

Divine Freedom in the Old Testament: A Comparative-Philosophical Inquiry

JACO GERICKE (NWU, VAAL TRIANGLE CAMPUS)

If anyone should find out in this manner the crass stupidity of the celebrated conception of "free will" and put it out of his head altogether, I beg of him to carry his "enlightenment" a step further, and also put out of his head the contrary. . . The "non-free will" is mythology; in real life it is only a question of strong and weak wills.¹

ABSTRACT

In this article we ask whether YHWH as depicted in the OT was assumed to have free will. The background lies in contemporary philosophy of religion where the problem of divine freedom arises in the context of perfect being theology. However, not only did ancient Yahwism(s) not operate on perfect being theology, the discourse also did not seem to value free will to the extent that OT theologians and philosophers of religion do. Though YHWH is typically characterised as able to do whatever he pleased, it can be demonstrated that his will was itself assumed to be governed by both intrinsic and extrinsic determinants. Thus contrary to the popular consensus, a belief in absolute divine freedom is in fact absent from the OT's folk-metaphysical assumptions.

A INTRODUCTION

This article intends to answer a rarely asked question in OT theology, namely, was YHWH assumed to have free will? While such an inquiry might seem fruitless, misconstrued or as having an obvious answer, this is in fact not the case. To be sure, there is no exact biblical Hebrew equivalent for the English abstract noun "freedom."² Neither was any OT text written as a philosophical treatise on divine freedom. Even so, biblical descriptions of divine willing in the character YHWH cannot but contain many covert and taken-for-granted assumptions on the matter. Moreover, prominent OT theologians have always assumed that the texts do have something to say about the freedom of YHWH's will and in this regard there seems to be some sort of consensus: the OT not only assumed YHWH has free will, the divine freedom was believed to be

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil* (trans. Marion Faber; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 59.

² Claus Westermann, *Elements of Old Testament Theology* (University of Michigan: John Knox Press, 1982), 144.

absolute.³ In this regard, several tradition-historical contexts exist with reference to which the scholarly belief in radical divine freedom is commonly expressed. The first of these is the mythological topos of YHWH's creation of the world:

The sovereign Lord of the world, who accomplishes his creation as *the utterly free decision of his will*.⁴

If the world was called into being by the *free will* of God, it is his very own possession and he is its Lord.⁵

A second context biblical theologians do not bypass the opportunity to stress YHWH's free will pertains to divine acts of election, more specifically his favouring of the people of Israel as the chosen nation (divine freedom is supposed to be the message of the so-called "scandal of particularity"):

What follows is a covenant revelation that reflects God's *freedom* and sovereignty in choosing and relating to Israel.⁶

In the election of Israel God manifested his *freedom*. . . .⁷

A third theological location for the scholarly emphasis on divine freedom can be found in discussions of YHWH's self-revelation:

. . . revelation is an act of God's *free will*. . . .⁸

Yahweh still remains free, making his presence known among his people according to *his own free decision*.⁹

³ See Willem Vangemeren, "Prophets, the Freedom of God and Hermeneutics," *WTJ* 52/1 (1990): 77-99. The same is true with regard to the question of human free will and attempts to explain away YHWH's predilection for overriding it in some texts; this is considered unfair or immoral by some Arminian Christian standards, e.g. Brian P. Irwin, "Yahweh's Suspension of Free Will in the Old Testament: Divine Immorality or Sign-Act?" *TynBul* 54/2 (2003): 55-62. However, even those who can deny human free will have a hard time thinking the same applies to YHWH *qua* being.

⁴ Emphasis mine. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Vol. 2; trans. John A. Baker; OTL; Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1967), 492.

⁵ Emphasis mine. Gerhard von Rad, *The Theology of Israel's Historical Traditions* (vol. 2 of *Old Testament Theology*; trans. David M. G. Stalker; OTL; New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 143.

⁶ Emphasis mine. Paul House, *Old Testament Theology* (Westmont, Ill., Intervarsity Press, 1998), 173.

