



O Precreation, where Art thou?

Ben Page¹ 

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Abstract

The thought that even though God has created, He *actually* existed *alone* without creation, what I'll call 'Precreation', seems to be a key premise in some contemporary arguments against divine atemporalism. The question this paper addresses is whether we have any strong reasons for affirming Precreation. Before answering this question I will discuss how Precreation is understood and then how some arguments against divine atemporalism employ this notion. The bulk of the paper then examines the main arguments for endorsing Precreation and concludes that they don't provide good grounds for adopting it. As a result, I suggest that atemporalists shouldn't be troubled by those arguments against their view which require Precreation since they can plausibly reject those premises.

Keyword Timelessness · Creation · Atemporal · Aquinas

The thought that even though God has created, He actually existed alone without creation, what I'll call 'Precreation', seems to be a key premise in some contemporary arguments against divine atemporalism (Mullins, 2025, 76–82; 2021, 92–94; 2016, 99–103; 2020; Craig, 2001a, 59–60; 2001b, 140–141). The question this paper addresses is whether we have any strong reasons for affirming Precreation. Before answering this question I will discuss how Precreation is understood and then how some arguments against divine atemporalism employ this notion. The bulk of the paper then examines the main arguments for endorsing Precreation and concludes that they don't provide good grounds for adopting it. As a result, I suggest that atemporalists shouldn't be troubled by those arguments against their view which require Precreation since they can plausibly reject those premises.

✉ Ben Page
hi@ben-page.co.uk

¹ Eton College, Faculty of Divinity, Eton, UK

Precreation

What then is Precreation?¹ Craig provides some understanding of this notion when he writes,

‘the actual world includes a state of affairs which is God’s existing alone without the universe.’ (2001a, 254; Mullins, 2001, 101)²

From this, what can we glean? Firstly, it seems that Precreation is a ‘state of affairs’ (Mullins, 2016, p. 101; 2021, 92–93; 2020; 2025, 28, 54, 224; Schmid & Mullins, 2022, p. 403; Craig, 2001a, p. 254; Copan & Craig, 2004, 161–162) where God exists alone. However, whilst this conceptualisation is typical, sometimes Precreation is instead conceived of as a ‘moment’ (Mullins, 2020, 2025), ‘phase’ (Mullins, 2020, p. 224; 2025, 83), or ‘state’ (Mullins, 2020, p. 233; 2025, 108, 258). Here I’ll assume state of affairs talk, given that this is the phrasing most widely employed.

Secondly, in this Precreation state of affairs God is truly alone, since defenders of Precreation take it that the universe, or creation, ranges over everything that isn’t God (Craig, 2016, 1–2; Schmid & Mullins, 2022, p. 403).³ Importantly, this state of affairs isn’t taken to be one that is merely *possible*, but rather one that is *actual* or *obtains*, with this Precreation state of affairs being actual or obtaining irrespective of whether God created.⁴ Mullins makes this explicit when he writes,

‘In the precreation state, God exists, so there is a way things are. In the precreation state, God has free will, so things could be subsequently otherwise.... the precreation moment is the moment where God exists without any universe because God has not freely exercised His power.... No matter what way history unfolds, this precreation moment has to be the first moment. No matter what God freely decides to do, there must first be this precreation moment where God exists without a universe of any sort.’ (2025, 108).

This aspect of Precreation shouldn’t go unnoticed, since the claim that ‘possibly God could have existed alone’, or ‘had God not created God would have actually existed alone’, is uncontroversial, even for defenders of divine atemporalism. For atemporalists typically think that some of what God eternally wills, or some of the

¹ Mullins writes, ‘There are different ways to understand this claim about God’s precreation moment. It depends on other things a classical, neoclassical, or open theist wishes to say about God and time.’ (2025, 51) Nevertheless, there seems to be something of a core to Mullins’s idea of Precreation, and the way I describe Precreation in the following three paragraphs, I think would need to be endorsed by all, according to Mullins.

² Note that Craig doesn’t use the language of Precreation but prefers referring to this as the state of affairs of God existing sans creation (2001a; 2021).

³ It’s not clear to me that Mullins himself holds that everything other than God is created by God, but since the argument I’m addressing is one where he seeks to show an internal inconsistency with what classical theism believes (2016; 2021; 2025, esp. 73–88), Mullins’s own personal views are not relevant here.

⁴ Here I assume, following Plantinga, that ‘actual’ and ‘obtaining’ (1974, 45) mean the same thing, with Craig seemingly taking these terms to be synonymous as well (2017, 11).

effects of the divine will, are contingent, with God being thought to will and act freely (Leftow, 1991, 299–302).⁵ Rather, what is controversial is claiming that the actual world includes a state of affairs where God *actually* exists alone or without creation even though He has created, since this allows some arguments against atemporalism to be formed. It should be clear that this is Craig's and Mullins's understanding of Precreation since they take Precreation to rule out 'tenseless' or 'eternalist' views of time, since these preclude a state of affairs where God exists without creation (Craig, 109, 254–255; Mullins, 2025, p. 223, 225).

