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The Self Beyond Itself: An Alternative History of Ethics, the New Brain Sciences, and the Myth of Free Will

By Heidi M. Ravven



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

Few concepts are more unshakable in our culture than "free will," the idea that individuals are fundamentally in control of the decisions they make, good or bad. And yet the latest research about how the brain functions seems to point in the opposite direction, with fresh discoveries indicating the many ways in which humans are subject to influences well beyond the control of the conscious self. In *The Self Beyond Itself*, acclaimed scholar Heidi M. Ravven offers a wide-ranging and bold argument for a new vision of ethics, one that takes into account neuroscience, philosophy, and psychology, challenging the ways in which we view our actions—and, indeed, our selves.

In a work of breathtaking intellectual sweep and erudition, Ravven offers a riveting and accessible review of cutting-edge neuroscientific research into the brain's capacity for decision-making—from "mirror" neurons and "self-mapping" to surprising new understandings of group psychology. *The Self Beyond Itself* also introduces readers to a rich, alternative philosophical tradition of ethics, rooted in the writing of Baruch Spinoza, that finds uncanny confirmation in modern science.

Illustrating the results of today's research with real-life examples, taking readers from elementary school classrooms to Nazi concentration camps, Ravven demonstrates that it is possible to build a theory of ethics that doesn't rely on free will yet still holds both individuals and groups responsible for the decisions that help create a good society. *The Self Beyond Itself* is that rare book that injects new ideas into an old debate—and helps us consider anew our understanding of ourselves and of our world.



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Editorial Review

Review

“As she delves deeply into the cognitive, cultural and philosophical sources of moral agency, Ravven takes careful note of the emerging brain sciences. . . .[A] must-read for anyone interested in the breadth and depth of our moral mentality.”

—Jaak Panksepp, Baily Endowed Professor in Animal Well-Being Sciences, Washington State University, and author of *The Archaeology of Mind*

“An intellectual hand-grenade, *The Self Beyond Itself* is a magisterial survey of how contemporary neuroscience supports a vision of human morality which puts it squarely on the same plane as other natural phenomena. . . . This book will spark fruitful debate and reminds us of the debt we owe Aristotle and Spinoza as we make sense of ourselves as part of the natural world.”

—William D. Casebeer, author of *Natural Ethical Facts*

“The most brilliant, original book on ethics in decades. Ravven’s immense erudition and sharp critical insights are extraordinary. This is a fascinating book for everyone concerned about education, politics, history, philosophy, religion, and the survival of human society.”

—Susannah Heschel, Eli Black Professor of Jewish Studies, Dartmouth College

“Shatters the many bubbles that contemporary philosophers have built around themselves. Its criticisms of free will are historically grounded and logically cogent; its alternative views of freedom and moral agency, drawing largely on Spinoza, are persuasive and much needed. This book will generate wide discussion in academic fields—and break new paths for society as a whole.”

—John McCumber, professor of Germanic languages, UCLA

“I began reading this book, because I had agreed to; I stayed because it riveted me. Not only is this a brilliant examination of ethical behavior in the light of history, social psychology, brain science, and philosophy, it is a powerful demonstration of what those disciplines are for. A new basis for the instilling of ethical behavior cannot be gainsaid after reading *The Self Beyond Itself*.”

—Daniel Boyarin, Taubman Professor of Talmudic Culture, University of California, Berkeley

“Fascinating, accessible, and engaging. . . . Ravven provides an alternative vision of human ethics, initially expressed in the naturalistic philosophy of Spinoza but also well supported by contemporary research in the cognitive sciences.”

—Wendell Wallach, Yale Interdisciplinary Center for Bioethics

“Extraordinarily wide-ranging, fervently argued, and visionary. . . . Ravven’s book is an exemplary case of a public philosophy, or the use of different modes of reasoning to broaden political sensibilities and battle provincialism.”

—Jim Wetzel, Augustinian Chair, Villanova University

“A thought-provoking study about the most urgent moral questions.”

—Warren Zev Harvey, professor emeritus, Department of Jewish Thought, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

“A perfect book for thoughtful people who wish they had taken (or wish they had paid attention in) a philosophy class in college. The real-life examples render the ideas very accessible and illustrate how our concepts of ‘self’ influence everything we do. Make it the gift you give your ‘self.’”

—P.H. Longstaff, professor, S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University

About the Author

Heidi M. Ravven is a professor of religious studies at Hamilton College. A founding member of the Society for Empirical Ethics, she has published widely in interdisciplinary journals and is the co-editor of *Jewish Themes in Spinoza's Philosophy*. She lives in Cazenovia, New York.

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Wesley Binns:

A lot of people always spent their free time to vacation or even go to the outside with them loved ones or their friend. Are you aware? Many a lot of people spent that they free time just watching TV, as well as playing video games all day long. In order to try to find a new activity this is look different you can read some sort of book. It is really fun for you. If you enjoy the book which you read you can spent the whole day to reading a e-book. The book *The Self Beyond Itself: An Alternative History of Ethics, the New Brain Sciences, and the Myth of Free Will* it is extremely good to read. There are a lot of those who recommended this book. We were holding enjoying reading this book. In case you did not have enough space to bring this book you can buy typically the e-book. You can more very easily to read this book through your smart phone. The price is not too costly but this book features high quality.

Judith Bryant:

Reading can called thoughts hangout, why? Because when you are reading a book specially book entitled The Self Beyond Itself: An Alternative History of Ethics, the New Brain Sciences, and the Myth of Free Will the mind will drift away trough every dimension, wandering in each and every aspect that maybe unfamiliar for but surely might be your mind friends. Imaging each word written in a book then become one form conclusion and explanation that maybe you never get before. The The Self Beyond Itself: An Alternative History of Ethics, the New Brain Sciences, and the Myth of Free Will giving you an additional experience more than blown away the mind but also giving you useful facts for your better life in this particular era. So now let us demonstrate the relaxing pattern the following is your body and mind is going to be pleased when you are finished looking at it, like winning a casino game. Do you want to try this extraordinary paying spare time activity?

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