



The creation objection against timelessness fails

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Abstract

In recent years Mullins and Craig have argued that there is a problem for a timeless God creating, with Mullins formulating the argument as follows:

- (1) If God begins to be related to creation, then God changes.
- (2) God begins to be related to creation.
- (3) Therefore, God changes.
- (4) If God changes, then God is neither immutable nor timeless.
- (5) Therefore, God is neither immutable nor timeless.

In this paper I argue that all the premises, (1), (2), and (4) are false, and then provide a revised formulation of the argument which more clearly represents what Mullins and Craig wish to argue, given the explication and commentary they give when discussing this objection to timelessness. I then call into question this argument, and conclude by stating what I think Mullins and Craig should really be arguing given the specific views they have about creation *ex nihilo* and in virtue of what timelessness requires.

Keywords Divine timelessness · Creation · Change · Ryan Mullins · William Lane Craig

Brian Leftow once wrote, ‘A timeless God’s life is hard to describe, for it is little like ours.’ (Leftow, 2000, 166) In both respects this is true, and sadly all too often implications of a timeless God’s life are misattributed in virtue of a timeless life being misunderstood. I think this is evident from what I’ll call the ‘Creation Objection’ against divine timelessness which has been continually put forward by Mullins (2021, 92–94; 2016, 99–103; manuscript; 2020b), and Craig (2001a, 59–60; 2001b,

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140–141),¹ with this being one of Mullins's key reasons for his 'Put it to death and burry it!' (2016, 1) battle cry against divine timelessness. I contend advocates of timelessness will find this objection wholly unpersuasive and misconceived given what a timeless God's life is like.

The objection

In one of his articles Mullins formulates his Creation Objection as follows.

- ‘(1) If God begins to be related to creation, then God changes.
- (2) God begins to be related to creation.
- (3) Therefore, God changes.
- (4) If God changes, then God is neither immutable nor timeless.
- (5) Therefore, God is neither immutable nor timeless.’ (Mullins, 2021, 93).

Elsewhere Mullins gives slightly different premises to the argument, with one formulation speaking of God beginning to create (2020b, 219; *manuscript*), and another concerning God beginning to be causally related to the universe (2020b, 222; *manuscript*).² Nevertheless, all play on the same fundamental idea that there is ‘something’ that God *begins* to do, with this ‘something’ being what varies amongst the formulations, and that this ultimately results in God changing, with this being something timelessness cannot allow. Here I shall focus on the form of the argument set out above, although what I say here will be relevant for the other formulations given that they all trade on the same key idea. (1), (2), and (4) are all the premises of the argument. I think they may all be false,³ but a defender of timelessness need not follow me in thinking that. In this paper, however, I'll argue against all of them.

Before doing so, let me note that Mullins thinks some will reject (2) on the basis of their denying that God is *really related* to creation and others on the basis that we should be eternalists about time, both of which he is unhappy with (2021, 93–94). As we will see, I think the argument can be defeated without taking either of these options, and that defenders of timelessness should deny it for the reasons I give.

It will also be helpful to be aware that Mullins seems to think that if one adopts timelessness they must also hold that God is metaphysically simple, writing, ‘Personally, I think that one cannot consistently deny only one of these four divine attributes

¹ There have been several forms of objections against timelessness based on God creating (Pike, 1970, 104–110; Davis, 1983, 11–13; Padgett, 1992, ch.4; Swinburne, 1993, 216). I will focus my attention on Mullins's, but note that Craig's concerns are similar. However, one difference is that Craig runs what I've called the creation objection together with what Mullins thinks of as a distinct objection to timelessness which is based on God's conserving/sustaining action. I follow Mullins (2016, 103–108) and take the conservation/sustaining problem as distinct, and so deal with it elsewhere.

² Note that these arguments assume that a timeless God can create and/or be causally related to the created world. Yet they think that in virtue of this, difficulties for timelessness emerge. As such, arguments that say timeless causation is in principle impossible, for instance, will be ignored here.

³ I don't want to affirm 3, in virtue of denying 1 and 2, and so I treat 1 as a counterfactual rather than a material conditional. As such I say that 2 is false, but even if the antecedent were true, the consequent doesn't necessarily follow.

[timelessness, immutability, impassibility, and simplicity] because they are systematically connected' (2020a, 393).⁴ From this I take it that he thinks these attributes are mutually entailing, a claim he suggests Rogers (Mullins, 2016, 129) and McCann both make (Mullins & Byrd, 2022, 22). This would therefore mean both that simplicity entails timelessness, and that timelessness entails simplicity.⁵ Despite Mullins's attestation I cannot see where Rogers and McCann make such a claim,⁶ and the closest I can find of Mullins spelling out this entailment is in his comment that simplicity helps one deny that there are intrinsic or extrinsic changes in God, both of which are changes he thinks are repugnant to timelessness (2021, 88). But this connection seems far weaker than one of entailment, and so it seems possible that there be a complex object which exists timelessly and undergoes no intrinsic or extrinsic change. In fact, within debates about the problem of temporary intrinsics, the possibility of complexes within timeless worlds are sometimes appealed to (Sider, 2001, 99–101). It therefore seems to me that the entailment between timelessness and simplicity has yet to be demonstrated, and as such one can hold that God can be timeless and yet not simple, as several philosophers do.⁷ The reason this is important, is because it means one cannot reject a reply on behalf of divine timelessness in virtue of it conflicting with simplicity. As such if one wants to argue against *timelessness*, with the title of Mullins's book, *The End of the Timeless God*, suggesting that this is his primary goal, then one cannot hide behind arguments against simplicity, as these don't apply to all who think God is timeless.⁸

⁴ For how Mullins suggests we should think the classical tradition conceives of divine simplicity see (Mullins & Byrd, 2022, 21–26).

⁵ I do not wish to question the former entailment here, only the latter.

⁶ Mullins references Rogers's *Perfect Being Theology* (2000), albeit without a page number, but whilst I can see that Rogers claims that simplicity entails timelessness (2000, 32), and that eternity preserves simplicity (2000, 55), I cannot find her claiming, or arguing, that timelessness entails simplicity. Mullins's reference to McCann is to his *Creation and the Sovereignty of God* (2012, 12–14), but nothing in this section of McCann implies this entailment; McCann doesn't even speak of timelessness here. Similarly the references (Mullins & Byrd, 2022, 22) to Dolezal (2011, 198–199) and Dugby (2016, 50–51), which are meant to explain why a weak doctrine of divine simplicity would undermine timelessness and immutability, also do nothing to show that timelessness entails simplicity.