Before turning to the arguments against timelessness that rely on Precreation, let me provide two final comments. The first is that within the context of arguments against timelessness, this Precreation state of affairs is taken to be *prior* to God existing alongside creation in a non-temporal sense.⁶ This is because creation is *typically* taken to include the creation of time,⁷ and so therefore the priority in question is said to be either 'ontological' (Schmid & Mullins, 2022, p. 403) or 'causal' (Craig, 2021, p. 361).⁸ But it needs to be pointed out that these types of priority do not by themselves imply that the actual world includes a state of affairs in which God exists alone. For example, Craig allows that an atemporalist who endorses a tenseless theory of time can say that creation ontologically depends on God (2001a, 254) such that God is ontologically prior to creation, even though there is never an actual state of affairs in which God exists alone.⁹ Similarly, causal priority does not by itself entail that the cause in question can exist without its effect. Cases of simultaneous causation where the effect is never impeded show this, as both the cause and effect will exist together even though we can still think of the cause as causally prior to the effect.¹⁰ Arguably this is what God's intrinsic causal power is like, both in taking no

⁵ It seems Mullins thinks that free action is a problem for divine atemporality, for he writes, 'God has succession in His life as He freely exercises His power.' (2025, 25) Defenders of atemporality will deny that free action requires succession, although I cannot discuss this further here (Leftow, 1991, 299–302).

⁶ Note that Mullins's own view of Precreation holds that the Precreation state of affairs is a 'moment of time' (2025-108-109). However, Mullins's arguments against timelessness do not assume his own favoured understanding of Precreation, for he aims to show there is an internal consistency with what these classical theists believe (2016; 2021; 2025, esp. 73–88). As such, in the arguments he gives that rely on Precreation, he understands this Precreation state of affairs to be timeless (2025, 51). Craig's own view is different to Mullins, in that he seems to think that God's Precreation state of affairs is timeless, but that God becomes temporal once He has created (2001a, 271–276, 56, 60).

⁷ Mullins seems to think that God doesn't create time, since he appears to favour the view where time is an attribute of God and God does not create His attributes (2025; 2022; 2020).

⁸ As Craig thinks God's Precreation state of affairs is timeless, he has additional reason to think that this priority cannot be temporal.

⁹ Craig rejects such a view at least in part because he thinks such a picture will provide an 'emasculated doctrine of creation ex nihilo' (2001a, 254), for it affirms that 'in the actual world [there is] *no* state of affairs of God existing alone without the spacetime universe' (Craig), 254). His reasons for this seem to be Biblical and something I will comment on later.

¹⁰ Craig (2001a, 276–278) allows simultaneous causation, Mullins wouldn't like this example since he rejects this type of causation, thinking instead that causes must be temporally prior to effects (2020, 224, 231–232; 2025, 107). However, if one goes this route then if God is causally prior to creation, creation cannot include time. For to be causally prior will require that there be a time prior to the effect, as causes must be temporally prior to their effects. Whilst this might not bother some, such as Mullins (see note 7), others will be unhappy with the consequence that God doesn't create time.

time to bring about its effect and never being impeded.¹¹ Given this, it is possible to say that God is ontologically and/or causally prior to all that is non-God, even if there is no Precreation state of affairs.¹²

Secondly, I want to suggest a little cleaning up of how to understand Precreation so to bypass a potential concern with the idea. To do this let me first specify two predicates, namely *Accompanied*, where ‘ x is Accompanied iff there exists a y & $\sim(x=y)$ ’, and *Lonely*, where ‘ x is Lonely iff $\sim(x$ is Accompanied)’. These predicates allow us to state Precreation slightly more formally, where Precreation holds that there is an actual state of affairs in which God satisfies the predicate Lonely. However, this definition highlights a potential problem for the idea of Precreation, with this becoming apparent by asking what is a state of affairs? Sadly, advocates of Precreation never seem to tell us, but the one thing it can’t be is God, since God is not a state of affairs. But given that a state of affairs isn’t God, then it seems we have something that isn’t God existing alongside God, namely the ‘state of affairs of God existing alone’. Precreation, as explicated above, therefore does not allow God to satisfy the predicate Lonely and instead has Him only ever satisfying the predicate Accompanied. This conclusion is reinforced if we assume some popular accounts on the nature of states of affairs. For instance, Armstrong claims that ‘a state of affairs exists if and only if a particular has a property, or a relation holds between two or more particulars’ (1993, 429) and therefore he holds that states of affairs are ‘existents... [and] have as constituents particulars, properties and relations.’ (1993, 429–430) God is therefore distinct to a state of affairs on this view. Similarly, on Plantinga’s view, states of affairs are abstract objects and exist (2003, 107), but God is not an abstract object (Plantinga, 1980, p. 47), and so any state of affairs must be distinct from God. Perhaps there is a way of speaking of God satisfying the predicate Lonely that includes states of affairs talk,¹³ but I suggest that we drop talk of states of affairs altogether and take Precreation as the claim that God satisfies the conditions for the predicate ‘Lonely’.¹⁴

An atemporal Lonely and Accompanied god?