⁷ Emphasis mine. Brevard Childs, *Old Testament Theology in a Canonical Context* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 355.

⁸ Emphasis mine. Ludwig Köhler, *Theology of the Old Testament* (trans. Andrew S. Todd; LTTS; London: James Clarke & Co., 1957), 60.

⁹ Emphasis mine. Walter Zimmerli, *Old Testament Theology in Outline* (trans. David E. Green; London: T & T Clark, 1978), 73.

Fourthly, there is believed to be radical freedom with regard to the divine nature and attributes:

YHWH retains YHWH's freedom to be YHWH in every circumstance. . . . YHWH is free to act without obligation according to YHWH's own inclination.¹⁰

YHWH, the holy god, acts *with freedom*, is not bound by necessity (cf. Ex 33:19).¹¹

On other miscellaneous points, appeals to alleged divine freedom are typical in attempted explanations of the prohibition against images.¹² YHWH's free will is also seen as accounting for the pre-orthodox motif of divine repentance.¹³ In addition, other instances could be noted, but more will not make the point any clearer. Divine freedom is not only taken for granted among OT theologians but actively promoted as a central concern in biblical god-talk. However, while insisting on YHWH's free will is certainly theo-politically correct, well-intended, edifying and philosophically in vogue, the question is whether the view actually reflects what is implicit in the textual data. Or might it be a projection of readers whose culture is obsessed with freedom of the will for a variety of reasons?

To the best of my knowledge, there is no bulk of research within OT theology exclusively devoted to actually arguing philosophically that YHWH was assumed to have free will. In this article, however, the question of divine freedom in the OT will be our central concern. In the discussion to follow the objective of the study will be to determine what the texts presuppose that is in any way related to our query. The methodology employed involves a descriptive and comparative philosophy of religion applied to clarify the relevant presuppositions in the religious discourse of ancient Yahwism(s) as found in the OT. The hypothesis is that the concept of divine freedom as popularly understood in OT theology and philosophy of religion is alien to biblical metaphysics. The attribution of absolute freedom to YHWH is the result of superimposing anachronistic philosophical-theological categories (particularly "divine sovereignty") onto pre-philosophical biblical god-talk.

In light of the objective and methodology noted above, the outline of the article is as follows. The case against divine freedom commences with an introduction to philosophical debates on the subject of free will. Following that is

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 322.

¹¹ Bernhard Anderson, *Contours of Old Testament Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 32.

¹² Westermann, *Elements*, 129.

¹³ E.g., Thomas M. Bolin, "'Should I Not Also Pity Nineveh?' Divine Freedom in the Book of Jonah," *JSOT* 67 (1995): 109-120.

a closer look at what modern philosophers of religion have had to say about the problem of divine freedom, thus obtaining a functional conceptual background for inferring what is nascent in biblical discourse. The outline of relevant issues comprising this section will itself be supplemented by comments on where and how the OT implicitly diverge from the popular consensus in contemporary OT theology and modern philosophical perspectives on divine freedom.¹⁴

B PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DIVINE FREEDOM

What exactly is freedom as such thought to be in the context of metaphysics and, if there is such a thing at all, what does and does it not entail? Whatever our view on the matter, the problem of free will is a classic within the history of Western philosophy.¹⁵ David Hume once called it:

. . . the question of liberty and necessity; the most contentious question of metaphysics, the most contentious science. . .¹⁶

Though German philosophies of the will in the 19th century (e.g., Schelling, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, et al.) had a lot to say about the lack of freedom, a marked increase in a passionate affirmation thereof can be found from the heyday of existentialist philosophies from the mid-twentieth century onwards.¹⁷ In contemporary analytic philosophy (i.e., post-Kripkean possible worlds metaphysics in particular), however, the concept of free will has become notoriously difficult to define.¹⁸ A variety of current perspectives on

¹⁴ For a discussion of the use of comparative philosophy of religion in biblical studies, see Jaco Gericke, "Descriptive Currents in Philosophy of Religion for Hebrew Bible Studies," *HTS* 67/3 (2011); Art. #855; 8 pages; [cited 5 January 2013]. Online: DOI: 10.4102/hts.v67i3.855.

