

## Essentialist and non-essentialist *philosophical* perspectives on the *question* “*What is an אלהים?*”

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### Abstract

In Old Testament scholarship, a number of studies have attempted to answer in their own way the question of what an אלהים (a god in the generic sense) was assumed to be. This discussion is indirectly related to an older theme in OT theology, namely the “essence” of Yhwh’s divinity in particular contexts. Whereas the relevant research has thus far only involved linguistic, literary, historical, comparative and theological approaches aimed at providing answers, none has paid closer attention to what exactly is meant by a question of the form “What is X?” itself. The originality and contribution of this study lies with its exclusive descriptive and meta-theoretical philosophical concern with the multiplicity of ways in which concepts of *whatness* and essence can be interpreted in relation to the concept of generic אלהים as common noun in the Old Testament. The aim is to provide a prolegomenon for future theory in service of a more nuanced manner of speaking.

### Abstrak

In Ou Testamentiese navorsing het bestaan daar studies wat elke op eie wyse poog om die vraag oor wat n אלהים (n “god” in die generiese sin) is te beantwoord. Die betrokke akademiese gesprek hou indirek verband met n ouer tema in Ou Testamentiese teologie, naamlik rondom die essensie van Jhwh se goddelikheid in spesifieke kontekste. Waar die relevante navorsing tans beperk is tot linguistiese, historiese, komparatiewe en teologiese perspektiewe (wat almal poog om dit te antwoord), blyk daar skynbaar min belangstelling te wees in wat hoegenaamd bedoel word met n vraag van die vorm “Wat is X?” Die oorspronklikheid van die huidige bydrae bestaan in die eksklusief deskriptiewe en meta-teoretiese filosofiese fokus op die veelvoud van wyses waarop die konsepte van wat-heid en essensie geïnterpreteer kan word in relasie tot die konsep van generiese godheid in die Ou Testament. Die doel is daarvan is om n prolegomenon vir toekomstige teorie daar te stel ter wille van n meer genuanseerde meta-taal.

**Keywords:** Old Testament, philosophical perspectives, generic אלהים, questions, *whatness*, essence, meta-theory

## 1. Introduction

How shall we understand the *question* of what, according to the OT, is an אלהים? (cf. Smith 2001: vi). Looking at the common name in the Hebrew Bible (OT) as a whole, an extension of great complexity and diversity shows itself to include, *inter alia*, the following examples:

### In the Pentateuch:

- (a) In the beginning אלהים created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1.1)
- (b) ...the אלהים wind was moving over the face of the waters (Gen. 1.2)
- (c) The sons of אלהים saw that the daughters of men were fair (Gen. 6.2)
- (d) "Hear us, my lord; you are an אלהים among us." (Gen. 23.6)
- (e) With אלהים wrestlings I have wrestled with my sister (Gen. 30.8)
- (f) And there wrestled a man with him... (Gen. 32.24)
- (g) Why did you steal my אלהים? (Gen. 31.30)
- (h) אלהים called to him out of the bush... (Exod. 3.4)
- (i) See, I make you as an אלהים to Pharaoh. (Exod. 7.1)
- (j) ...his master shall bring him to the אלהים .... (Exod. 21.6)
- (k) ...he shall pay as the אלהים determine (Exod. 21.22)
- (l) And he received the אלהים at their hand... (Exod 32.4)
- (m) Do not turn to idols or make for yourselves molten אלהים... (Lev. 19.4)
- (n) They sacrificed to demons which were no אלהים ... (Deut. 32.17)

### In the Former Prophets:

- (o) ...what Chemosh your אלהים gives you to possess? (Judg 11.24)
- (p) ...and it became an אלהים panic (1 Sam. 14.15)
- (q) I see an אלהים coming up out of the earth (1 Sam. 28.13)
- (r) ...the heritage of the אלהים (2 Sam. 14.16)