With this as background we see how some arguments against atemporalism rely on God satisfying Precreation and Accompanied. This is most obvious in Mullins’s ‘Problem of Relational Change’ (2025, 82), which runs,

PRC1) If creation ex nihilo is true, then God changes from *being alone* to *existing with a universe*.

¹¹ I say intrinsic so to rule out cases where something extrinsic, such as human free will, might impede God, with Leftow arguing that omnipotence only concerns God’s intrinsic causal power (2009, 180–183).

¹² These types of priority are exactly those which defenders of divine atemporality do attribute to God (Leftow, 2012, p. 4, n.15, 340), even though they deny Precreation (1991, 290–291). (Note that in the quote Leftow only speaks of causal priority, however he also affirms God’s ontological priority, since he endorses divine ultimacy and holds that God is the source of all that is outside of Him (2012, 1–22).

¹³ Perhaps some type of nominalism regarding states of affairs which can be paraphrased away.

¹⁴ I suspect we should also drop any talk of a Precreation ‘moment’, ‘phase’, or ‘state’ for similar reasons and stick to thinking of Precreation as God satisfying the conditions for the predicate Lonely.

PRC2) Creation ex nihilo is true.

PRC3) Thus, God changes from *being alone* to *existing with a universe*.

Here it is worth noting that Mullins defines creation ex nihilo as requiring that God satisfy Precreation (2025, 54, 224), something I will comment on later, but God satisfying Precreation and Accompanied is also required if premise PRC1) is true for it speaks of God changing, where a change occurs when some one thing is one way and then another. God is taken to be alone and also existing with a universe, or in my terminology, satisfying Precreation and satisfying Accompanied. A change wouldn't be required here if God could satisfy both predicates at once, but the implicit thought here, and in the arguments below, is that He cannot and so He can only satisfy both if He changes. The reason this is thought to cause trouble for atemporalism, although once again not explicit in this argument or the following, is because an atemporal God cannot change and therefore if God changes, He must be temporal.¹⁵ If an atemporalist wants to avoid this argument they must therefore deny that God changes, and either show that He can satisfy both predicates without changing or deny that God satisfies both predicates. Supposing both of these predicates can't be satisfied without changing,¹⁶ and since it is obvious that God satisfies Accompanied, as you and I exist and we are not God, an atemporalist will therefore need to deny that God satisfies Precreation. Mullins would likely worry that this implies that an atemporalist cannot endorse creation ex nihilo, but, as I'll suggest shortly, I think this is a mistake since there are other popular accounts of this doctrine that don't require God to satisfy Precreation.

Mullins gives at least four other arguments against atemporalism that won't run if one denies that God satisfies Precreation with the first being, the 'Problem of Causal Change' (Mullins, 2025, p. 77),

PCaC1) If creation ex nihilo is true, then God changes from *not causing anything to exist* to *causing a universe to exist*.

PCaC2) Creation ex nihilo is true.

PCaC3) Therefore, God changes from *not causing anything to exist* to *causing a universe to exist*.

Once again, even if we ignore how Mullins says we must understand creation ex nihilo we can see that PCaC1) relies on the idea of God satisfying Precreation and Accompanied, as it is only when God satisfies Precreation that He is not causing anything to exist and only when He satisfies Accompanied that He is causing something

¹⁵ There is a question as to whether an atemporal God can change extrinsically, but I'll ignore that complication here, and we can assume that He can't.

¹⁶ It might be thought obvious that both can't be satisfied without changing since they are contraries, but it might be that something can satisfy contrary predicates if that thing exists across multiple temporally unconnected timelines. To see why that won't help in this case see note 22.

to exist, since all other than God is caused to exist by God. Therefore, so to avoid the implication that God changes, atemporalists can deny that God satisfies Precreation. What they should claim instead is that it was *possible* for God not to create and therefore eternally satisfy Precreation, but given that God has created, He eternally satisfies Accompanied.

Related to this argument is Mullins's 'Problem of Accidental Properties' (2025, 80) for atemporalism, with this argument claiming,

PAP1) If creation ex nihilo is true, then God changes from *not having the accidental property of Creator* to *having the accidental property of Creator*.

PAP2) Creation ex nihilo is true.

PAP3) Therefore, God changes from *not having the accidental property of Creator* to *having the accidental property of Creator*.