¹⁵ More recently, see Laura Ekstrom, *Free Will: A Philosophical Study* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000). Robert Kane, ed., *Oxford Handbook on Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) and Robert Kane, *A Contemporary Introduction to Free Will* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* (2nd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); John Martin Fischer, Robert Kane, Derk Pereboom and Manuel Vargas, *Four Views on Free Will* (Walden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2007); Derk Pereboom, ed., *Free Will* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2009).

¹⁶ David Hume, *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (ed. Tom L. Beauchamp, Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 53.

¹⁷ See classically, Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956). To deny the reality of freedom has been almost taboo since then (i.e. "bad faith," "inauthenticity," a lack of "accountability," etc.).

¹⁸ See Timothy O'Connor, "Free Will," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2011 Edition; ed. Edward N. Zalta; n.p. [cited 1 February 2013]). Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2011/entries/freewill/>.

the subject exists, commonly designated by technical terms such as libertarianism, compatibilism, determinism, fatalism, *etcetera*.¹⁹

The problem of free-will in linguistic philosophy and metaphysics proper also has a pre-history in philosophical theology, namely in questions of how human beings can have free will in the context of divine foreknowledge and sovereignty.²⁰ Many analytic Christian philosophers of religion also consider free will a core ingredient in theodicies.²¹ Of course, most of the discussion even in theology is focused on *human* freedom. Yet from early on, philosophers of religion have also inverted the question and wondered whether God as conceived of in classical theism can be said to have free will.²² This odd conundrum arises in the context of perfect being²³ with its assumptions that the divine is omnipotent, omniscient and absolute in goodness.²⁴ On the one hand, it is hard to see how, if God knows the future from eternity, God has any real choice between alternative courses of action. On the other hand, God as so conceived is also thought of as lacking freedom both in relation to logically contradictory actions (making a stone so heavy God cannot lift it) and also with regard to engaging in inappropriate behaviour (e.g., doing evil, climbing a tree, creating anything but the best, etc.).²⁵

¹⁹ For an explanation of these terms, see Ilham Dilman, *Free Will: An Historical and Philosophical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999).

²⁰ In philosophical theology a familiar source is Jonathan Edwards, *Freedom of Will* (ed. Paul Ramsey; New Haven: Yale University Press, 1957). More recently, see Linda Zagzebski, "Foreknowledge and Free Will," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2011 Edition; ed. Edward N. Zalta; n.p. [cited 1 February 2013]). Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2011/entries/free-will-foreknowledge/>.

²¹ See typically Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977).

²² For the classic debates on the topic, see William Rowe, "Clarke and Leibniz on Divine Perfection and Freedom," *EnDiss* 16 (1997): 60-82. Cf. also more recently Michael Almeida, *The Metaphysics of Perfect Beings* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

²³ I use the concept of "God" as "being" here simply in a nominal sense to denote the way the Divine is commonly referred to in the contexts of discourse with which this study operates. Of course, many philosophical theologies in Continental philosophy of religion do not consider God a being at all, especially in view of the critique against such notions in the work of Paul Tillich, in Martin Heidegger's critique of onto-theology and in Jean-Luc Marion's post-metaphysical theology (God without Being). In the present article with its descriptive agenda I am simply noting the way philosophers of religion talk. Whether the jargon is problematic or not is not currently relevant.

²⁴ See William Rowe, "The Problem of Divine Perfection and Freedom," in *Reasoned Faith* (ed. Eleonore Stump; Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press, 1993), 223-233.