⁷ To give three examples, Leftow thinks God is timeless (1991), doesn't think that God is simple due to the position on modality he holds (2012), and that simplicity doesn't entail timelessness (1991, 70–71). Mawson thinks God is timeless (2019), and not simple (2019, 54), at least in the way Mullins thinks of simplicity. Finally, Craig holds that God is timeless sans creation (2001a, 283–284), and that divine simplicity is false (2017, 145).

⁸ One might think I'm being unfair to Mullins, and that he should be understood as *only* arguing against those who think God has all of the four classical attributes mentioned above. I have some sympathies here, since Mullins, in the introduction of *The End of a Timeless God* does say that he will be examining the timelessness research program, which he suggests will include 'divine timelessness, simplicity, strong immutability, and strong impassibility.' (2016, 10) Yet in the book itself, Mullins criticises Leftow's view and Mawson's. But given this, it seems he is targeting views that do not fit under the research program he initially stated. In any case, if the target was only views where God is both timeless and simple, perhaps the book deserved a different title, maybe, *The End of a Timelessly Simple God*? The book, if successful, would still be showing a *lot*, but just not that any conception of timelessness is ruled out.

(1) If God begins to be related to creation, then God changes

I argue against this first premise by way of counter example to show that God can begin to be related to creation without changing. However, before doing so we need to be clear on what it means to ‘begin’, something that sadly never gets defined in any of Mullins’s presentations of the argument.

Largely in virtue of the Kalam cosmological argument, there has been much discussion regarding the correct definition of ‘beginning to exist’. One key question that has arisen is whether something can begin without having a first moment or instant.⁹ This has resulted in definitions that are agnostic as to whether there is a first, such as Pruss and Rasmussen’s, ‘A state of affairs s begins to obtain if and only if (i) there is a time at which s obtains, (ii) there is a time or finite interval of time U , such that there is no time prior to U at which s obtains, and (iii) s would not obtain without time’ (2018, 71) and Loke’s, which largely mirrors Craig and Sinclair’s (2009, 184),¹⁰ ‘ x begins to exist at t iff (i) x exists at t , and the actual world includes no state of affairs in which x exists timelessly, (ii) t is either the first time at which x exists, or is separated from any $t' < t$ at which x exists by an interval during which x does not exist.’ (Loke, 2017, 143). Nevertheless, given that the context of the creation objection is the theological doctrine of creation ex nihilo, and in this context Mullins (2020b, 233, 236)¹¹ and Craig (2001a, 274, 276, 280; Copan & Craig, 2004, 199, 253, 258) both speak of creation having a first moment, I will assume that within the argument we are considering, the concept of ‘firstness’ is required.¹²

Whilst Leftow agrees that for something to begin it will have a first member (2002, 28), he also suggests another condition on beginnings, namely that the first is succeeded by at least another (2002, 28–29). Let us follow suit and claim that if something only existed for a single instant, we wouldn’t say that it begins. As Leftow says,

‘If the only person waiting at a ticket window says, “The line begins with me,” this is just a joke. Nothing begins with him until a second person starts to wait. (One person waiting is “the beginnings” of a line, but this just means that if a second person joins the first, the result will be a line.) For whatever begins, continues. Events begin only if they continue past their first instants. No event lasting only an instant continues. So no such event begins, though each (trivially) occurs at the first instant at which it occurs.’ (Leftow, 2002, 28)

⁹ For a good discussion of this see Oderberg (2003).

¹⁰ Loke removes: ‘(iii) c ’s existing at t is a tensed fact’ (Craig & Sinclair, 2009, 184), so to make the view compatible with both static and dynamic theories of time (2017, 143).

¹¹ Mullins speaks of a first moment throughout the paper. My reference to his paper refers to what I take to be Mullins’s own view, where the first moment is what he calls the ‘precreation moment’, which has no intrinsic metric even though it is temporal (Mullins, 2020b, 234).

¹² I will speak throughout in terms of a first instant due to ease, but supposing instants are not possible, I can also adopt a view where there is a first member which has the shortest possible temporal length. What I need to be the case is that the first member is finite in length, so to prevent it being infinite and thereby implying that it did not begin.

Here then are two conditions we will initially take to be plausible for beginnings, namely that it is ‘unpreceded and something of the right sort succeeds it.’ (Leftow, 2002, 28).

Before giving my counter example to (1), I make two further points. First, note that I’ve said nothing about the need for there being prior members ‘before’ the first in order for there to be a beginning. That these aren’t required is most easily seen by considering the case of time beginning.¹³ Supposing it’s possible for time to begin, then it begins by having a first member of finite duration and then being succeeded by others. There is no temporal ‘before’ the first member, as there is no time before the first, and yet we can still say that time began. To say that there must be a temporally prior member would be to in principle rule out that time had a beginning. Beginnings, then, don’t require temporally prior members.

My second point is that when a first member begins to exist, it doesn’t change.¹⁴ For instance, when I began to exist, I didn’t change. This is because to undergo a change is to first be some way ontologically and then another. Nothing at its first instant has already been one way, and so it cannot and has not changed to be another.¹⁵ With this noted, we can move on to my counterexample to premise (1).

Suppose God is *temporal* and that time has a first instant. God and time’s first instant are simultaneous with each other, with time depending upon God.¹⁶ God and time, however, exist for more than one instant, and so based on the conditions I’ve given for what it is for something to begin, both God and time begin, since both have a first and subsequent temporal members.¹⁷ Given this we cannot talk of prior instants

¹³ Some suggest that contemporary cosmology supports the idea of time having a beginning, whilst others are less sure (Callender & McCoy, 2022, 707–718). I’m no cosmologist, so I don’t attempt to adjudicate who is right, but I do take it that it is at least in principle possible that time had a beginning.

¹⁴ In personal correspondence, Josh Rasmussen has suggested to me that the definition of begins to exist that Pruss and himself (2018, 71) give is consistent with this claim even if there is no first instant. For ‘in the case where there is no first instant, there is no instant *when* it begins. So there is no change *when* it begins.’ I ignore views of beginnings without a first due to ease of explication, and since Craig and Mullins endorse a view of creation having a first member.

