

# Did God Create Evil?: Kevin Timpe

Source URL: <https://closerotruth.com/interviews/48452>



## Transcript - Long

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Kevin, in trying to understand what God is all about I like to look at God's attributes. And each one of the ones that we know about; omniscience, omnipotence, all-good, all-benevolent; each has its own kinds of problems, logical problems, but the most sensitive one often is God's freedom because it just seems so immediately obvious that if God is all-powerful and yet God is all-good, there are a lot of things that God can't do.

### Kevin Timpe:

Mm-hmm.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

So how can we begin to understand what it means to say God is all free? Is that kind of a phony name?

### Kevin Timpe:

Perhaps in one sense, if we take all-free to mean something that I think we shouldn't mean. So let me parallel with one of the other attributes that you just gave. Classical perfect being theology, Western monotheisms tend to use the term that God is omnipotent, right? God is all-powerful. But those same traditions want to say that, in one sense that are things that God can't do. God can't create a triangle with no corners, for example, or God can't make a coffee cup that is entirely green and entirely red. So there are certain logical impossibilities that I think most of us would say that not even God can do. So we have to understand the all in all-powerful in the right kind of way. And I think there's something similar to be said about God being all-free. I tend to have a view of freedom that sometimes gets called a normative notion of freedom, where freedom is not just sort of a neutral capacity, but it's something that's oriented towards what we take to be good. So I think whenever we freely do something, we do it because we think that there's some good that we're trying to accomplish. And so if we have that kind of picture, then we say that God is all-free. But God's freedom is always going to be oriented to those things that He correctly believes, knows to be good. So there are certain things that God can't do. I mean, in one sense there are things that I can do that God can't do. Right? I can kick my dog, for example, for no good reason, but I take it that God couldn't do that. I think that it would be weird to say that I'm freer than God in being able to do that, precisely because what's constraining God, again isn't, you know that He can't move His leg or you know that there's something external to Him that's restricting Him. But that it is precisely God's perfection and orientation towards the good that perfects His freedom.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Are you limiting the concept of free will by requiring it to be normative in the sense that it has to have a good objective to achieve?

### Kevin Timpe:

Well, free will is one of these terms that gets used to mean a lot of different things. And so certainly there are certain kinds of freedom or uses of freedom that I'm restricting in a sense. The way that I tend to think about free will as sort of a technical term is the kind of control over an action that we would have to have in order to be praiseworthy or blameworthy for that action. And so it's because freedom plays this functional role in explaining moral responsibility that I think it's appropriate in that context to build on the normative dimension. But certainly there are kinds of freedom that aren't going to be like that.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Yeah, that have nothing to do with what's good or bad or if I decide to move this finger or move that finger. That is free will, because we can test whether that was set from all eternity which finger I move. That's neither moral responsibility or anything.

### Kevin Timpe:

Well there'd be context perhaps in which moving that finger versus another finger might be...

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Sure, but not now.

### Kevin Timpe:

Yeah, but not now. And so the kinds of freedom that I think really matter are going to be the kinds that are not like the finger-moving case or what sometimes get called chocolate versus vanilla cases; you know, ordering one flavor of ice cream versus another. What we really care about is the freedom that we do that makes I think a moral difference in the world. Either for moral good, or for moral evil.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Okay so now, how does that apply to God's freedom?

### Kevin Timpe:

So I take it that if we think of freedom as always oriented towards something that the agent in question believes is good, insofar as God's the perfect thinking agent, He's going to be aware of all the various reasons. And given that God I take it is also morally perfect, He's always going to be rightly oriented towards those reasons. And so there are going to be actions that God can't do given the other attributes about Him. But it's not as if there's something else, again, not anything outside of God that's limiting those. It's going to be freedom used for what freedom is best used for, so it's going to be perfected freedom. Or sometimes it's called genuine freedom. Freedom that's expressing the kind of goal that it ought to live up to.

### Robert Lawrence Kuhn:

Not able, I'd like to dig a little bit under that term. And not able can mean physically impossible. If I have no left arm, I can't play the piano with the left arm. Now that is unable to do it. Another version of that says that somebody told me I shouldn't do it so I control myself whenever...

**Kevin Timpe:**

Yeah.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

So I mean, in what... which of those conditions applies to God not doing evil?

**Kevin Timpe:**

I think the second kind.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

The second one. So God is able to do evil but it's impossible because he won't.

**Kevin Timpe:**

He has the power such that if He were to will to do an evil, nothing could prevent that from being accomplished.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

Because many theists believe the latter instead of the former. That it is metaphysically impossible for God to do evil, for the same conclusion, but they come up with a different underlying basis for it. And your claiming, which I think I'd agree with, not that that should give you any confidence, that God should be able to do it because He is all-powerful, that's the definition, but wills not to.

**Kevin Timpe:**

Yeah. Again I think that if God were to will to do some evil action, nothing could prevent Him from carrying it out. So what prevents Him from carrying it out is just his goodness.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

And that's fine.

**Kevin Timpe:**

But I do take it that God's goodness is necessary. So it's, right, there is a very strong sense in which it's the case that God, given His character, can't do these evil actions. But again it's an internal necessity given His character and not some kind of...

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

And this brings up the tension between the different divine attributes and enables them to fight against each other and you have to sort of tease apart the differences which make some people to say that the whole concept of this perfect being with all these attributes is incoherent, and therefore that doesn't exist. But you would take the position that you can articulate these together.

**Kevin Timpe:**

Mm-hmm. And yeah, I mean there – for all these divine attributes there are different accounts of what they're like. And I think that our job as a philosophical theologian or philosopher of religion is to try to figure out what understanding of the various attributes can fit together best as an overall system.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

And in this pantheon of attributes, how important is free will compared to the others?

**Kevin Timpe:**

Very important I think. But if you ask me which ones aren't important, that's probably going to be a short list too.

**Robert Lawrence Kuhn:**

And so, is it the equivalent of omnipotence which we normally hear about or God knows everything, omniscient, or all-good. I mean those are the sort of the big three.

**Kevin Timpe:**

I think it's up there with that sort. If I were forced to privilege one of these over the other I think I would probably privilege God's moral character, God's moral goodness over the others. But I think that if we're careful, we can have proper understandings of God's omnipotence, His omniscience, his freedom, and His moral goodness that all hang together.