### In the Latter Prophets:

- (s) He shall be called...mighty לא (Isa. 9:5)
- (t) ...to a tree, 'You are my father,'... to a stone, 'You gave me birth'. (Jer. 2:27)
- (u) As many as your cities are your אלהים... (Jer. 2:28)
- (v) I will cause your multitude to fall by the swords of אלהים (Ezek. 32.12)
- (w) Nineveh was an exceedingly אלהים city, three days' journey in breadth (Jon. 3.3)
- (x) ...guilty men, whose own might is their אלוה (Hab. 1.11)
- (y) the house of David shall be like an אלהים (Zech. 12.8)

### In the Writings:

- (z) You have made him a little less than אלהים (Ps. 8.6)
- (aa) Your righteousness is like the לא mountains... (Ps. 36.20)
- (bb) "An אלהים fire fell from heaven... (Job 1.16)
- (cc) the morning stars sang...the sons of the אלהים shouted for joy? (Job 38.7)
- (dd) When he raises himself up, the אלהים are afraid. (Job 41.25)
- (ee) Your throne, oh אלהים, endures for ever and ever. (Ps. 45.6)
- (ff) The לא cedars with its branches (Ps. 80.10)
- (gg) אלהים has taken his place in the council of לא ... (Ps. 82.1)
- (hh) An לא is in your hand to do it. (Prov. 3.27)

Of course, the exact sense and reference of the use of אלוה/אלהים/לא as used above mostly as common nouns are open to debate (e.g. “godhead”, “a god”, “gods”, “divine”, “divinity”, “deity”, etc.). Yet assuming the basic identification of complex extensional plurality to be more or less correct, how would one reply to the question of what, according to the OT, an אלהים was assumed to be?

## 2. Overview of related research

Some examples of contemporary research within English directly or indirectly attempting to answer the question of what an אלהים is include, *inter alia*, the following: Ringgren (1974), Schmidt (1994), van der Toorn (1999:313-319), Burnett (2001), Smith (2001; 2004), Gericke (2009:22-45), McLellan (2013) and Hundley (2013). In cognate studies, one related discussion that took place in research on divinity within Mesopotamian religion is the edited volume of Porter (2009). Related studies in other fields (e.g. Egyptology, Greek philosophy and religion, etc.) are numerous.

As regards the preferred methodologies operative in OT studies in particular, Smith (2001:6-9) has identified four different approaches to the question of what an אלהים was assumed to be:

1. Taking inventory, i.e. making a list of entities/phenomena classified as gods;
2. Explicating etymology, i.e. noting the root meanings of terms for “deity”;
3. Atomistic comparative description, i.e. comparing ANE gods with Israel's God;
4. Large-scale comparative description venturing a typology of divinity.

In turn, these approaches are indirectly related to the subtheme in theologies of the OT pertaining to the so-called “essence”, “essential nature”, “essential properties/characteristics/attributes” of God (or Yhwh). Consider the following examples of prominent (mostly German) OT theologians who appear to have expressed something similar (emphasis mine).

He learns about the nature of God by reasoning *a posteriori* from the standards and usages of law and cult...from the events in history...in short, from his daily experience of the rule of God. By this means he comprehends the divine *essence* much more accurately than he would from a number of abstract concepts. (Eichrodt 1961:33)

When the tribes, then, in the course of further historical developments suddenly experienced Yahweh's power also in the sacral form of wars, that was a new revelation of his *essence*. (Von Rad 1962:73)

It makes a difference whether one makes from God's hiddenness a statement of being, such that it belongs to God's *essence*, that he is a *deus absconditus*, or whether one can speak of the possibility of God to hide him from a person (Westermann 1984:172)

Having to do with a state of affairs, the event becomes the *essence* of YHWH's reality (Preuss 1996:74)

The name of God, which like his glory and his face are vehicles of his *essential* nature, is defined in terms of his compassionate acts of mercy. (Childs 2004:596)

Images are the object of shaping, when it is of the *essence* of genuine deity to be the subject of that verb, the real God is the one who shapes. (Goldingay 2006:42)

The words of verses 6-7 provide a summary from the *essential* characteristics of YHWH as Lord of the covenant. (Brueggemann 2010:n.p.)