²⁵ For an introduction to the problematic, see William Rowe, "Divine Freedom," in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2008 Edition; ed. Edward N. Zalta;

Interestingly, irrespective of differences of opinion among philosophers of religion as to whether the concept of a free perfect being is internally logically coherent, most seem to be united in the assumption for God to have free will (or autonomy) is better than not to have it. Apparently it is considered problematic for philosophers of classical theism if God's choices are determined either by God's nature or by anything external to God.²⁶ Another motivating factor for arguing in favour of divine (or human) free will is the assumption that such freedom is a necessary condition for authentic interpersonal relationships and for moral responsibility. Thus there is considered to be much at stake in discussions about whether God enjoys absolute freedom and two preliminary questions²⁷ are typical of the subject matter.

- (i) Apart from freedom, what properties are held to be essential to divinity?
- (ii) What conception(s) of freedom govern the inquiry?

With regard to the first question above, and from a historical perspective, it has to be acknowledged that what classical theism considers essential properties for a perfect being are not instantiated in many narrative and poetic representations of YHWH in the OT.²⁸ As for the second question, two different views of divine freedom have emerged that might be presupposed in discussions about divine freedom in the OT:

- (i) According to the first view, YHWH was assumed to be free provided it was believed that nothing outside the deity determined it to act in a particular way.
- (ii) According to the second view, YHWH was assumed to be free provided it was believed that it was in his power not to do what he did.

The first of these two views has to its advantage being based on the popular if naïve notion that freedom of the will is freedom from external forces with respect to choosing courses of action. The problem, of course, is that if this criterion is itself dubious it is not sufficient to establish that YHWH was assumed to be genuinely free. Even if it was believed that YHWH was not determined to perform an action by external forces, YHWH could be assumed to be in the grip of some internal passion or irresistible impulse that necessitated the performance of a particular action, thereby overcoming YHWH's judgment that the action might be wrong or unwise.²⁹ This would explain the frequent repentance on the part of YHWH in some representations (e.g. with regard to

n.p. [cited 1 February 2013]). Online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2008/entries/divine-freedom/>.

²⁶ See William Rowe, *Can God Be Free* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

²⁷ Rowe, "Divine Freedom," n.p.

²⁸ See also Terrence Fretheim, *The Suffering of God: An Old Testament Perspective* (OBT 12; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

²⁹ Rowe, "Divine Freedom," n.p.

creation, the flood, the choosing of Israel, the election of Saul, etc.).³⁰ So the mere absence of determining external forces cannot be considered sufficient for YHWH's actions to be considered as having been completely free. This philosophical given is overlooked by OT theologians that proclaim divine freedom based on the first of the two criteria above.

Suppose then we opt for the second view above and assume that an act of YHWH was assumed to have been performed freely only if YHWH was free to perform the action and free not to perform it. If either some external force or internal passion was beyond the control of YHWH and YHWH's action was inevitable given that external force or internal passion, then YHWH was not assumed to act freely in performing that action. Working with this view as our chosen vantage point, to what extent (if at all) can we say that YHWH was assumed to have free will? After all, since YHWH is sometimes depicted as subject both to external constrains (divine functions and relations) and uncontrollable passions that compelled YHWH to act, it is tempting to conclude that YHWH was not as such assumed to enjoy perfect freedom of action.³¹ Let us pursue this line of thinking and see where it leads.³²

C DETERMINISM AND THE DIVINE NATURE

There exists an unnoticed inherent deconstructive philosophical tension in the rhetoric on divine freedom within OT theology itself.

On the one hand, as was noted earlier, it is frequently emphasised that YHWH is a free agent and not dependent on, or determined by, anything at all. On the other hand, a problem arises when YHWH's will is claimed to be wholly singular:

YHWH's will is undivided, and there is one divine will that is active in all spheres.³³

On the view that YHWH was assumed to be free if and only if it was believed that it was in YHWH's power not to do what he did, the statement above entails the absence of free will. An undivided will coupled with full power and knowledge (which OT theologians also ascribe to YHWH) by

³⁰ See John Barton, "Alttestamentliche Theologie nach Albertz?" *JBT* 10 (1995): 25-34.

³¹ See Brueggemann, *Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, 370.