Bypassing Mullins's definition of creation ex nihilo, the change that God undergoes which is spoken of in PAP1) also relies on God satisfying Precreation and Accompanied, since it is only when God satisfies Precreation that He won't have the accidental property of Creator, and it is only when God satisfies Accompanied that He will have the property of Creator, since all that is not God is created by God.¹⁷ Atemporalists can avoid this change once again by denying that God satisfies Precreation. Yet God can still have the accidental property of Creator, so long as it is contingent that God has created, with this being what most atemporalists claim.

The final two arguments that Mullins gives rely on the idea that God changes and also a particular understanding of begins, with the first of these being the 'Problem of Creational Change' (Mullins, 2025, p. 76; 2020, 219),

PCC1) If God begins to create the universe, then God changes.

PCC2) God begins to create the universe.

PCC3) Therefore, God changes.

In order for PCC1) to imply that God changes one needs to understand what it is to begin in such a way that God is one way and then another. It seems this is what Mullins thinks, since in the paragraph immediately prior to the argument he writes, 'in the act of creation, God goes from not creating to creating' (2025, 76), with this, I take it, being how he understands what it means for God to *begin* to create.¹⁸ Once again it is only when God satisfies Precreation that He isn't creating, with God being

¹⁷ God satisfying Accompanied, however, is consistent with the property of Creator being essential or accidental.

¹⁸ Mullins gives another argument against atemporalism, the 'Problem of New Decisions', with premise 'PND4) If God's decision to create began to exist, then God changes', also showing that he thinks something beginning implies a change.

Accompanied when He is creating the universe. As with the other arguments, so to avoid the charge that God changes, atemporalists should deny that God satisfies Precreation and claim that God doesn't change by creating. Will this imply that God doesn't begin to create the universe? It will if we understand a beginning as requiring a change, and it will on other definitions of beginning too, even if they do not require a change, for example Pruss and Rasmussen's, which says, '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).¹⁹ Maybe there is an adequate definition of begins that would allow an atemporal God to begin to create, but why should we want to say this about God in the first place? Other things we want to say about God, namely that He is free to create, doesn't seem to require that God begins to create, for God's eternally creating something is a contingent act of God's, such that He could have done otherwise. Equally, denying that God begins to create doesn't imply anything about what God has created either, such as whether what God has created is temporally finite or infinite. Mullins disagrees with this latter point (2025, 78–79; 41; 220–221; 2016, 102), with this being something I will comment on later. As such, I take it that an atemporalist, in virtue of denying that God satisfies Precreation, given that He has created, can deny that God begins to create without this leading to any unsavoury conclusions.

Mullins's final argument, the 'Revenge of the Creatational Change' (2025, 80), which Craig (2001a, 59–60) also gives, goes as follows,

RCC1) If creation ex nihilo is true, then God begins to be causally related to the universe.

RCC2) Creation ex nihilo is true.

RCC3) Therefore, God begins to be causally related to the universe.

RCC4) If God begins to be causally related to the universe, then God changes.

RCC5) God begins to be causally related to the universe.

RCC6) Therefore, God changes.²⁰

Ignoring, one last time, Mullins's understanding of ex nihilo, he seems to think that RCC1) will require that God satisfies both Precreation and Accompanied, for he writes that 'RCC1) seems plausible given the classical theists' claim that there is a state of affairs where God exists without the universe and a state of affairs where God exists with the universe.' (2025, 80)²¹ RCC4) is similar to PCC1) in the previous

¹⁹ To see that this definition doesn't require a change to take place, think of this definition's understanding of what it is for time to begin.

²⁰ Mullins's (2020, 222) version of this argument consists only of RCC4) – RCC6).

²¹ Craig (2001a, 59–60, 254–255) says much the same.

argument since if beginning to be causally related requires a change, then we'll have to understand this beginning as God first not being causally related to the universe, therefore satisfying Precreation, and then being causally related to creation, therefore satisfying Accompanied. Once again, atemporalists should deny that God, given that He has created, satisfies Precreation, and as a result God doesn't begin to be causally related to the universe, for as Leftow writes, 'No clear-eyed atemporalist would accept this. An atemporal God does not come to have new relations.... He just timelessly has any relation He ever has.' (2018, 178)

Given what I've said, an Atemporalist should claim that if God hadn't created then He would have satisfied Precreation, but since God has created, He eternally satisfies Accompanied and as such He never satisfies Precreation. In virtue of this all the arguments given above can be rejected. However, since there are so many arguments against atemporalism that rely on the claim that God satisfies Precreation even though He has created, one might have thought that there must be strong reasons for thinking this. I will suggest that in fact, there aren't any.²²

The content of creation ex nihilo

One reason Mullins (2025); Craig (2001a, 254) give for thinking that God satisfies Precreation is that it's required for a correct understanding of creation ex nihilo. I think this way of arguing that God satisfies Precreation is unhelpful as there are other