If “oneness” becomes an *essential* feature of the deity, what might this mean in comparative terms? (Smith 2010:146)

Many more examples of similar jargon from the works of other OT scholars could be given, but it will simply state what is already clear, i.e. some form of “essentialism” is operative within mainstream OT theology. To be sure, much of it is probably “nominalist” only as many of those cited above would probably deny being essentialist in terms of their own metaphysical assumptions (e.g. Brueggemann). Even so, it seems interesting to note that, if we look at the combination of the studies concerned with the question of what an אלהים is and the above references to a divine essence, it would seem as though no-one in particular thinks of the very question of *whatness* or the related concept of essence as somehow in themselves problematic.

### 3. A philosophical perspective

As a supplement (not replacement) to what Smith (2001:6-9) identified as a fourfold manner of approaching the question of what an אלהים was assumed to be, this study intends to add a fifth, namely:

#### 5. *Philosophical* perspectives on the *question* of what an אלהים is

In this regard it should be recalled that asking questions of the form “What is X?” (or “What is an F?”) is surely one of the most popular philosophical exercises in the history of the discipline. In the context of metaphysics and ontology the concept of *whatness* is often directly related to that of *essence* (see Fine 1994). However, philosophical approaches proper to this question tend to begin not with seeking answers thereto but instead first try to understand what exactly could possibly be meant by the question itself.

There currently exists a great variety of conflicting perspectives on the concept of *whatness* and on the pros and cons of essentialism. For this reason, the discussion to follow, aiming to be philosophical as it is historical and situated within OT scholarship, will not seek to answer the question of what an אלהים was assumed to be. Instead, we shall take a closer meta-theoretical look at an array of essentialist, anti-essentialist, neo-essentialist and post-essentialist philosophical perspectives on *whatness* from the history of philosophy in a way adapted and reapplied for the context of analyzing the concept of אלהים as common noun in the OT. No attempt is made to prescribe a particular perspective or to point biblical scholars in any particular direction. The point is to create awareness of the need for philosophical nuance.

#### 4. A brief history of *whatness* and *essence*

The overview to follow is totally rudimentary and introductory in scope. Only accepted English translations are used to make the discussion accessible to readers across disciplinary lines who may not be able to access the alien originals. Of course, there is no possible way to include all relevant thinkers from the history of philosophy on the topics of *whatness* and *essence* as there is arguably none who has failed to say at least something about it. In addition, those selected follow the story of stereotyped histories of Western philosophy, fully aware that a post-colonial and gender-sensitive story would read differently. Also, the ideas of the philosophers mentioned will be adapted, stereotyped and compacted for practical purposes. None of them had just one view of the issues-at-hand. None discussed *whatness* and *essence* in relation to generic אלהים as common name in the OT. None would have applied their ideas on popular conceptions of divinity (the discussion to follow could never apply to the concept of “God” in philosophical classical monotheism’s perfect being theology). None has produced works that have lent themselves to one clear-cut interpretation.

As for the biblical discourse, it is taken-for-granted that the OT itself never explicitly asks the question of what an אלהים – and its essence – were, in so many words (although it does presuppose reflection on the problem). Neither does it ever express itself in the meta-language of Western philosophy in general and essentialist ontology in particular. Yet it hardly matters if some of the philosophical language to be discussed seems inappropriate. For in no way is an attempt made to say what the OT itself ever thought about what an אלהים was assumed to be in philosophical terms. The only focus is on complicating the scholarly question of *whatness* and the related concept of *essence* so readily employed by OT theologians.