³² Chances are that reconciliation of supposed divine freedom and necessity is not possible. It was for this reason, amongst others, that Immanuel Kant could list the free-will vs. determinism problem as the third of his antinomies of pure reason, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (trans. Lewis White Beck; Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1993).

³³ Horst-Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology* (vol. 2; London: A S Todd, 1996), 177.

implication has no real alternative courses of actions available to it. What is desired and what must be done are already so certain that it is hard to see how YHWH then could do anything else.

On the other hand, another qualifying statement sometimes found in OT theology when the topic of divine freedom arises is the claim that the only necessity involving YHWH derives from his nature (Job 34:13; Ps 135:5; Isa 45:7; Jer 18:6; Lam 3:37-38, etc.). Allegedly, YHWH does not at any time act contrary to his nature.³⁴ Here "does not" seems very much like "cannot." If YHWH was constrained by his nature, even if it is the only constraint, it is still a constraint. To see whether the problematic can be side-stepped to some extent, a philosopher might wish to ask whether the OT assumed YHWH to be responsible for his own nature or not.³⁵ In other words, was YHWH through his actions also believed to create his own nature over time, and, by virtue of having created it, thereby thought to be causally responsible for who he became?³⁶

The reason why this question is considered to be important is that the problem of constraint-by-one's-nature seems to rest on the assumption that no being can be responsible for having the nature it has or, having a certain nature, responsible for acting according to it. And, if this assumption is correct, it logically follows from YHWH's possessing the nature he does that a) it was not up to YHWH who he was and b) given this, to choose whether or not to act accordingly. Of course, in the broad sense of the expression "the divine nature," YHWH might have been assumed to have been responsible for its constitution, or at least for part of it. A deity like YHWH with a naturally gracious disposition towards his people may have been assumed to have played a role in developing his "nature" to be gracious towards them (e.g. by restraining himself time and again), and thus may bear some responsibility for his "nature" to be gracious.³⁷

In this sense perhaps YHWH was both assumed to be constrained by his nature and yet free in the sense of being partly responsible for how that nature was developed. That being said, it seems more valid to say that according to what is implicit in the OT, YHWH was not assumed to have been responsible for being the kind of god he was believed to be, that is, a gracious god. In other

³⁴ Trent C. Butler. "Divine Freedom," in *Holman Bible Dictionary* (1991), n.p. [cited 2 February 2013]. Online: <http://www.studylight.org/dic/hbd/view.cgi?n=1635>.

³⁵ Of course, this assumes that the concept of "nature" is appropriately applied to YHWH. Biblical Hebrew knows no such word and the question of whether there is or can be such a thing as the divine nature and what that would entail has been a topic in philosophy of religion over the centuries. For a summary with a not so interesting answer, see Alvin Plantinga, *Does God Have a Nature?* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1980).

³⁶ Cf. Rowe, "Divine Freedom," n.p.

³⁷ Cf. Rowe, "Divine Freedom," n.p.

words, YHWH did not have the freedom to choose not to be gracious, he desired it without prior volition; he could not will to be a god who is not gracious, even though YHWH's graciousness most certainly had its limits (cf. Exod 32-34). YHWH thus acts instinctively and engages in innate divine behaviour in the sense that YHWH has no choice but to act graciously most of the time, as befits the type of god he was.

With regard to the typology of divinity in ancient Israelite religion, leaving the world in the text behind, from the perspective of the history of religion YHWH was not assumed to be free not to act out a theistic stereotype.³⁸ YHWH may have been an atypical deity in his interreligious environment, yet it cannot be denied that YHWH seems non-representable aside from being constructed as an ancient Near Eastern (Bronze, Iron and Axial Age) god bound by external and internal constraints. Externally it seems that the biblical authors could not imagine YHWH without envisaging simultaneously a character who (like others of his kind) creates and destroys, blesses and curses, saves and judges, provides and hides, *etcetera*. Internally YHWH seems to have been considered to be constrained by his honour and reputation, the desire to be worshipped and feared, the need to rule and command, and by the compulsion to remain loyal to and fulfil his promises to his covenant partners (cf. how loyalty to Abraham, Moses, David, etc. often supervened on both fair and destructive divine impulses of the moment).³⁹