¹⁵ I can make the same point on views where there are not instants but the shortest possible temporal moments, where to change would require more than one moment. Note that this will require me to deny that qualitative heterogeneity within the finite interval is sufficient for something to change. I do deny this, and say instead that all there would be in this case is variation. (Thanks to Claudio Calosi for raising this with me).

¹⁶ Maybe God simultaneously causes time, or maybe time depends upon God in some other way. Mullins it seems wouldn’t like the former (2020b, 224) but might opt for the latter (2020b, 230–237). For he appears to think it virtuous if causes temporally precede their effects, thereby ruling out simultaneous causation (2020b, 224, 229, 231–232, 235). By contrast, I think it a vice. Whilst simultaneous causes might be ‘abnormal cases’ of causation (Paul & Hall, 2013, 67), although that depends on one’s metaphysical outlook, a view of causation which in principle rules them out I take to be too narrow.

¹⁷ One could add an extra condition on what it is to begin in order to rule out God beginning to exist in this example. For instance, the assumption that something which necessarily exists cannot begin to exist, even at time’s first instant (Leftow, 2012, 341; 1991, 269). Making this addition would not negatively affect my counterexample, for all it would mean is that God didn’t begin to exist, although He did begin to be related to time, since there is a first instant at which God is related to time, subsequent instants at which He is related, and time is not necessarily existent. Obviously if one thought time was necessarily existent, then this would cause issues, since it would be the case on this revised definition of beginning that time never began either, and one might think that two necessary things cannot begin to be related to each other.

before God and time since there is no temporal before God and time. The best we can do here is speak of God being in some sense logically ‘before’ or ‘prior’ to time in the sense that time has some type of asymmetric dependence on God. But this doesn’t imply there actually exists, or existed, an instant where God exists and time doesn’t. The first instant at which God exists is the first instant at which time exists, there are no existing instants before this.

On this view God begins to be related to time. There is a first instant at which God is so related and subsequent instants at which He is also related. Yet God doesn’t change when He begins to be related. The first instant of God’s existing is the first instant at which He is related to time. There is no prior instant. As we saw above, in order for something to change it has to be one way ontologically and then another. God is never one way and then another on this view, with this being the case even though God’s relationship to time has a beginning. All one need now do is substitute ‘time’ for ‘creation’, and we have a counterexample to premise (1), where God begins to be related to creation but doesn’t change. What this counter example shows is that in order for God to change when He begins to be related to creation, He needs to be first one way ontologically and then another. But if God’s first instant is such that He is related to creation, then He doesn’t change in being so related.

(2) God begins to be related to creation

Turning to premise (2), I take it that given how we have characterised ‘beginnings’, with their requiring subsequent members, defenders of timelessness should think it is obviously false, given that a key feature of divine timelessness is that God lacks succession.¹⁸

Boethius, building on Augustine,¹⁹ provided what became the traditional definition of eternity/timelessness when he wrote,²⁰

Eternity is the whole, simultaneous, perfect possession of limitless life, which we can better understand perhaps by comparing it to temporal things. One who lives in time progresses in the present from the past and into the future. There is nothing in time that can embrace the entirety of his existence. ... What may properly be called eternal is quite different, in that it has knowledge of the whole of life, can see the future, and has lost nothing of the past. It is in an eternal present and has an understanding of the entire flow of time. (Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy* V.6, 2008, 168–169)²¹

¹⁸ As Hasker says, ‘the most essential attribute of divine timeless eternity is that in it there is no such thing as change, and therefore no temporal succession.’ (2022, 768).

¹⁹ Augustine (*Confessions* XI. xi, 13) also contends that eternity lacks succession whereas time is characterised by it.

²⁰ Eternity here, I take as synonymous with timelessness. In reality it’s more complicated than this, since there are different grades of timelessness (Leftow, 2005, 51–58). However for my purposes, we can treat them as speaking of the same thing since all agree there is no succession in eternity.

²¹ Anselm (e.g. *Monologion* 24) and Aquinas (e.g. *Summa Theologica* I, q.10, a.1, Co.), also largely follow Boethius in their conceptions of eternity.

There are several different claims about eternity here,²² but for our purposes the key one is that whilst temporality involves succession, eternity necessarily does not. Temporal beings live their lives part by part, and therefore are characterised by succession. Whilst by contrast, an eternal being's life is not made up of temporal parts, and so necessarily no succession either.²³ An eternal being lives all its life at once in its eternal present.²⁴

An additional question may now be asked, namely how we are to conceive of this eternal present. Three answers have been given to this.²⁵ The first thinks of the eternal present as point-like or instant-like, such that we should conceive of it in the same way we would conceive of a single instant in time which necessarily has no successors. This is nicely illustrated, in a non-theological context, by Latham and Miller's stopped presentist world, a world they consider to be timeless and that contains a single instant or slice of reality (2020, 145). Given that an eternal being's life comprises only one instant, it's clear that there is necessarily no succession in it. The second view claims we should think of the eternal present in terms of an extended duration. We can get a handle on what this means by considering a parallel in mereology, namely an extended simple. The thought here is that sense can be made of something which has no mereological parts, and yet is extended, so not point like, and therefore we can make sense of a temporal parallel, namely a temporal moment that has no parts and yet a duration.²⁶ The third answer suggests we shouldn't really make much of speaking of an eternal present, duration, or instant, since it is suggested that these are essentially temporal notions and therefore it is inappropriate to speak about a timeless God in this way (Helm, 2010, Ch.2; McCann, 2012, 50–53). For the purpose of this paper, I need not take a side on which position is preferable, since all uphold the same key feature of eternity, namely that it lacks succession. Nevertheless, I'll speak in terms of instants for the rest of the paper since I think it is conceptually clearer and will provide simpler explication.

It should now be evident why premise (2) is obviously false given divine timelessness, namely because there are necessarily no successive instants in God's life. But since we are assuming Leftow's conditions on what it is for something to begin, beginnings require there to be successive instants, namely ones after the first. But a timeless God doesn't have that. His first instant is the only instant of His life, since

²² See Stump (2003, 132–134) for a nice discussion.

²³ As always, things are a bit more complicated when considering the incarnation, but not in such a way that it renders the divine to have undergone succession (Pawl, 2016, Ch.8).