²² Another way to argue that God satisfying Precreation and Accompanied is inconsistent with atemporalism, albeit without relying on thinking that God changes, like all the arguments above, would be the following:

1. Nothing can satisfy the conditions for both the predicates 'lonely' and 'accompanied', where these are satisfied at no temporal distance from one another.
2. If God satisfies the conditions for both the predicates 'lonely' and 'accompanied' then God satisfies 'lonely' at some temporal distance from His satisfying 'accompanied'. (1)
3. If God's satisfying the conditions for the predicate 'lonely' is at some temporal distance from His satisfying the conditions for the predicate 'accompanied' then God is temporal.
4. So, if God satisfies the conditions for both the predicates 'lonely' and 'accompanied', then God is temporal. (Hypothetical syllogism 2, 3)
5. If 4 is true, then God's satisfying the conditions for both the predicates 'lonely' and 'accompanied' is inconsistent with atemporalism.
6. Thus, God's satisfying the conditions for both the predicates 'lonely' and 'accompanied' is inconsistent with atemporalism. (4, 5 MP)

One may try and avoid (1) by pointing out that being 'at no temporal distance' is ambiguous between the temporal distance between two things being 0, and the category of temporal distance not being applicable. If the temporal distance is not applicable, then it might be thought that one thing can have incompatible predicates, such as in a case where one thing exists in two temporally unconnected timelines and having P in one-timeline and not-P in another. However, this won't help here, for if God satisfied the predicate accompanied in one timeline, He would satisfy it in the other timeline also. This is because if there is a contingent and wholly distinct object in one timeline, God in the other timeline will be contingently and non-temporally related to this object and therefore classed as accompanied in this timeline as well. As such, God cannot satisfy both predicates at no temporal distance from one another.

One may instead escape the argument by denying (3) through believing in mixed relations and that extrinsic change does not render something temporal, which will allow one to say that God can satisfy incompatible predicates at distinct times without Himself being temporal (thanks to a reviewer for pointing this out).

popular accounts of this doctrine which don't include God satisfying Precreation as part of their content but are nevertheless consistent with holding that God satisfies Precreation as an additional belief. This is parallel to thinking that creation *ex nihilo* does not include the temporal finitude of the past as part of its content, something that many claim, and yet adopting the additional belief that the past is temporally finite. Given this, I suggest we ask the more fundamental question, namely whether we have any strong reasons for affirming that God satisfies Precreation and leave the question concerning the proper formulation of creation *ex nihilo* to the side.

However, given how Mullins speaks of creation *ex nihilo* (2025, esp. Ch.3; 2016, 101–103, 134–136; 2021, 92), it may well be that he would disagree with my claim that there are other popular accounts which deny that God satisfies Precreation. He suggests we define the doctrine as follows,

‘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.’ (2025, 54, 224).

Here (i) clearly endorses that God satisfies Precreation, and Mullins suggests God's satisfying Precreation also implies that creation is temporally finite in the past, since he holds that if creation were eternal then God would never be alone since creation would always be there (2016, 101–102, 117; 78–79). However, whilst this might be how *some* conceive of creation *ex nihilo*, it's a mistake to think it's the only popular way. For instance, in a recent introduction to an edited collection on creation *ex nihilo*, the authors claim the doctrine refers to God freely creating ‘the world out of nothing – from no pre-existent matter, no space or time.’ (Burrell et al., 2010, p. 1)²³ This construal of the doctrine says nothing about creation being temporally finite in the past, with this being purposefully omitted by many authors throughout the collection (Burrell et al., 2010, 25–26, 142, 172, 213, 222).²⁴ Yet the result of this is that these authors take creation *ex nihilo* to be consistent with creation being eternal in the past, and therefore God could be said to create *ex nihilo* even though God does not satisfy Precreation.²⁵

Another popular view of creation *ex nihilo* adds to the previous understanding that creation is temporally finite in the past. Yet this addition doesn't imply God satisfies Precreation either. For creation can be temporally finite and depend upon God, even though God never satisfies the conditions for the predicate ‘Lonely’, and this is

²³ One might think that talk of ‘time’ in this quote implies temporal finitude, but given what the authors go on to say, it's clear that they don't think this (Burrell et al., 2010, 8–10).

²⁴ The same omission is present in another edited collection on the topic (Anderson, & Bockmuehl, 2018, p. 38, 181, 195, 372). McFarland's recent book length treatment of creation *ex nihilo* makes the same point writing, the doctrine ‘is completely unaffected by... whether or not... the world had a temporal beginning.’ (2014, xv).