In other words, YHWH was not assumed free with regard to his basic functions and relations.⁴⁰ This is also true on the most fundamental level:

³⁸ I am working here with the literary ontology of Ricoeur's "world in the text." Of course, from a literary-critical perspective the question poses a category mistake. The character of YHWH as a literary persona has no free or un-free will since literary constructs are not actually volitional agents. See Robert P. Carroll, *Wolf in the Sheepfold: The Bible as Problem for Theology* (London: SCM Press, 1997), 37; David J. A. Clines, *Interested Parties: The Ideology of Writers and Readers of the Hebrew Bible* (JSOTSup 205; Gender, Culture, Theory, 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 187-211.

³⁹ YHWH's nature and commitments appear to constrain him to the point of being compelled to act for his reputation, his honour, his predications and promises, his holiness and his glory. It is quite common for OT theologians to say YHWH "limits" and "restrains" himself in their discussions of YHWH's freedom. For more on this, see Fretheim, *Suffering of God*, passim.

⁴⁰ The divine functions and relations themselves can also be seen as having been assumed to be volitional constraints. Thus also external circumstances and forces outside the deity were assumed to coerce him into particular actions (although texts differ to the extent this was assumed to be the case). Variables such as covenantal obligations, religious rituals, human behaviour and limited control over the forces of chaos (e.g., facing the Leviathan in Isa 27:1 in a future battle vs. Ps 74 where it is in the past and Ps 104 where there is no conflict). Some texts also place YHWH's influence outside of Sheol (Pss 6, 30, 88, etc.) In other words, not only YHWH's nature or proper-

YHWH was assumed to be a necessary being and therefore had no freedom as to whether or not to exist (and was not believed to be free to end his existence). Besides the above, YHWH was also not assumed to have had any choice about the basic metaphysical framework of divine reality *per se* within which and as part of which YHWH was assumed to exist prior to and since creation. There were also necessary parts of the divine world that YHWH was not assumed to have created (e.g. besides himself, think of YHWH's location prior to and at creation, Sheol, time as such, language, etc.). Many chaotic elements YHWH could not simply wish away (e.g. the waters, the darkness, in some texts the Leviathan – and contrary to modern sentiments, this was not due to alleged respect for human free will).

To bring the point home, a subtle distinction needs to be made. Though there was assumed to be an apparent *freedom of choice* for YHWH in relation to certain states of affairs, there was not assumed to be any *freedom of will* with regard to the innate desires that necessitates those choices in the first place. Hence there was not assumed to be absolute freedom of will in YHWH, only some appearance thereof. This point is decisive. While YHWH is represented as making decisions, YHWH was not believed to be free to choose the basic properties, values and motivations that constituted the divine nature that determined which among alternative courses of action YHWH would opt for. In this sense we can say that absolute divine freedom is absent from the OT in that YHWH either (a) could not have refrained from performing a certain typical divine action (like ruling the world) or, at least, (b) could not have refrained from causing his decision to perform that action (i.e., from having the desire to rule).⁴¹

If the argument above is valid, it follows that the apparent freedom OT theologians ascribe to YHWH could in fact be a projection onto the text of anachronistic assumptions about what is proper for a god and concerning what seems to be desirable for modern human beings as autonomous (legal) subjects. Perhaps the idea of YHWH being a slave to his divine nature offends only readers with post-biblical libertarian metaphysical tastes. For it is quite likely that in ancient Israel the idea of absolute freedom was not so positively valued as in

ties but also his functions and relations vis-à-vis the world was often assumed to determine the course of action he would invariably follow (e.g. act like a god, remain loyal, be to his name, etc.).