²⁴ Note that this present is distinct from the temporal present which moves. This means that if one adopted a presentist view of time and this view of eternity, there would be two distinct presents. I discuss this in greater detail elsewhere (Page, [manuscript a](#)). Further, note that this view rules out God being *wholly* timeless and being without any of what Leftow calls typically-temporal-properties (2002, 22–23), since presentness is a typically-temporal-property, but on this view, not one that is sufficient for something to be temporal. However, if one finds this view too odd, one can adopt a position where God has no typically-temporal properties. This view of timeless entities is even compatible with many forms of presentism, since numerous presentists allow for them (Bourne, 2006, 79–80; Crisp 2004, 46; Craig 2000, 227). Whether a timeless entity such as this could be God, so that a timeless God is compatible with presentism, would require more discussion but Leftow (2018) and myself (Page, [manuscript a](#)) have done so elsewhere.

²⁵ For a nice discussion see (Leftow, 1991, Ch.6).

²⁶ As Leftow notes (1991, 137–143), Chronons, temporal atoms, appear to be thought of in this way.

His life lacks succession. The instant of God's life occurs, but it doesn't begin. Premise (2) is therefore false on divine timelessness, for nothing begins in a timeless God's life.

Not so fast

One, however, might complain that the falsehood of premise (2) was rigged from the start given my adopted definition of 'beginning', since it implied that succession was required for something to begin. In some sense this is true, although I deny that it was defined *merely* in order to get this result. Yet note that I can retrieve the same outcome by focusing on another part of the definitions of 'beginning to exist' that I quoted above, namely by considering what it is to be a time, with this being required for those definitions of beginning.

In order to count as temporal one must at least possibly stand in temporal relations, such as being past or future, earlier or later. A past temporal event is one that once occurred but no longer does due to events succeeding it, and a future temporal event has not yet occurred but will occur by succeeding previous events. Whilst an event is earlier than another in virtue of preceding the current event under consideration, and that which is later is an event that succeeds the current one. If this is right, and to be at a time is such that it names a temporal event, then to be at a time requires possibly being part of a successive series of temporal events.²⁷ For if there were possibly no succession, there wouldn't be any time, but rather only a necessary single instant, and this looks very much like eternity.

The result of this is that I can deny that a timeless God 'begins to be related', since it will be false that 'there is a time at which s [/God being related] obtains', and ' x [/God being related] exists at t ', as required in the quoted definitions given earlier of beginning to exist (Pruss & Rasmussen, 2018, 71; Craig & Sinclair, 2009, 184; Loke, 2017, 143). For nothing in an eternal God's life occurs *at a time*, and so nothing begins for God.

One might try once more, and this time claim that all that's required for something to begin is for there to be a first member. Would this help get the argument off the ground? Sadly not.

Think back to premise (1). I provided a counter example against it, but if being first is all that it means to begin, then divine timelessness itself will also provide a counter example. For now we will say that God, in virtue of having a first instant, begins, with His life being made up of only this instant, as timelessness precludes succession. God therefore does all God ever does in this one instant of His life, for instance causing the world to exist, etc.²⁸ Given this we have God having a beginning in virtue of having a first instant, and creation having a beginning in virtue of it also having a first instant, with neither instant being temporally preceded by the other.

²⁷ See Leftow (2002, 22–23) for further discussion.

²⁸ One may ask questions about how a timeless God could cause a temporal world. But as noted in footnote 3, I take it that the creation objection allows this to be possible and argues there is a problem given that God has created.

Does God begin to be related to creation? On this view, yes, since there is a first instant that God is related to creation, namely the only instant that comprises a timeless God's life. Does God change by beginning to be related to creation? Of course not. To think that is to assume that God's life is composed of more than one instant, something timelessness denies. For as we saw above, in order to change, one has to be first one way ontologically and then another. Timelessness, due to its lack of succession, rules out that God was ever one way and then another. This would require God's life to be made up of multiple instants, but on divine timelessness it's not. Thus, even with our revised definition of beginning, we merely end up with another counterexample to premise (1). This is obviously not good for the argument.

(4) If God changes, then God is neither immutable nor timeless

Whilst what I've said so far is sufficient to think the argument fails, let me also comment on premise (4) since I take it that this premise is ambiguous, and as a result is true on one reading, and false on another. This is because, 'the fact that some object *a* is not *F* before an event occurs but is *F* after that event occurs does not [necessarily] mean that the event constitutes, in any deep sense, a change in *a*.' (Marshall & Weatherston, 2018) But in order for God to undergo a type of change that is problematic for immutability and timelessness, He must undergo a deep change since it is only this type of change that implies succession in God's life.²⁹

The first reading of premise (4) understands change as a real change, which claims 'an object undergoes real change in an event iff there is some intrinsic property it satisfied before the event but not afterwards.' (Marshall & Weatherston, 2018) Everyone agrees that if God changes in His intrinsic properties He cannot be timeless, for God would undergo succession, first being intrinsically one way and then being another. As succession is contrary to divine timelessness, this type of change cannot be allowed.

Nevertheless, there is another type of change which many defenders of timelessness think is compatible with a lack of succession in the divine life, namely what has been called 'mere Cambridge' change (e.g. Leftow, 1991, 309–311; Wierenga, 1989, 171–172; McCann, 2012, 53–54).³⁰ If one undergoes a Cambridge change then all that occurs is that the predicates one satisfies at one time are different to the predicates one satisfies at another, without it being the case that one has undergone any type of intrinsic change. An example Mullins gives of this type of change is as follows,

‘At the moment I am typing this from my flat which is south of the Cambridge Faculty of Divinity. Say that I later walk north of the faculty building. The Faculty of Divinity building has not undergone an intrinsic change throughout

²⁹ For the remainder of this section I'll only speak of timelessness, as this is what this paper focuses on.