As such this study aims to be a prolegomenon hoping to add nuance and precision of language to any a future asking of the question of what an אלהים was assumed to be (and to discussions of the essential properties of divinity in the OT). None of the philosophical points of view summarized very briefly, or any particular form of god-talk in the OT, is assumed to be something that is either true or false. The usual and necessary concern with answers, normativity, justification and correctness are purposefully bracketed. As is going into dialogue with the noted research. Such is beyond the scope and aim of this study, which will operate with conditional arguments employed for purely experimental purposes only.

##### 4.1 The early and medieval periods

Socrates (470-399 B.C.E.) may not have been the first Western philosopher concerned with essences (Parmenides, for example, was also an essentialist of sorts). Yet his character in Plato’s dialogues became famous for asking “What is X?” questions (see Plato 1961). In doing so, Socrates was looking for a definition of an abstract term (like אלהים-ness). Yet Socrates would not have wanted a list of mere examples of אלהים. Neither would his reapplied view be concerned with simply coming to know the popular meaning of the word אלהים. Instead, it might require a specification of all and only those properties of an אלהים that were unique, common, necessary and jointly sufficient for actually being an אלהים.

Plato (424-348 B.C.E.) had a view that can be adapted to show that Socrates’ search for final answers to “What is X?” questions ended in vain and led to the paradox of analysis. According to the latter *aporia* you either know what an אלהים is (making the question of what an אלהים is unnecessary), or you don’t (meaning that recognizing a correct answer to the question is impossible for a lack of verification criteria) (see the *Meno dialogue*) In Plato’s jargon, the epistemology of the essence of an אלהים can be best described by assuming that we know what

אלהים is through an innate concept. This concept is recovered by recollection and refers not to any אלהים *per se* but to the “Form” (*Eidos*) of אלהים (compare the *Phaedo dialogue*). This is the archetype for or ultimate origin of all possible instances of things called אלהים. It exists eternally in a realm of perfection (the problem of the One and the Many, see the *Republic*). It can be used to explain why anything was called or recognized as being an אלהים (or not) in the first place (i.e. via *participation*). It can also be seen as accounting for the possibility of conceptual diversity and changes in representation of אלהים.

For Aristotle (384-322 B.C.E.), a definition (*horismos*) of an אלהים should express “the what-it-is-to-be” (*to ti ên einai*) one (see Aristotle 1994a). Subsequent Latin translators rendered the Greek phrase with *essentia* (from which our word “essence” is derived). From an adapted Aristotelian perspective, the essence of an אלהים in the OT could, *inter alia*, refer to a group of structural features and causal powers which give an אלהים as a type of being its enduring identity, which contributes to its membership of a more general kind, and which explain its innate nature (see Aristotle 1997). In addition, *what* an אלהים is can also be stated in terms of the so-called four “causes” or “explanations” (especially the formal “cause”), in terms of the distinction between form and matter (it’s constitution), by way of a definition via *genus* and *difference*, and/or by way of various types of *predication* (being (not) “said of” an אלהים and (not) “present in” an אלהים) (see Aristotle 1994b). From the point of view of the categories of being, an Aristotelian might even call an אלהים a *secondary substance*, whose essential attributes should be distinguished from its accidental ones (see Aristotle 1963). Ultimately, the essence of an individual אלהים is its “soul” (self).

From Porphyry (234-305 C.E.), Aristotle’s notion of a definition of אלהים can be replaced by the concept of אלהים as *species*. Yet from this point of view, *what* an אלהים was assumed to be and the divine *essence* are not the same thing. Whereas for Porphyry essence is tied to *species*, *whatness* is connected to genus only (and what-kindness to difference). Porphyry was also known for having constructed a taxonomic tree in which, as commentary on Aristotle (his *Isagoge*), each type of being (an אלהים in our case) can be classified in relation to other beings with the aid of the five concepts of genus, species, properties, essence and accident (see Porphyry 1975)

Boethius (480-524) was the first to draw a distinction between essence (for us, *what* an אלהים is) and existence (for us, what it is *to be* an אלהים, i.e. *that* it is). Whereas *what* an אלהים was might here be taken to refer to the specific nature or form common to all individuals in the same species, *what* it meant to be an אלהים would refer to the actually existing concrete אלהים. Here *whatness* thus signifies what can be called the total essence of an אלהים, whereas *thatness* in an אלהים denotes what is to be seen as being a constitutive part of that essence. In other words, we may distinguish between an abstract or formal essence (the nature of an אלהים) and a concrete essence (the being of an אלהים).