⁴¹ Crude or naïve realism assumes that the ability to demonstrate voluntary thoughts or movements proves that one is free. However, things are not so simple, as was shown by Arthur Schopenhauer, *Prize Essay on the Freedom of the Will* (ed. Günter Zoller, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). One can choose what to do but not what to want. Of course, while this refers to human freedom, the notion of a will that is not chosen but innate can also be applied to the anthropomorphic representations of YHWH.

the Kantian or Existentialist type of insistence on moral autonomy still evident in contemporary philosophy of religion:

At present one only feels responsible for what one intends and for what one does, and we have our pride in ourselves. All our professors of jurisprudence start with this sentiment of individual independence and pleasure, as if the source of right had taken its rise here from the beginning. But throughout the longest period in the life of mankind there was nothing more terrible to be independent. . . . While we feel law and regulation as constraint and loss, people formerly regarded egoism as a painful thing, and a veritable evil. . . . At that time the "free will" had bad conscience in close proximity to it; and the less independently a person acted, the more the herd instinct, and not his personal character, expressed itself in his conduct, so much the more moral did he esteem himself. . . . It is in this respect that we have most changed our mode of thinking.⁴²

Perhaps it is objected by saying the above is applicable to humans only (i.e., not to divinity). However, if we remember that YHWH's psychological constitution is a privatisation and projection of ancient Near Eastern social mores, the hypothesis positing the absence of divine freedom might seem to be historically the greater possibility. Even theological realists must concede that the OT does not know of a god reposing in isolation – YHWH is always related and therefore conditioned. In all likelihood, objections to the theory will stem from taking the popular biblical-theological consensus on the supposed absolute freedom of YHWH for granted.

The obsession in Old Testament theology with emphasising the supposed absoluteness of divine freedom is in all likelihood itself based on remnants of the Christian (Reformed) doctrine of divine sovereignty. Perhaps it is also fuelled by the residue of classic existentialist ethics (where the denial of absolute freedom is considered "bad faith"). And because many find it impossible to envisage legal responsibility without a belief in free will, plus the fact that the master-slave mentality (and therefore metaphor) has become outdated in the West, many contemporary readers will find the hypothesis of this study quite strange. That is because we subconsciously and anachronistically tend to project the axiology or value theory behind our modern and postmodern philosophical anthropologies onto OT folk-theologies.

Reading the OT today, then, it is unavoidable that autonomy and freedom will be privileged over heteronomy and determinism, also with reference to the interpretation of biblical god-talk. Therewith an error theory to account for the loss of the older determinist folk-metaphysics and for the current popu-

⁴² Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (ed. Walter Kaufmann; *New York: Vintage*, 1974), 117.

lar if misguided consensus on the supposed absoluteness of divine freedom in the OT.

D CONCLUSION

Assuming the conception of freedom of the will as having the necessary condition of there being the option to act and not to act in a given way, we may now conclude that the OT knows no such thing when it comes to representations of YHWH. The philosophical problem of divine freedom in the OT can therefore be concluded and outlined comparatively vis-à-vis assumptions in Christian philosophical theology, namely:

- (i) YHWH's character and values were assumed to be necessary, not self-caused;
- (ii) YHWH's actions involved innate divine behaviour, i.e. they were not free;
- (iii) YHWH's choices were determined and motivated by instinctive divine desires.

Thus while YHWH could do whatever found favour in his eyes, what did find favour was determined by what YHWH willed. And adapting Schopenhauer's dictum one may say that YHWH did things according to a divine will the nature of which he did not choose. Since the divine nature and will were assumed to be fixed and determinative of YHWH's choices among alternative courses of action, there was no real alternative. Any decision actually made in the end was not assumed to be free in the sense that YHWH could have willed (and therefore chosen) anything other than what he did choose. In view of these considerations, it is concluded that the problem of divine freedom as born in the context of philosophical thinking about perfect beings should be considered an anachronistic and pseudo-issue in theologies of the OT.

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- Jaco Gericke, North-West University, Faculty of Humanities, School of Basic Sciences, PO Box 1174, Vanderbijlpark, 1900, 21609268@nwu.ac.za