³⁰ To avoid confusion, let me note that Leftow thinks Cambridge properties don't help when it comes to discussions of divine simplicity and God's freely willing a particular state of affairs (2009, 29–33). Yet this is distinct from their use within discussions about God's relationship to time. Nevertheless, whilst Leftow does think Cambridge changes are compatible with a timeless God, he doesn't think one has to go this route (1991, 312).

this process. It has only undergone a mere Cambridge change. It has gone from being “North of Ryan” to being “South of Ryan.”” (Mullins, 2016, 154)

Mullins, like Craig (2001b, 145; 2001a, 73–75), however, does not think these types of changes are compatible with timelessness, and holds that classical authors denied God could undergo such changes (Mullins, 2021, 87–88). This latter claim, however, does not seem to me to hold for all classical authors. To give just two prominent examples, Aquinas, in *Summa Theologica* I, q.13, a.7, ad. gives an instance of a Cambridge change that is very much like Mullins’s. All one need do is substitute ‘the Cambridge faculty of divinity’ with ‘the column’ and ‘Ryan’ with ‘the animal’. Yet, Aquinas allows these types of changing predication to be made of God.³¹ Similarly, Anselm (*Monologion* 25) gives another paradigm example of a Cambridge change, focusing on height, and being taller or shorter than someone, and also allows these types of changing predication to be made of God.³² As such, it doesn’t seem the classical tradition unanimously rejects these types of changes.³³

Mullins (2016, 153–154) suggests that Chisholm & Zimmerman (1997, 264) provide an argument to say that if God undergoes a Cambridge change He must be in time. I think Mullins is mistaken on this score, for in the section below the one Mullins quotes Chisholm and Zimmerman write, ‘The bare fact that God was such that you are standing, and now is such that you are sitting, does not threaten divine immutability; for, as Anselm and many others have pointed out, only certain changes in property “bring some degree of mutability in their train”, while others “do not impair at all the immutability of that in whose case they occur.”” (1997, 264) A couple of sentences later they say, ‘but “mere-Cambridge changes” of the latter sort are no threat to immutability’ (1997, 264).³⁴ A timeless God, however, is immutable, since if

³¹ See also *Summa Theologica* I, q.13, a.7, ad 2.

³² Mullins does mention Anselm (2016, 51, n.33), but seems to suggest that Anselm shouldn’t be thought of as speaking about Cambridge changes. This is somewhat odd, as change in height, Anselm’s example, is often given as a paradigm case of a Cambridge change (Blackburn, 2008, 51; Bunnin & Yu 2004, 96), and is taken to be an instance of this type of change by Anselm scholars (Visser & Williams, 2009, 106).

³³ Mullins (2016, 51, n.30; 2021, 87) quotes Helm as being one defender of timelessness who supposedly argues a timeless God cannot undergo Cambridge changes. I contend that it’s actually rather tricky to understand exactly what Helm thinks on this score, for it does seem that early on in his book *Eternal God* he doesn’t allow an immutable God to undergo these types of changes (2010, 19–20), but then later in the book it seems an immutable God can undergo them (2010, 45), with this being apparent in his more detailed discussion of immutability (2010, 86), seemingly contrasting ‘merely Cambridge change’ with ‘real change’, a distinction he made previously (2010, 45). In other work it is clear that in contrast to Mullins, Helm doesn’t think a ‘mere extrinsic relation’ is enough to make a timeless God temporal. For on Mullins’s view ‘when temporal creatures refer to God it would seem that God would undergo an extrinsic change and thus Himself be temporal.’ (2016, 51) I take it Mullins would think much the same about other potential timeless entities, such as when anyone has thoughts about numbers. However Helm, by contrast writes, ‘God certainly has a relation to the creation which he would not have had had there been no creation, but what does this show? It certainly does not show that God must be temporal any more than if I think about the number seven for five minutes then the number seven is temporal’ (2001, 162). As such, since ‘extrinsic’ and ‘Cambridge’ are often used synonymously in these contexts (e.g. Stump 2003, 97; Marshall & Weatherston 2018), I take it that Helm doesn’t think an extrinsic or Cambridge change would make a timeless God temporal.

³⁴ The reason why Chisholm and Zimmerman speak of immutability here is in order to show that this attribute is not threatened by God being temporal and that God could be immutable without being timeless.

He changes there will be succession in the divine life. It therefore seems the argument against timelessness via Cambridge changes is meant to show that God cannot be immutable if He undergoes such a change, and that therefore, assuming that a timeless God must be immutable, He cannot be timeless. But according to Chisholm and Zimmerman immutability is consistent with Cambridge changes.³⁵

Perhaps instead the worry about the compatibility between timelessness and Cambridge changes is the following: to undergo a Cambridge change one must satisfy a description *at one time* but not *at another time* whilst undergoing no robust change (Blackburn, 2008, 51; Bunnin & Yu, 2004, 96), but a timeless God does not exist at any time and so God satisfying different descriptions at different times is incompatible with divine timelessness. Here I think it will be helpful to provide an analogy or model so to see what divine timelessness allows for. As such take two great bearded philosophers, David Lewis and Tim Pawl. Suppose that Lewis and Pawl are stranded in a possible world which contains two island universes, one where Lewis is based and the other where Pawl is. The Island universe on which we find Lewis with his glorious beard, L, will contain only one time slice, t^*1 where Lewis's beard is 10cm long, whilst the other island universe, P, will consist in Pawl and his growing beard across multiple successive time slices.³⁶ As these are island universes there are no temporal relations that hold between them, much like there are no temporal relations that hold between a timeless God and a temporal universe. Further, as Lewis's universe has only one time-slice, and so is one instant long, it mirrors the timeless life of God.³⁷

Now consider $t1$ in P, where Pawl's beard is presently 5cm long. Pawl can say truthfully at $t1$, 'my beard is 5cm long.' Pawl, however, cannot say truthfully at $t1$ that 'Lewis's beard is presently 10cm long', since Lewis is not temporally related to Pawl and so the present tense of Pawl's universe does not transfer to Lewis's.³⁸ Nevertheless Pawl can say truthfully at $t1$ that 'Lewis's beard in L at t^*1 is 10cm long.' Given this Pawl can say truthfully at $t1$, 'my present beard length is shorter than Lewis's beard length in L at t^*1 .' Fast forward to $t10$ in P, such that Pawl's beard in P is now presently 15cm long. Now at $t10$ Pawl can say truthfully, 'my present beard length is longer than Lewis's beard length in L at t^*1 .' Here it may *seem* to those who think Cambridge changes are incompatible with timelessness that Lewis has undergone some type of change. For as we can see there are predicates spoken of from within P that are true of Lewis at different times in P, namely that at $t1$ in P, Lewis in L at t^*1 has a longer beard than Pawl, and that at $t10$ in P, Lewis in L at t^*1 has a shorter beard than Pawl. But it would be a mistake to think that a change in which Lewis is ontologically one way and then another has occurred, something that will be obvious

³⁵ In personal correspondence Dean Zimmerman has confirmed to me that the paper was not meant to argue that a timeless God could not undergo Cambridge changes.