Avicenna (980-1037) offered a view that both developed the essence/existence (*whatness/thatness*) distinction and also featured Arabic forerunners to Latin concepts such as 1) *Quidditas* (lit. “what-ness”), e.g. what makes an אלהים an אלהים; 2) *Ipseitas* (lit. “self-ness”), e.g. what makes Yhwh an אלהים; 3) and *Haecceitas* (lit. “this-ness”), what Yhwh *Yhwh* (see Avicenna 1977-83). On this view, the essence of an אלהים would be the thing considered in itself, i.e. an אלהים devoid of any relation to existing things or mental concepts, free of universality or particularity, potentiality or actuality, unity or multiplicity, for instance. This essence of an אלהים is, however, by definition *ineffable*.

Abelard (1079-1142) put forward an ontology of essences which, if adapted, suggest that there cannot be any אלהים-ness, namely something present as a whole in many אלהים at once which constitutes their substance (i.e. making the individual אלהים in which it is present the kind of thing an אלהים is). On this view, universality is not an ontological feature of the world of אלהים but a semantic feature of language about אלהים. The essence of an אלהים can be called its "status", which refers to what it meant to be an אלהים as an intentional object (i.e. a thought object) (see Abelard 1994).

From our adaptation of the views of Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), knowledge of an אלהים just is knowledge of its essence (see Aquinas 1965:33-67). Here the concept of the essence of an אלהים can be reapplied (Aquinas would never have put "God" in a genus or separated אלהים's essence/existence) roughly the same as Aristotle's original meaning(s), while at the same time obtaining new nuances. For one, the distinction between essence and *substance* in an אלהים would be more important, the former now signifying the *quiddity* ("whatness") of an actual אלהים as substance. Another aspect, the "suppositum", is not assumed to be identical with the nature of an אלהים; for an אלהים in the OT was not thought to be the same as אלהים-ness, just like a human is not identical to humanity (see Aquinas 1948). The essence or nature of an אלהים in this language thus connoted only what was included in the definition of the אלהים as species.

Duns Scotus (1266-1308) provided an additional perspective in that his adapted view suggests that the question of *whatness* with reference to an אלהים (i.e. what the אלהים are) can be distinguished – but not separated from – the question of *thisness* (i.e. what an individual אלהים *uniquely* is). An אלהים is a "bare particular", while its *thisness* (what makes it *this* particular אלהים, as opposed to another) is its "haecceity", i.e. the what *it* (i.e. *this thing*) is. For our adaptation of Scotus' ontology, there is no *thisness* or *haecceity* of an אלהים without the *whatness* (*quiddity*); and no *whatness* of an אלהים without the *thisness* (see Scotus 1987).

#### 4.2 The modern and postmodern eras

In the late medieval period and into the modern age, the conviction that human reason could attain the actual essence of a real thing was radically questioned. Although some philosophers still thought real things possessed actual natures or essences, they began to doubt whether human reason was equipped to attain these essences.