²⁵ This view follows Aquinas's understanding of the philosophical component of creation *ex nihilo* (Baldner & Carroll, 1997), since he took it to be a real possibility that creation was eternal and yet created *ex nihilo* (Wippel, 1984, 191–214).

exactly what many advocates of atemporalism claim (e.g. Leftow, 1991, 290–291).²⁶ It may be that we have other reasons to reject this view, but it shouldn't be because it rules out creation being temporally finite.²⁷ Yet given this, we have two popular construal's of creation *ex nihilo* which are consistent with denying that God satisfies Precreation.²⁸

It should therefore be evident that there *are* different views as to what is the proper content of creation *ex nihilo*. Importantly, the two options which do not require God satisfying Precreation are compatible with God satisfying Precreation as an additional belief. As such the question as to whether there are any strong reasons for thinking God satisfies Precreation is relevant for both of these accounts too.

For the Bible tells me so?

Both Mullins and Craig argue that Christians with a high view of scripture should think that God satisfies Precreation given various Biblical texts, 'Mt 13:35, 24:21, 25:34; Lk 11:50; Jn 17:5, 17:24; Eph 1:4; 1 Pet 1:20; Tit 1:2; 2 Tim 1:9; Heb 9:6; Jude 25; Ps 90:2; Rev 13:8, 17:8.' (Mullins, 2016, p. 136, n.43; Craig, 2001a, 254–255; 2001b, 66).²⁹ One might object to this way of gaining evidence for God satisfying Precreation from the outset, particularly given that no real defence or exegetical explanations are given.³⁰ For it might be argued that before we interpret the biblical text we should see what our metaphysical demonstrations about God imply, and then read the Bible in light of these. Thus, if one had good metaphysical grounds for thinking God had a nature which entailed the falsity of Him satisfying Precreation, then it would be a mistake *not* to read the appealed to verses in light of this, much like one does with other Biblical anthropomorphisms. However, I shan't follow this line of attack here and instead will argue that the texts themselves don't give us strong grounds for thinking that God satisfies Precreation.³¹

²⁶ Mullins (2025, 78–79; 2022, 41; 2020, 220–221; 2016, 102) doesn't seem to think this is possible, for he claims that if an eternal God eternally creates then the creation itself must be eternal. I will comment more on this later in the paper.

²⁷ For instance, Craig (2001a, 254) rejects this view, not on the grounds that creation wouldn't be temporally finite in the past, but in virtue of it implying that God does not satisfy Precreation.

²⁸ Views which don't endorse God satisfying Precreation are defined by Mullins as eternal creation, where 'An eternal creation 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 no state-of-affairs where God exists without a particular universe, set of universes, or all possible universes' (2025, 54, 224). Accordingly, the two popular accounts of creation *ex nihilo* I've laid out would be considered types of eternal creation. Obviously one can define terms as they wish, but it seems an odd consequence that one must call a temporally finite creation a form of 'eternal creation'.

²⁹ Both cite all the same verses, other than John 17:5 which Mullins adds.

³⁰ In a co-authored book Copan and Craig spend two long chapters looking at the biblical data concerning God's act of creation, however these chapters aim to establish that creation is temporally finite in the past and not the additional claim that God satisfies Precreation. The comments that do relate to God satisfying Precreation are extremely fleeting and largely quotations (Copan & Craig, 2004, p. 39, 56, 66, 67, 68, 85).

³¹ One might also question the view of scripture required so that these texts trump all other considerations, but I shan't question this either.

To start, it's not clear that all the texts Mullins and Craig reference support the claim that God satisfies Precreation. For instance, Hebrews 9:6, cited by both, isn't on topic, and so I assume Hebrews 9:26 is what was meant. Yet Hebrews 9:26, Matthew 13:35; 24:21; 25:34, Luke 11:50 and Revelation 13:8; 17:8 don't imply that God satisfies Precreation either, since they merely speak of things occurring 'from the foundation of the world' (NRSV) or 'from the beginning/creation of the world' (NIV), all of which may give us good reasons for thinking that creation is temporally finite in the past, something which seems to be in line with how biblical scholars interpret these texts (e.g. Hagner, 1995, p. 743; Nolland, 1993, p. 668; Wolter, 2017, p. 127; Marshall, 1978, p. 505; Ellingworth, 1993, 484; Koester, 2001, p. 428; Cokerill, 2012, p. 422), but as I've already noted, creation's temporal finitude does not imply that God satisfies Precreation.³²

However, John 17:5; 17:24, Ephesians 1:4, 1 Peter 1:20, 2 Timothy 1:9, Titus 1:2, Jude 25, and Psalm 90:2, seem more suited to be employed as evidence for God satisfying Precreation since they speak of God being 'before creation' or 'before time'. Exactly how to understand 'before' in these passages is tricky, since it cannot be one of temporal priority, since those who think God satisfies Precreation typically take creation to include time, and nothing can be temporally prior when there is no temporal domain.³³ Yet as I've already noted, ontological and causal priority don't imply that God satisfies Precreation either, and so if we were to interpret the texts by using these types of priority then God needn't satisfy Precreation.³⁴ It therefore isn't clear exactly how to translate these passages so that their talk of 'before' makes metaphysical sense and implies that God satisfies Precreation.