³⁶ I'll assume an A-theoretic world, but one does not have to. Note also that Lewis (1986, 71) wouldn't like this thought experiment due to his begrudging rejection of island universes. I, however, take island universes to be possible (for some consideration in their favour see: Bricker, 2020, ch.4).

³⁷ I discuss the possibility of this type of example and how these island universes as mirroring a timeless God's life elsewhere (Page, [manuscript a](#)), see also Leftow (2018).

³⁸ Making sure one speaks in such a way that there are no temporal relations between the two timelines is tricky, but it can be done (Leftow, 2012, 2018, 356, n.36).

when we look at things from Lewis's perspective. That is, in virtue of these changing predicates, Lewis undergoes no change and given his existence in a one instant world it is impossible for him to do so.

One might push back and claim that in virtue of these changing predicates God *must* gain new extrinsic properties, or new ontological features. This, however, seems false, something that can be seen clearly from thinking about posthumous predication. For we can make predication that change about entities which no longer exist, yet we shouldn't think that in virtue of these changing predicates there are ontological features which are added or removed from this non-existent entity. For example, my thinking of Bucephalus at one moment and then not about him at another, does not require Bucephalus's present existence or Bucephalus presently gaining and losing properties. Yet we need not restrict this thought to entities which no longer exist, and much the same can be said in cases of presently existent things. That is, when I think about my wife and daughter whilst I'm away at work, we don't need to think that in virtue of that there is some ontological addition or subtraction in my wife and daughter in virtue of my thinking about them. As such, predication we make about God, even though they change over time, need not imply that God undergoes the gaining or losing of ontological features.

Now turn to Lewis's island universe, L, and to Lewis's perspective on things. From Lewis's standpoint in L it is permanently t^*1 , since there is no other time, and so what is true at t^*1 is permanently true and never changes. Hence it is permanently true at t^*1 in L that Lewis has a longer beard than Pawl's in P at $t1$, and that Lewis has a shorter beard than Pawl's in P at $t10$. If one wishes, one can even say that these are contingent extrinsic properties that Lewis *always* has in L, since Pawl in P did not necessarily have to grow his beard, and as timelessness does not entail simplicity. In any case, whatever properties Lewis has and whatever predicates are true in L they do not change, for how could they in a universe which lacks succession.

What goes for Lewis and Pawl goes for God and creation. At different times within creation there can be different predicates that are true of God and this will not at all imply that God undergoes any type of succession. Thus, to think about universe P as the temporal world God has created, and L as God's timeless eternity, it can be true that in P at $t1$ I do not relate to God in L at t^*1 as Lord, whilst at P at $t10$ I do relate in L at t^*1 to God as Lord. In P there is a before and after in which I relate to God as Lord, but none of this temporality transfers to God in L at t^*1 where there is no before nor after. For God it just permanently is the case, in L at t^*1 , that I do not relate to Him as Lord in P at $t1$, and that I do relate to Him as Lord in P at $t10$. As Leftow says, 'God does not come to have new relations. ... He just timelessly has any relation He ever has.' (2018, 178) The result of this is that whatever name one wants to give this type of case, be it Cambridge change, extrinsic change, or something different, it is consistent for different predicates to be true of God at different times within creation without it being the case that God undergoes succession within eternity. To think otherwise, one must show why this example is mistaken.

The result of all this is that premise (4), in its current form is underspecified and therefore may come out as false, since as we have seen one can apply predicates to

God which change in their truth value without it being the case that God ceases to be timeless.³⁹

The real argument

Given what I've said, I think it's fairly clear that the argument in its current form fails. Yet one might think I've been unfair, since the argument itself is often taken to be a difficulty arising from creation ex nihilo (Mullins, 2016, 101; 2021, 92; *manuscript*; Craig 2001a, Ch.8) and I've not spoken about this doctrine other than to clarify that to begin in the context of the argument requires having a 'first' member. However, given the explication and commentary around the argument, it seems clear that the 'real' argument is one which arises from a *specific reading* of creation ex nihilo and its implications, since it is these that are supposed to cause trouble for timelessness.

The key thought Mullins (2016, 101; 2021, 92; 2020b; *manuscript*) and Craig (2001a, 60, 254–255; Copan & Craig, 2004, 161–162) rely on is that there is a 'state of affairs' where God exists but creation doesn't, and another state of affairs where God and creation both exist.⁴⁰ However, talk of states of affairs is ambiguous. For if all that is intended is that these are *possible* states of affairs, then the defender of timelessness will agree. But if this is all that is meant, then it's very difficult to see what the problem for timelessness is supposed to be. Rather, what Mullins and Craig seem to mean is that both of these states of affairs obtain, that is God *actually* exists alone prior to creation, and God *actually* exists with creation once He has created. Thus, God is said to have a 'precreation existence' (Mullins, 2021, 92; 2020b) or a 'precreation moment' (Mullins, *manuscript*) and given that God has created, a post-creation existence too. The thought then is that in virtue of this, God will have to undergo a change, something timelessness cannot allow. As such I take it that the intended argument against timelessness is in fact something like the following:

³⁹ Here is one way in which to make (4) in its present form come out true, namely by contending that changes should be thought of as occurring between events, and that typical Cambridge changes in some way flunk this requirement in virtue of not counting as events or distinct events (Leftow, 2005, 63; Helm, 1975). If one goes this route then extrinsic predication can be true or false of God at different times from within creation, but these won't properly count as changes. Premise (4) therefore wouldn't need to remove any ambiguity and so wouldn't require revision, but equally the supposed difficulty of Cambridge changes bringing about a change in a timeless God would turn out to be no problem at all, since in fact it would turn out that Cambridge changes weren't of the relevant type to bring about a change in the first place.

⁴⁰ I use the language of 'states of affairs' since it is primarily what Mullins and Craig talk about (Mullins, 2016, 101; 2021, 92–93; 2020b; *manuscript*; Craig, 2001a, 254; Copan & Craig, 2004, 161–162). However, they sometimes use other terminology to describe pre-creation, such as referring to a 'moment' (Mullins, *manuscript*; 2020b), 'phase' (Mullins, 2020b, 224), 'state' (2020b, 233), or as God being some way 'sans creation/universe' (Craig, 2001a, 60; Copan & Craig, 2004, 253). I will not quibble on terminology here, and if one prefers one can instead use the terminology of 'moment' going forward, so long as one is happy to allow for timeless moments.