Rene Descartes' (1596-1650) view still drew on the essence/existence distinction of the medieval period. Yet it was novel insofar as it sprung from a more general theory of "attributes" (or "properties"). The basic idea as adapted for our purposes is that there exists only a distinction of reason between the substance of an אלהים and any one of its attributes; or between any two attributes of the an אלהים substance. For Descartes' purposes, the essence of an אלהים is not a list of necessary properties but rather its "principal attribute". This in the context of the tri-partheid distinction between the substance, attributes and modes of an אלהים, which should not be conflated. (see Descartes 1996)

John Locke (1632-1704) has been seen by some philosophers as the father of anti-essentialism. On his views of essence as adapted and reapplied here, the basic idea is that an אלהים has no properties necessarily or contingently in themselves. In addition, the common noun אלהים would also be what, in Locke's own terminology, can be called a "sortal". The latter offers an answer to the "What is it?" question. His theory might also suggest the need for a distinction between the *real essence* of an אלהים (mostly hidden from us and determined by its nature) and its *nominal essence* (which we (somewhat) arbitrarily construct). These, in turn, can be related to the difference between a real and a nominal *definition* of an אלהים. The former

says what an אלהים itself really is (as Socrates would have liked), while the latter explains the use of the word אלהים in language about it.

Gottfried Leibniz (1646-1716) expressed views which can be adapted to appear as trying to salvage the tradition of “Aristotelian essentialism” about an אלהים. Yet this view might also add to it by emphasizing the notion of an אלהים as “active force”, which would be his most distinctive contribution (see Leibniz 1998). Some might call this “superessentialism”, based on the fact that for Leibniz (on some readings, at least) not only are essential properties of an אלהים also its necessary properties, all properties of an אלהים are necessary and therefore essential (i.e. there are no accidental properties). Even in the most contingent truths about an individual אלהים there is always something to be conceived (a sufficient reason) which serves to explain why this predicate or event pertains to it, or why this has happened in relation to it, rather than not.

According to our adaptation of the ideas of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), even if we could continue to describe various aspects of an אלהים indefinitely, we can never fully have knowledge of what an אלהים as such was. And since we cannot know what an אלהים is essentially, we should instead look for the conditions that must be presupposed to make the construction of the generic *concept* אלהים possible. Kant’s reapplied view of essence also suggests a difference between the appearance (phenomenon) of an אלהים (its extrinsic or relational properties) and the essence (noumenon) of an אלהים as it is in itself (its intrinsic or non-relational properties). The latter are ineffable and an אלהים itself is utterly transcendent (see Kant 1933).

Georg WF Hegel’s (1770-1831) adapted account of the essence of an אלהים might be taken to reject all transcendence in favour of the appearances. For our purposes, the very idea of an אלהים-in-itself contains an internal contradiction. For it calls us to think of an אלהים without determination, and yet the very nature of an אלהים cannot but contain determinations. There is no distinction between reality and appearances in an אלהים as much as the appearances of an אלהים just are the reality or essence of an אלהים. The essence of an אלהים is thus identical to its relational and extrinsic properties (without which it is no-thing). Also, an אלהים will be known only relative to what it is *not*, i.e. through *negation*. In other words, it has *identity* only through difference. A Hegelian logic of essence is thus “transcendental,” not “formal”.

In our reapplication of the relevant related ideas of Friedrich W. Nietzsche (1844-1900), there is no essence of an אלהים, not even in appearances. Also, since the concept of an אלהים has a history it cannot be defined. Therefore one cannot say *what* an אלהים is, not least because the name itself is already a metaphorical construct based on generalizing from human needs in the face of a complex and extensive process of becoming. In order to state what an אלהים is, scholars will of necessity simplify and thereby falsify the whole in the process of description, which is already and always subject to interpretation. Not only are any seeming essential properties of an אלהים thus an arbitrary construct, by assimilating the new into the old it ignores many of the unique aspects of various alternative representations of אלהים in the OT. Any attempt to state what an אלהים essentially is a given interpreter’s perspective and will-to-power.

