This book builds on the author’s earlier publications in the field of phenomenology. What the reader will find here is the same careful analysis of embodied subjectivity present in previous books, including *Postfoundational Phenomenology*. But whereas Mensch’s earlier texts focused primarily on epistemological issues, in *Ethics and Selfhood* Mensch deploys an impressive grasp of the philosophical tradition—as we have come to expect from this author—to shed light on a number of ethical aporias. In this present work, Mensch makes a concerted effort to demonstrate the practical import of philosophical reflection. Thus, in the fourth chapter, philosophy meets the real world in the form of the brave men and women who helped to rescue Jews during Europe’s darkest hours in the last century. In the first and third chapters, Mensch surveys a number of traditional ethical paradigms in order to demonstrate their inability to address difficult moral situations. This part of the book sets the stage for the second and later chapters where we are presented with an alternative ethics of embodiment that is critically informed by much twentieth-century philosophy, in particular, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas.

Given the wide range of names and ideas that this book endeavors to cover, I will not attempt to summarize the content of each of the book’s chapters. Instead, I will focus on those sections of *Ethics and Selfhood* that underscore the nature of the problems that Mensch addresses. The third chapter employs an interesting grouping of ethical theories based on how a theory accounts for the “ought” of moral experience. On one side, Mensch locates philosophers like Plato and Kant. According to Mensch, the ethical models developed by these two thinkers share in common the idea of an abstracting, divided self. The essential picture of the self that emerges here underscores the tension between reason and the material world. For Plato, the disjunction is primarily articulated as a conflict between the “eye” of the mind—attuned to the perfect Forms—and the generally impulsive character of the appetites. (It is curious that Mensch remains silent about the third element in the tripartite soul: the *thumos*.) Though frequently formulated as an epistemological issue, Plato’s conception of the mind is clearly guided by moral concerns. Similarly, Kant’s ultimate motivation for disengaging reason from our inclinations is not so much epistemological as moral. Kant must assure himself that we exercise our duties in such a way that they are not
compromised by self-serving constraints; to do so is to make light of the seriousness or absoluteness of ethical demands.

By highlighting the transcendental powers of the self, this strand of the philosophical tradition, Mensch notes, can account for the remarkable ability that human beings possess to adjudicate between various finite positions or perspectives. Reason’s capacity to stand back from the limitations of the natural world, that is, the mind’s capacity for abstraction, opens us to the possibilities of critique and change. But there is a price to be paid for this particular articulation of the self. As Mensch points out, the emphasis on transcendence, and all its related associations—the mind as spontaneous freedom, the ideal of objectivity, and so on—as formulated in traditional philosophy frequently cuts us off from the framework or context of human finitude. In so doing, it blinds us from seeing the irreducible uniqueness that defines each particular self. This is no trivial point, as Mensch insists for most of the book. Our radical singularity plays a formative role in accounting for the exigencies of moral obligations. After all, I am held accountable for my publicly uttered promises, and not some generic, universal subject.

On the other side of his moral taxonomy, Mensch locates the theories of Aristotle, Mill, Darwin, and Freud (actually, the first two and the latter two are treated within separate subgroups). What these thinkers hold in common, despite initial appearances, is a conviction that the ethical “ought” felt by individuals has its locus in the material, social world, and not in abstracting reason or its accompanying ontology (for example, timeless Forms and noumenal categories). In contrast to the transcendent philosophers, the non-transcendent thinkers have sought to develop a more grounded account of the self. The primary strength of this approach is to address the major weakness associated with the transcendental paradigm. Whereas Plato and Kant are willing to sacrifice context in the hope of locating a pure psyche or self, these other thinkers ground their idea of the self in the concrete world of social constraints, physical impulses, and internalized psychic demands. On the flip side, however, the major shortcoming of the non-transcendent position concerns its relative failure to provide a fully coherent account of our capacity to distance ourselves from the natural world in order to judge it critically.

Mensch makes a convincing case that both transcendent and non-transcendent accounts of ethics ultimately fail to make sense of the horrors associated with the Holocaust. That conclusion will, of course, come as no surprise to the reader. Mensch’s unique contribution is to focus the discussion on a specific moral dilemma associated with the
Holocaust: why did some non-Jews risk their lives to rescue Jews from their persecutors? By concentrating on the circumstances surrounding some of these rescues, Mensch powerfully illustrates a number of the inherent limitations with the classical approaches mentioned above.

Mensch sets out in later chapters to develop a theory of the ethical subject that properly addresses the deficiencies of the traditional models surveyed in the first half of the book. What he comes up with is a compelling account that situates our capacity to make critical discernments precisely in the contextualized or enframed nature of lived experience. The result is a notion of the subject as fissured self-presence. Avoiding the traditional pitfalls associated with dualism, Mensch’s phenomenologically reconfigured subject is conceived simultaneously in terms of incarnate being, exposure, vulnerability, and self-reflexivity. As one might imagine, the attempt to reconcile the transcendental and immanent features of human subjectivity requires a delicate balancing act. Does Mensch succeed? One certainly senses that he has thought through the intricacies of the problem at hand. But because he ends up appealing to so many different strands of modern and contemporary philosophy, his own position is sometimes difficult to assess properly. For example, he juxtaposes what he calls the “absolute character of life” (Chapter 4) with the Other’s face as the source of the questioning power that is eventually bequeathed to the self. One feels that more needs to be said here, given that the themes of “life” and “face” seem like such unlikely bedfellows. It is not entirely clear how one reconciles a notion of the anonymous impersonality of “life”—at least as this category resonates with the work of Nietzsche, Dilthey, and Bergson (Mensch invokes Nietzsche’s name in this context)—with the notion of the neighbor’s face that personally addresses the self, which we associate with figures like Rosenzweig, Buber, and Levinas. Perhaps the transition that he makes between Nietzsche’s use of “life” and the Talmudic interpretation of this term (102–4) can ultimately be justified. But given that we are dealing with two such radically different registers of thought, that transition requires further thematization.

Finally, it should be pointed out that Ethics and Selfhood consists of a collection of previously published papers (now turned into chapters). It would be difficult to question the merits of each of these chapters. The level of writing and thinking found in them is without question first-rate. But it is not always clear how these various chapters relate to one another. The overall structure of the book is not as transparent as one would like it to be. The Introduction and Conclusion tacked on at both ends of the book, which attempt to synthesize its disparate sections, do
help, but fall short of unifying the work as a whole. This criticism aside, this provocative book is certainly worth a read. On their own, some of the chapters stand out as exceptional attempts to grapple with some of the most perplexing questions surrounding the nature of the self and ethics.

JOHN CARUANA, Ryerson University