- (6) There is an obtaining timeless state of affairs where God exists alone and without creation (pre-creation), such that God is not related to creation.⁴¹
- (7) There is an obtaining timeless state of affairs where God exists with creation such that God is related to creation.
- (8) God cannot be related to creation and not related to creation in the same obtaining timeless state of affairs.
- (9) Therefore, God must exist without creation in one obtaining timeless state of affairs, and with creation in another obtaining timeless state of affairs.
- (10) If God exists for more than one obtaining timeless state of affairs then God changes.
- (11) Therefore, God changes.
- (12) A timeless God cannot change.⁴²
- (13) Therefore, God cannot be timeless.

Given this formulation of the argument it now becomes apparent why Mullins and Craig think many will reply to their argument by claiming that God has no real relations to creation (Mullins, 2021, 93; 119–126; Craig 2001a, 56–75), namely in order to quibble about (7).⁴³ It's also clear why their worry concerns the fact that God changes, where change requires something being one way and then another, since given the argument God clearly does exist in two different state of affairs, (6) and (7), and so it seems God must change.

Nevertheless, I think this formulation is also unsuccessful. For one, I take it that defenders of timelessness should deny (6). Mullins and Craig seem to think the pre-creation component of (6) is implied by creation *ex nihilo*, but as I noted above, this requires a specific reading of the doctrine, and exactly how to understand the doctrine is hotly debated. To take just a handful of examples as an illustration, Aquinas famously thought that creation *ex nihilo* was compatible with the universe being eternal, with this clearly being an instant where (6) is false.⁴⁴ In a recent edited collection by theologians and philosophers, *Creation and the God of Abraham*, the introduction claims that creation *ex nihilo* states that 'God created the world out of nothing – from

⁴¹ As Tim Pawl has suggested to me in personal correspondence, this is a tricky thing to say since it might seem as though we have two things, a 'state of affairs' and 'God'. This may well be a problem for both Craig and Mullins, but here I'll assume that one can speak of states of affairs without reifying over them and that this is sufficient to dispel this worry.

⁴² One may have to further specify (4), given what I said about it above.

⁴³ It is in the context of real relations that Craig discusses Cambridge changes. Craig's thought is that Cambridge changes are sufficient for real relations, and that in virtue of God existing without creation 'sans creation' and then with creation once He has created, the relation is new and enough to make God temporal (2001a, 73–75). The key work here, once again, is being done by premise (6) in my construal of the argument, with this being a premise I claim defenders of timelessness will deny.

⁴⁴ For Aquinas's understanding of creation *ex nihilo* see (Baldner & Carroll, 1997), and for his defence of the possibility of a past eternal universe (Wippel, 1984, 191–214).

no pre-existent matter, no space or time.' (Burrell et al., 2010, 1)⁴⁵ Yet this too doesn't imply that creation *ex nihilo* requires an actually obtaining state of affairs where God exists alone. According to Copan and Craig creation *ex nihilo* affirms 'that God brought the universe into being without any substratum or material cause at some point in the finite past.' (Copan and Craig 2004), 147)⁴⁶ What is clear here is that Copan and Craig think temporal origination is essential to creation *ex nihilo*, but not even this requires that there is an actual state of affairs where God exists alone. For to take one of my examples above, God and time can both begin at the same moment, and given this it will be the case that God brought the universe into being without any substratum or material cause at some point in the finite past albeit without a pre-creation moment where God actually exists alone. Another definition is from Lebens who defines *creatio originalis ex nihilo* as follows, 'The universe was created by God at some point in time (perhaps the first moment in time), before which there was nothing (except God). Ever since, God has been sustaining the universe.' (Lebens, 2020, 31) Here one may think an actual pre-creation state of affairs is endorsed, but it only will be if one reads 'before' in a certain way, for if one reads it as implying only a logical before, then it does not imply that God ever actually exists alone. In personal correspondence Lebens has endorsed this reading, stating that he did not mean for his definition to imply that creation *ex nihilo* *requires* that God actually exist alone in a pre-creation state of affairs.⁴⁷ Given this, the only definition of creation *ex nihilo* that I know of which explicitly endorses the pre-creation claim is from Mullins himself,

‘Creation Ex Nihilo: A creation *ex nihilo* occurs if and only if (i) a particular universe, set of universes, or all possible universes are freely caused to exist by God, and (ii) there is a precreation moment or state of affairs where God exists without a particular universe, set of universes, or all possible universes.’ (manuscript)

Here the pre-creation condition of (6) is explicitly endorsed, and I agree that *if* this is what creation *ex nihilo* requires then there are problems for timelessness. Nevertheless, given the diversity of views as to what creation *ex nihilo* means, arguments will need to be given in favour of endorsing this view of creation *ex nihilo*, rather than merely claiming this is what everyone thinks it implies. Mullins and Craig do provide a few reasons in support of (6) and elsewhere I argue they are insufficient (Page, manuscript b). As such, given the falsity of (6), I take it that even in its ‘real’ form, the argument against timelessness fails.

⁴⁵ Similar thoughts can be found by diverse authors throughout the text (Burrell et al., 2010, 8, 142, 172, 213, 222).

⁴⁶ As far as I can tell Craig never defines creation *ex nihilo* as requiring an actual pre-creation existence, even though he does think one should endorse it. At times it seems Craig means to imply that creation having a first temporal member implies that there is a pre-creation moment. I think this is a mistake and deal with it elsewhere.

⁴⁷ Lebens writes, ‘The word “before” in my formulation should be read loosely as referring either to temporal priority, if you think that God is in time, or logical/ontological priority if you think that God is atemporal.’ (personal correspondence)

A final failure

But I think the argument in its ‘real’ form might fail for another reason, with this concern being again to do with the premise that seeks to imply that God changes. That is, I suspect one should deny (10) given how we are to understand the relationship between (6) and (7).