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889-1951) presented a linguistic philosophy suggesting that there exist serious problems with any attempted “real definition” approach to the question of what an אלהים in the OT essentially is (see Wittgenstein 1958:§65-71). The variety of things called אלהים has no one essential thing in common and is only loosely related to one another. These similarities are analogous to “family resemblances”, so that the extension of the term אלהים can be seen as being as complex as that of the concept of “games” (where there is no essential property common to all things so called). In other words, there are no necessary or essential properties of the אלהים – only overlapping ones. In the end, then, the question “What is an אלהים?” can on

this view be seen as itself an illusion of language – something which appears to be grammatically legitimate but is not. Thus what it means to be an אלהים is not something mysterious or hidden but is already available in the use of the word אלהים in specific “language games” providing the contexts for its use.

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) came up with a phenomenological perspective which can be adapted to suggest the essence of an אלהים is something “described” rather than posited. One brackets the question of whether this essence is real in order to refrain from getting caught up in the endless metaphysical issues. On this view, the essence of an אלהים is not some occult quality but the phenomenon of an אלהים grasped as being this or that kind of thing. The truth is that all texts in the OT present the “essence” of an אלהים when they operate with it in representing it and in characters making judgments about a particular אלהים. It is only that, from a theoretical point of view, the reader tend to interpret the essence of an אלהים away (see Husserl 1998:41) Yet it is clearly visible in terms of figure and background, limit and horizon.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) offered a perspective that we can reapply to reverse the order of the traditional essence/existence distinction in ontology (see Sartre 1957). If existence is the fact of being an אלהים, the essence, on the other hand, is the kind of thing an אלהים is, i.e. the blueprint, plan, or description, the nature of the thing (the “what” it is) (analogous to humans, see Sartre 1948). On this view the existence of an אלהים precedes its essence. An אלהים would thus not by itself be any “thing”. It is only in entering into relations and becoming (someone’s) an אלהים (and therefore what it is) that an אלהים admits to some sort of definition. The essence of an אלהים is thus an emergent property only instantiated vis-à-vis an Other. Being an אלהים is therefore a relation as much as it is a property, and the latter only gets instantiated in the former.

Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), like Aristotle and Aquinas, offers a view that can be taken to mean that a philosophical approach to our topic is knowledge of the *essence* of אלהים. Yet from the perspectives found in Heidegger’s evolving ontology, the use of the word “Wesen” as here re-applied to the question of what an אלהים in the OT was assumed to be, can refer to several things, namely: the “essence” (common properties) of an אלהים; “*whatness*” (quiddity and constitutive properties) of an אלהים; an אלהים’s “essentials way” (necessary properties); “inherent” (intrinsic properties) of an אלהים; the אלהים as a “whole” (consequential properties); an אלהים’s “way of being” (identity over time); “what is ownmost” (haecceity and identity across possible worlds) in an אלהים, etc. The concept of being an אלהים thus has a broader usage than simply its connection to and derivation from the idea of “essence”. (cf. Heidegger 1961:59)

Karl Popper (1902-1994) implied that any “essentialism” is a logical error that is typical of the humanities and social sciences. The priority given to the quest to define one’s terms (e.g. אלהים) and the belief that it is important to find answer to any “What is X?”-questions (such as, with reference to an אלהים) are utterly mistaken. The quest for *whatness* is the “essentialist” fallacy, perpetrated by those who Popper calls “methodological essentialists” assuming that the essence of an אלהים may be discovered and discerned with the help of intellectual intuition. It is the belief that the essence of an אלהים has a name proper to it (an אלהים), the name after which the sensible thing (an אלהים) is called; and that this essence of an אלהים may be described in words about an אלהים (see Popper 1966).

