Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995) is one of the greatest Western philosophers of the twentieth century on the subject of ethics, and surely the most influential philosopher of ethics in the continental tradition. Levinas wrote in the tradition of phenomenology. He was a student of both Husserl and Heidegger and the teacher of such well-known ‘postmodernist’ thinkers as Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray. Alarmed by the apparent complicity of the most sophisticated modern philosophical speculations on the nature of ‘being’ with ethical turpitude and indifference, as evidenced by Heidegger’s association with Nazism, Levinas sought to rethink the relationship between philosophy and ethics. He argues that ethics must precede ontology, which is always in danger of betraying ethics. By ethics Levinas means the face-to-face, concrete encounter with a unique human being for whom I am personally and inescapably responsible.

Plato was central to Levinas’s assertion that ethics must precede ontology. Indeed, the subtitle of Levinas’s second and last magnum opus, Autrement qu’être, ou au delà de l’essence (Otherwise than Being, or Beyond Essence [1974]), is a direct and literal translation of what Socrates says about the good in Book 6 of the Republic. The very existence and essence of objects of knowledge is dependent upon the good, Socrates asserts, although “the good itself is not essence but is still beyond being or essence (ἐπείκεινα τῆς οὐσίας), exceeding it in dignity or age (πρὸ θεός) and in power” (509c). The good, for Plato, is more venerable than—that is, comes before—ontology, the science of being. ‘Beyond being:’ a demonically hyperbolic expression (διαμονίας ὑπὸ ρήμαν), Glaucon remarks. But there we have it, 2500 years before Emmanuel Levinas, in his own sometimes hyperbolic prose, often referred to as ‘postmodern,’ made this insight the cornerstone of his extraordinarily original rethinking of both phenomenology and of the entire tradition of Western thought. Plato, by Levinas’s own consistent acknowledgement, was there long before Levinas himself.
Part III of this article will explore responsibility in Plato’s *Republic*, and how believing in ghosts, particularly Homeric ghosts, blocks our access to the good beyond being. I shall begin, in Part I, by discussing analogous passages in the Hebrew Bible and then, in Part II, in Confucius, before returning to Plato. Lest the global scope of this study appear somewhat excessive and irresponsible, please allow me to try to comfort the reader with the notion that the three principle texts for this study on ghosts and responsibility—Leviticus, the *Analects* of Confucius, and Plato’s *Republic*—can be dated within less than a hundred years of each other.

*Part I*

“Thou shalt not consult ghosts and spirits”: *The Hebrew Bible*

In the space of two chapters of Leviticus—all contained within the single *parashah* (i.e. portion of the Torah) entitled Qedoshim—God speaks to Moses and tells him to convey to the Israelites the following command, which they must follow if they are to make themselves holy. If you follow these commands, God says, “you shall be holy [ qedoshim], for holy [qadosh] am I, the Lord, your God” (Leviticus 19:2):

Do not turn to the ghosts [ha ʾovot], and of the familiar spirits [ ha yiddeʿonim] do not inquire to be defiled of them. (Leviticus 19:31, trans. Alter)

And the person who turns to the ghosts [ ha ʾovot] and to the familiar spirits [ ha yiddʿonim] to go whoring after them, I shall set My face against that person and cut him off from the midst of the people. (Leviticus 20:6)

And any man or woman who has a ghost [ʿov] or a familiar spirit [yiddʿoni] is doomed to die. They shall be stoned, their bloodguilt is upon them. (Leviticus 20:27)

The Israelites are urged not to turn to ʾovot, singular, ʾov, i.e. a “prophecying spirit of the dead” and to yiddʿonim, singular yiddʿoni, i.e. a

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