
*Ethics and Selfhood*, a recent work of interest to ethicists working within the continental tradition, presents an alternative to contemporary ethical theories by articulating a sense of moral obligation rooted in the self’s alterity. Mensch’s objective in this work is to provide an ethics that prevents the kinds of moral collapse (i.e., genocide) increasingly prevalent in the modern age (p. 1). Using the Holocaust as his main example, he argues that genocide occurs because its perpetrators act “outside of the framework of humanity” (p. 2). For ethics to “guard against” such moral collapse it must “return to the ethical imperative of preserving the context that permits such [moral] judgment” (p. 8), or to what Mensch calls the “human framework.” Though Mensch does not explicitly define “human framework,” I take it to indicate the cultural, religious, political, and ethical practices of human beings. He identifies two reasons why the human framework has been largely ignored in modern ethical thinking: (a) human beings’ rapid technological development (a phenomenon mentioned by Mensch but left undiscussed thereafter), and (b) the emergence of the modern rational and autonomous subject (p. 4). It is this second point that Mensch identifies as the reason why modern ethical theories cannot guard against the kind of moral collapse he identifies with the Holocaust. In order to recontextualize the self, Mensch offers a view of the self as embodied. According to him, because we are embodied and, therefore, “irreducibly unique,” the human condition is fundamentally one of plurality, which “manifests itself in our capacity for empathy” (p. 12). It is this conception of embodied selfhood and its capacity for empathy that provides the cornerstone to his account of moral obligation and an ethics that guards against genocide.

Mensch’s book, which consists of seven chapters (some of which have been previously published as articles), can be roughly divided into two parts. The first comprises chapters one and two, consisting of his critiques of the Cartesian and Kantian views of the self, and the articulation of his own view of embodied selfhood, respectively. The second part, which provides an alternative ethical theory that is built around Mensch’s conception of an embodied self, consists of the last five chapters. Chapter three presents a critique of
Western ethics that draws on the insights gained in the first two chapters. Chapters four through seven are Mensch’s attempt to argue for a phenomenology of obligation that is “grounded” in an embodied selfhood (which relies heavily on the concept of empathy), recontextualized in its human framework. I will begin with a brief discussion of Mensch’s critiques of Descartes’s and Kant’s accounts of subjectivity and then move to examine his view of selfhood, as they are presented in chapters one and two, respectively. I will then briefly comment on Mensch’s critique of some main figures in Western ethics, as he presents them in chapter three. Finally, I will sketch Mensch’s argument for his ethics, highlighting his attempt to ground obligation through empathy and alterity, focusing on the arguments he gives in chapters four, five, and six. Although his effort to emphasize the embodiment of human beings is laudable, it seems to me that his account of the self (1) fails to establish a cogent ethical framework and (2) is ultimately in tension with his earlier critical remarks about the tradition.

Mensch’s first chapter offers stock readings of Descartes’s and Kant’s accounts of subjectivity. Descartes is depicted as “radically deframing” the self, which results in an indubitable, disembodied, empty, unity that is “outside of the totality for which it is supposed to serve as an Archimedean fulcrum” (p. 21); Kant, very similarly to Descartes on Mensch’s reading, understands the self as a noumenal, unknowable, absolute unity that, in virtue of its “existing” outside the framework, becomes the normative standard for both theoretical cognition and practical action (pp. 26–32). According to Mensch, both Descartes and Kant fail to articulate a cogent view of the self precisely because they abstract the self from its human context. He compares their accounts with one that emphasizes the self’s temporality, and in doing so he seems to be drawing on a Husserlian understanding of inner time consciousness.1 When insisting on the self’s temporal form, Mensch tries to argue for its essential openness “to what is not itself” (p. 33). “As a field of temporal relations, the subject is capable of as many forms as time has” (p. 33). It is through this emphasis on the self’s openness that Mensch hopes to argue for the centrality of empathy in a phenomenological account of the self and obligation. Though the use of Husserl is a potentially fruitful avenue of inquiry, as I will argue below, he fails to draw on some of Husserl’s valuable phenomenological analyses. For example, Mensch does not engage with any of Husserl’s own reflections on ethics, nor does he dialogue with any of the valuable secondary literature dealing with Husserl’s moral philosophy.2 For these reasons, Husserlian phenomenologists may find Mensch’s book to be of less interest than its title indicates.

Despite his criticisms, Mensch acknowledges that Descartes’s and Kant’s accounts of subjectivity are motivated by a dichotomy between “freedom” and what he calls “framing,” which seems to be the empirical conditions that contextualize human beings’ actions (i.e., their culture, history, etc.) “The way