Nevertheless, suppose such an interpretation can be given, I still doubt that these passages give much evidence for God satisfying Precreation, as I think the meaning we attribute to these passages should largely be determined by the human authors intent, and I take it that in each case the author's intent wasn't to endorse the claim that God satisfies Precreation but to convey some other theological message. One might respond by noting that many Christians take all or some of these texts to be authored by both humans and God, and so whilst it might not have been the human author's intention to advocate that God satisfies Precreation it may have been God's. But I'm sceptical that we can *know* what God's intention was for each of these texts. Further, I'm not convinced that it's good exegetical practice to suppose that one should adopt the metaphysical implications of a Biblical text when read plainly on the basis that it *might* have been God's intention for the text, even though it very likely wasn't the human authors. This seems especially suspect to me when the following conditions are met: (i) the claims in question are not central to salvation,³⁵ (ii) the claims aren't implied throughout the Biblical text but only in a select few verses, and (iii) there are

³² This is something I will comment on later in the paper.

³³ Mullins (2016, 136, n.43) makes this point but seems to think it can be overcome by speaking of 'ages' rather than times, but it's not at all clear what is meant by an 'age', for it cannot mean a length of time, which would be the natural reading, and so unless 'age' is further specified it's far from clear that this translation helps.

³⁴ As I've said in note 12, it is exactly these types of priority that defenders of atemporalism attribute to God even though they deny that God satisfies Precreation given that He has created.

³⁵ Swinburne (2007) provides some reasons for thinking salvation is God's primary intention of the Bible.

other biblical texts which contradict, either explicitly or implicitly, the metaphysical claims of these texts.³⁶ In our case, I think all of these conditions are met. Firstly, God satisfying Precreation, as far as I can tell, isn't required for the mechanics of salvation. Secondly, the texts that support God satisfying Precreation are few and far between, with four of the eight that I consider to be relevant, being found within either poetry (Psalm 90:2), a prayer (John 17:5; 17:24), and a doxology in the form of prayer or praise (Jude 25).³⁷ But the language employed in these forms of writing is *regularly* not that of clinical analysis but rather more poetic and imaginative, and therefore at best they give very weak attestation to God satisfying Precreation. Finally, I think Barr is likely correct in thinking that the Bible does not provide a *unified* picture of God's relationship to time (1962, 156–157), and therefore there may be parts which imply that it is false that God satisfies Precreation.³⁸ For instance, as I've noted already, if God is atemporal and has created then He doesn't satisfy Precreation. But there is arguably some Biblical support for divine atemporality (Crisp, 2019, 107–110) and/or key themes which best support atemporality (Leftow, 1991, 2003, 275–277).³⁹ Additionally, many biblical scholars think the language of 'before creation' or 'before time' attempts to convey the idea that God is atemporal. For instance, Towner (2006, 470), Mounce (2000, 483) and Johnson (2001, 348), suggest that God being 'before the beginning of time' in 2 Timothy, was written to distinguish the atemporality of God from the temporality of His creation, with Quinn (1990, 65) making the same point regarding Titus 1:2. As such, I think we should be highly sceptical that we can reliably infer what the divine intention was for these particular texts, and therefore should focus on what the human authors meant by them.

What the human authors were likely intending to convey by these texts is something I leave to textual scholars, and here I merely report their findings. Regarding Ephesians 1:4, Lincoln suggests the key function of the language is 'to give believers assurance of God's purposes for them. Its force is that God's choice of them was a free decision not dependent on temporal circumstances but rooted in the depth of his nature.' (1990, 23; O'Brien, 1999 100) Much the same can be said of 1 Peter 1:20 where the purpose is to let the believer know that God has eternally planned

³⁶ Meeting these conditions seems to me to suggest that we have little *justification* for thinking that God's intention for these texts were that they taught particular metaphysical theses.

³⁷ Lincoln writes that the prayer in which both John verses are found 'constitutes this Gospel's most extensive reflection on what is entailed in the intimate union between the Son and the Father, which was experienced in this world yet transcends its categories of time and space.' (2005, 433–434) Whilst Davids (2006, 116) and Green (2008, 137) contend that Jude's language is used so to express God's 'transcendence', contrasting the temporal creation. As such these passages may also support divine atemporality, and therefore speak against God satisfying Precreation, given that He has created.

³⁸ Crisp (2019, 108) and Helm (2010, 6–7) also think the biblical material on God's relationship to time is *underdetermined*, with Craig (2001a, 7–8) being very close to thinking the same). One might therefore turn to tradition and authoritative statements of Catholic and Protestant doctrine to determine God's relationship to time. This would be good news for atemporality (Crisp, 2019, 102–103), and consequently bad news for God satisfying Precreation, given that He has created.

