

**James Mensch**, *Ethics and Selfhood: Alterity and the Phenomenology of Obligation* (Albany, N.Y. SUNY, 2003).

According to *Ethics and Selfhood*, a minimal requirement for ethics is that of guarding against genocide. In deciding which races are to live and which to die, genocide takes up a standpoint outside of humanity. To safeguard against this, Mensch argues that we must attain the critical distance required for ethical judgment without assuming a superhuman position. His description of how to attain this distance constitutes a genuinely new reading of the possibility of a phenomenological ethics, one that involves reassessing what it means to be a self. Selfhood, according to Mensch, involves both embodiment and the self-separation brought about by our encounter with others. Others provide us with alternate viewpoints and actions. In the empathy that opens us up to them, we separate ourselves from our own embodied perspectives. Others, moreover, provide us with the experiential context needed for moral judgment. Buttressing his arguments with documented accounts of those who hid Jews during the Holocaust, Mensch shows how the self-separation that occurs in empathy opens the space within which moral judgment can occur, and obligation can find its expression. He includes a reading of the major moral philosophers—Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Mill, Arendt, Levinas—even as he develops a phenomenological account of the necessity of reading literature to understand the full extent of ethical responsibility. Mensch's work offers an original and provocative approach to a topic of fundamental importance.