Willard VO Quine (1908-2000) had a view which, if adapted for our purposes, might be taken to suggest that ontological questions of the form “What is an F” (e.g. like “What is an אלהים?”) cannot be answered via recourse to a further term, i.e. “An F is a G.” (e.g. an אלהים is P; where P is an essential and necessary property). (see Quine 1953:71) The answer makes only relative

sense: sense relative to the uncritical acceptance of "G" (P) (Quine 1960:53) Aristotelian essentialism about an אלהים, according to which it has an "essence", i.e. those properties of an אלהים without which it ceases to be what it is, is incorrect. Essential properties, if any can be said to exist, are such only for *descriptions* of an אלהים, not of the actual אלהים to which the word refers. Hence the idea of the essence of an אלהים understood in modal terms (necessary properties across possible worlds) is also wrongheaded. There are no logically necessary and therefore essential properties of an אלהים (all are accidental).

Gilles Deleuze (1925-1995) provided a metaphysics which would also stress the urgency for an ontology of pure difference with reference to what an אלהים was assumed to be. From an adapted Deleuzian point of view, a philosophical approach to אלהים can never arrive at an adequate concept of אלהים. To our heart's desire, we may compound and multiply the concepts of our meta-language but there will always necessarily be some aspect of an אלהים left untouched by our thinking. However many categories we may employ in our attempt to think the *whatness* of an אלהים, the nature of any particular אלהים will always elude us. Apparent identities such as "X" (אלהים in the OT) are therefore composed of endless series of differences (see Deleuze 1994). Such differences, as opposed to essences in an אלהים, are the only reality and go all the way down.

Hilary Putnam (1926 –) dealt with general names like אלהים which could be associated with *natural kinds*. However, the word אלהים does not denote an *essence*; instead, one must associate the word with a certain *stereotype* (see Putnam 1975). The latter comprises a list of properties that are usually associated with the term אלהים. These properties are neither necessary nor sufficient conditions for being a member of the natural kind referred to by the term אלהים. It is not required that all or even most of the members of the אלהים possess these properties. They are simply properties associated with the term אלהים and אלהים as natural kind.

Saul Kripke (1940 –) helped to revive neo-essentialism in analytic philosophy with his idea suggesting that the term אלהים may be taken to be what he would call a *rigid designator*, i.e. something that would refer to an אלהים as fixed object across all possible worlds for a given linguistic community (see Kripke 1980). Yet Kripke's modal view of essence would not hold that essential properties determine the natures of an individual אלהים or that essential properties furnish us with an answer to our question of what an אלהים is. Instead, Kripke's essentialism is entirely focused on necessity; on this view the necessary properties of an אלהים are the essential ones. This is different from Aristotelians who would make an explicit distinction between necessary and essential features of an אלהים.

Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) went even further than his predecessors in his early writings by implying that the quest for the essences of an אלהים would be based on two problematic assumptions: That there is a distinct and ahistorical essence of an אלהים, and that discerning any such an alleged essence reveals a fundamental concept at the centre of the אלהים as phenomenon (see Derrida 1978).

From his adapted perspective one cannot make statements such as an אלהים is P with regard to the identity of an אלהים coherently. However, this is not only not essentialist, it is also not anti-essentialist, since the latter presupposed but called into question the stable meaningfulness of the concept of essence itself. Derrida (1967) offered a differential ontology that would distinguish the essence of an אלהים from its identity. The idea is that the essence of an אלהים does not define the sign's identity. The latter is instead determined by a co-originate and co-dependent relationship of differences existing between a set of oppositions and differences

within the identity of an אלהים. There is therefore no original, pure, unambiguous, clear, original, essential or permanent meaning for the sign אלהים to have.

## Conclusion

This study has been an introductory meta-theoretical discussion of the variety of possible *philosophical* interpretations of the question of what an אלהים in the OT was assumed to be. In asking questions of *whatness* and essence, OT scholars have not only been entering the territory of philosophy in general and ontology in particular. They have also sought answers when what the question of *whatness* and the concept of *essence* themselves are supposed to mean is far from established. Hence any future research concerned with anything related to the idea of an essence of אלהים and with asking what an אלהים was assumed to be would do well to take cognisance of the variety of nuances these notions has hitherto lend themselves to in the history of the discipline where they are ultimately most at home.

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