To see this note that someone who thinks God is timeless will think both states of affairs in (6) and (7) are timeless, *and* that the relationship between (6) and (7) is non-temporal. For if (6) was temporally before (7) then (6) and (7) are in fact no longer timeless since (6) now stands in a temporal relation of being before (7), and (7) stands in a temporal relationship of being after (6). Thus if (6) and (7) are read as being temporally related to each other, both premises would turn out false, since neither state of affairs would be timeless as timeless states cannot stand in temporal relations. As such, I take it that we should understand the relationship between (6) and (7) to be non-temporal, given that this is an argument targeting timelessness, and this in fact is how Mullins understands the relationship ([manuscript; 2020](#), 225).⁴⁸ Yet it is this non-temporal relation between (6) and (7) that I suggest implies (10) is false. For I will deny that that which is related timelessly changes, since for something to change, at the very least it requires the same thing to be one way *and then* another.

To see this notice that the picture we get in (9), given (6), (7), and (8), is that God exists in two different timeless states of affairs, where an implication of them being timeless is that there will be no temporal relations between them. Now ask yourself, assuming such a set up is possible, does God really change in this scenario? It seems to me that the answer is no, since given this account God is not one way *and then* another, for the *and then* relationship is temporal, and there are no temporal relations between God’s two timeless states of affairs. Yet if we are to make the relationship between the two timeless states of affairs temporal, so to get temporal succession, we would be no longer able to affirm (6) and (7), since the states of affairs would no longer be timeless, as timeless entities cannot stand in temporal relations. (10) is therefore false and thus the real argument does not get Mullins and Craig what they want either.

A success at last

Nevertheless, from this we may be able to see how to form an argument which will make it the case that a timeless God is impossible *given* Mullins and Craig’s view of creation *ex nihilo*. The argument would run as follows.

⁴⁸ Mullins has additionally confirmed this to me in personal communication. Craig’s own view is similar, but he takes (7) to be a temporal state of affairs, such that God is timeless sans creation and temporal since creation ([2001a](#), 60). Yet he too thinks that these two actual states of affairs will not be temporally related ([2001a](#), 272–273). Given this, the argument I am about to give I take it would also work on Craig’s account.

(14) If Creation ex nihilo has occurred (as defined by Craig and Mullins), then there is a pre-creation state of affairs where God exists truly alone and without creation, such that God is in no way related to creation, *and* a state of affairs where God exists with creation (post-creation).

(15) Creation ex nihilo has occurred (as defined by Craig and Mullins).

(16) Therefore, there is a pre-creation state of affairs where God exists truly alone and without creation *and* a state of affairs where God exists with creation (post-creation).

(17) Divine timelessness precludes there being both a state of affairs where God exists truly alone and without creation *and* a state of affairs where God exists with creation.

(18) Therefore, divine timelessness precludes creation ex nihilo (as defined by Craig and Mullins).

(19) A faithful Christian should affirm creation ex nihilo (as defined by Craig and Mullins).

(20) Therefore, a faithful Christian cannot hold to divine timelessness.

Assuming, for the moment, Craig and Mullins's definition of creation ex nihilo, I think all the action will be regarding (17). In order to see why one should affirm it, consider this *model* of a timeless God's relation to a pre-creation and post-creation state of affairs. First take two one-instant island universes, P and Q, which will represent the two timeless states of God's life, where these are non-temporally related to each other. Now add another island universe, R, which will represent Creation. Now allow that it is possible that there be causal relations between island universes, for island universes need only concern the spatio-temporal non-relatedness of universes, therefore leaving it open as to whether they can be causally related. Whilst Lewis (1986, 78), given his account of counterfactual causation, thought they couldn't be, there are other views of causation which leave this possibility open. For instance, there's nothing in the formal apparatus of structural equation models, which have recently become popular in modelling causation (Schaffer, 2016; Wilson, 2018a; 2018b; Woodward, 2003), that prevents there being such causal relations, and as such in this model I'll assume there can be causal relations between the island universes. Now take it that Creation is causally related to only one of the island universes, Q. This captures the thought that God is causally related to creation in His post-creation state of affairs, and isn't related to creation in His pre-creation state of affairs, namely in P. Given this, we have a model as to how a timeless God can exist in two timeless states of affairs, one which is related to creation, and one which is not.

But now ask yourself the question, is God in P ever truly alone? In one sense, if we restrict what we mean by 'being alone', the answer is yes. For if to be alone requires that there is nothing else in your island universe, then God is alone. But given this God is equally alone in Q, unless we consider His additional causal relation to R as sufficient to render Him unlonely. However, there is also a sense in which God isn't truly alone in P. For P is non-temporally related to Q, such as both being part of the same possible world. Yet because of this, I take it that we just don't have a scenario

where God actually exists alone as Craig and Mullins require in their definition of creation *ex nihilo*.⁴⁹

Whilst the island universe case just given is a model, I take it to accurately represent the relevant details of what is the case if God is timeless and there is a pre-creation and post-creation state of affairs which are non-temporally related to each other. Given this, if one must endorse (14), then one cannot endorse divine timelessness. Additionally, note that this would also show that if God has created, premise (6) in the previous argument is false too, for God will never exist alone. Finally, it is worth pointing out that what I've said here also causes trouble for Craig's view of God's relationship to time, where all we need do to model Craig's account is to claim that the second island universe Q, is not one-instant long but has instead many successive instants. Yet this in no way changes the fact that P, Q, and R are all non-temporally related to one another, and given this we are once again left with the fact that God in P is not truly alone.⁵⁰ Craig therefore needs to choose between his own view of God's relationship to time, or his account of what creation *ex nihilo* requires.⁵¹

As such if Mullins and Craig want an argument against timelessness from creation *ex nihilo*, this is how I think they should formulate it. For my money, all the action will therefore rest on whether their account of creation *ex nihilo* is correct, that is whether one must accept (14). I don't think one should, but showing that will have to wait for another time.⁵²

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⁴⁹ If Mullins and Craig are happy to restrict being alone to merely being alone on an island universe, then a timeless God can be said to exist alone in an actual pre-creation state of affairs, and in an actual state of affairs with creation despite undergoing no change. This, however, is obviously of no help to them given the aim of their argument.

⁵⁰ Given that God has created. For defenders of divine timelessness can allow that God could have been alone if He had not created, but given that He has created, there is no moment where He is truly alone.

⁵¹ Note that if Craig claims the relationship between P and Q isn't non-temporal, then it seems to me that P will no longer be timeless, as is meant to be the case on Craig's view, at least given the traditional conception of timelessness as exemplified in Boethius and others.

⁵² See my (Page, [manuscript b](#)).

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