

Review of Heidi M. Ravven, *The Self Beyond Itself: An Alternative History of Ethics, the New Brain Sciences, and the Myth of Free Will*

New York: The New Press, 2013

*The Self Beyond Itself* is a defense of an incompatibilist, hard determinist view of free will. Free will is here defined in a very strong sense, as the existence of actions that do not result from any causes other than the agent herself. The question of how to define free will, especially whether it consists in the ability to do otherwise, and what the ability to do otherwise amounts to, is not given much consideration in this book.

Ravven frames her work in a broad historical context. The kind of determinism she favors is to be found in Aristotle, Maimonides, and Spinoza, as she interprets them. The main culprit responsible for the Western conception of free will is Augustine. Ravven finds elements of Augustine in a number of theories of free will, including those of Descartes and Kant. In her view, any proponent of free will is an unwitting Augustinian.

Ravven's tendency to see an Augustinian legacy in later views of free will result in her making some fairly implausible claims. Ravven claims at one point that proponents of free will hold that the only reasons and causes of actions are moral reasons. She attributes mind/body dualism to all believers in free will. Ravven claims that it is a standard philosophical view that reasons for action are mental and nonphysical.

The book is wide-ranging, even somewhat meandering in parts. *The Self Beyond Itself* opens with a chapter on educational reform. Proponents of teaching virtues in education, from William Bennett to Carol Gilligan, are critiqued for their assumptions regarding free will and responsibility. The case for the claim that all of these figures actually assume much regarding free will, let alone (as Ravven charges) a Kantian and Christian point of view, is somewhat weak.

Ravven goes on to say that views of free will are best tested by considering the subject of the following chapter, the Holocaust. An interesting case is made for the view that whether a person was a collaborator with the Nazi regime or someone who resisted was largely a product of circumstances. Ravven even goes so far as to claim that none of the individuals who worked to rescue Jews during the Holocaust were doing so as a result of conscious choice.

The following chapter continues the discussion of compliance with authority through accounts of familiar work in psychology due to Milgram and Zimbardo. A case is made that the actions of individuals often reflect the circumstances in which they find themselves.

The genealogy of the notion of free will is presented in the next section of the book, an extensive historical discussion, centering on Augustine, Maimonides, and Spinoza. There is a rich amount of historical detail in this section.

The book claims not only to be a history of free will, but a history of the "myth of free will." The argument against free will, based in neuroscience, follows. There are no new scientific results presented in this book. The scientific argument against free will consists of summaries of the work of others, most of which will be familiar to researchers interested in free will and neuroscience. For instance, Ravven argues against Kantian moral psychology by citing work by Joshua Greene and Jaak Panksepp contending that our apparent moral reasons are in fact after the fact rationalizations or confabulations. This sort of critique goes back to Friedrich Nietzsche (who goes almost entirely unmentioned in this book), at least.

The engagement with the existing literature on free will in this book is limited. Contemporary agent-causal and event-causal versions of libertarianism are not discussed at all. The incompatibilist conception of free will as acting without causal influence is put forward without argument. There is only a brief discussion of compatibilism, mostly in the footnotes. Ravven's contention that western belief in free will consists largely in acceptance of an Augustinian conception of the will and the self is at odds with the views of compatibilists from Locke to Dennett. Ravven goes on to make the rather odd claim that compatibilists hold the view that consciousness is not amenable to explanation. Unfortunately, the discussion of existing views on free will in this book contains too many errors and omissions.

Ravven's own original contributions are largely stated at the end of the book. Ravven's own theory, drawing on Spinoza, stresses the lack of a distinction between the self, the other, and indeed the universe itself. Drawing on Andy Clark and others, Ravven presents an extended self theory. This is an interesting idea, and more of the book could have been devoted to it.

Ravven endorses a view due to Donald Pfaff, according to which ethical behavior is a result of a blurring of the distinction between oneself and others. What results is what Ravven calls a "shared self." Ultimately, Ravven's own theory of ethics consists of the idea of not making distinctions between oneself and others. This kind of

impartiality figures in a wide range of ethical systems. Consequentialists and nonconsequentialists, including Kantians, could agree on it. What is missing here are the details that make ethical theory difficult and interesting.

This book is longer than it needs to be. It is heavy on summary. For example, Ravven devotes 5 pages to Malcolm Gladwell's theory from *Outliers*, including summaries of why Gladwell thought that Beatles and Bill Gates succeeded. Whatever the merits of Gladwell's theory, there is no need to go into such extensive detail about it.

The historical discussions are the strongest part of this book, and will be of use to readers interested in Augustine and Spinoza. While the scientific case against free will largely consists in results well-known in the literature, it is useful to have a summary of such results in one volume. The philosophical import of this book is limited, and the book is marred by many erroneous claims regarding free will and a lack of a deep engagement with the contemporary philosophical literature.