³⁹ One will have to argue against Craig style views of God's relationship to time, where God is atemporal sans creation and temporal after, so that these texts imply standard atemporality. Note too that it won't help arguing that scripture speaks in support more frequently of divine temporality, since God's temporality alone does not imply that God satisfies Precreation either since a temporal God might create at every moment of His life.

the actions of Christ, even though they have only just been revealed, and given ‘this sense of their place in God’s plan, their privileged status, along with their sense of the impending end, should strengthen these believers in the face of their concomitant trials.’ (Davids, 1990, p. 75) Similarly the content of 2 Timothy 1:9, ‘refers to the eternal purpose of God’ (Dunn, 2015, p. 422), with the language intending to stress that salvation depends on God’s choice, not on human works or merit (Marshall, 1999, p. 706), and that given God’s eternal purpose, believers can be assured of God’s salvation and calling, even in the threat of Ephesian opponents (Mounce, 2000, p. 483).⁴⁰ Yet if these are the primary intentions of the human authors, then what the texts mean to convey does not require or imply that God satisfies Precreation. Given this, it would seem the reason the authors spoke in a way that *appeared* to affirm that God satisfies Precreation is because it made it easier to express the theological points they wished to.⁴¹

Therefore, I don’t think we have good Biblical grounds for thinking that God satisfies Precreation, since although we cannot conclusively say that no author intended to give evidence for God satisfying Precreation, it seems we have good reasons for thinking it very unlikely that they did.

A great cloud of witnesses?

Another reason for claiming that God satisfies Precreation, apparent in Mullins’s work (2025, esp. Ch.3; 2016, 101–103, 134–136), comes from thinking that many contemporary and historical authorities take this to be the case. I think this claim is questionable.

Starting with contemporary scholars, Mullins (2025, 50) appears to contend that Lebens’s definition of creation *ex nihilo* implies that God satisfies Precreation. But Lebens definition, ‘The universe was created by God at some point in time (perhaps the first moment in time), before which there was nothing except God’ (2020, 31), doesn’t imply this if one reads ‘before’ as implying only a causal, logical or ontological priority. Lebens has confirmed in personal correspondence that his definition should have been more careful, and that he *doesn’t* wish to claim that creation *ex nihilo* *requires* that God satisfies Precreation.

Much the same goes for Mullins’s use of Ward (2025, 55) and Fergusson (2025, 224) whom he also takes as endorsing the claim that God satisfies Precreation.⁴² Once again, if one reads of the priority of which they speak of as logical, causal or

⁴⁰ Similar thoughts are found in Psalm 90:2, where the context makes it clear that the content expresses ‘confidence in God and gratitude for his help through the generations, affirming his everlasting nature.’ (Tate, 1990, p. 437).

⁴¹ One might object to my overall argument by claiming that it implies that the Bible cannot speak to issues that the authors did not intend to address. This, however, would be a mistake. For I think that one can mine the Bible for key themes found throughout the text and then employ these to think about how the Biblical authors, and perhaps the divine author, might think about issues which are not intentionally addressed in the text. (See: Hays, 1996, Part 2 and Part 3, but especially Chaps. 9 & 10) However, since I don’t think God satisfying Precreation is a key Biblical theme, this won’t help its cause either.

⁴² The references above relate to Mullins’s use of the scholars, with the scholars’ own references being Ward (2020, 15) and Fergusson (2014, 21).

ontological, then they don't affirm this, with both also confirming in personal correspondence that they don't think creation *ex nihilo* *requires* God to satisfy Precreation.⁴³ Mullins (2025, 77; Schmid & Mullins, 2022, p. 403) also suggests that Leftow (2012, 4) affirms that God satisfies Precreation, but this too is a mistake. For as Leftow makes clear in the footnote attached to the text referenced, if one endorses divine atemporality then God will be prior to creation in a sense that will not require God to satisfy Precreation (2012, 4, n.15), which is unsurprising since Leftow, as an atemporalist is explicit about this elsewhere (1991, 290–291).

Therefore, whilst there may be *some* contemporary affirmation, there is definitely less than Mullins claims. Mullins, however, may care little about this since he asserts that the idea of God satisfying Precreation has been lost within contemporary philosophical theology (2025, 50), with many contemporary theologians apparently being too 'squeamish' (2024, 34) to talk about it. Nevertheless, he thinks historical authorities are on his side in affirming that God satisfies Precreation,⁴⁴ writing, 'the classical tradition holds that the universe is not co-eternal with God' (2016, 101; 2021, 92) and from this inferring they must have thought that God satisfies Precreation (2016, 101). However, I'm unconvinced that many/most classical philosophical theologians held that God satisfies Precreation given that He has created. Nonetheless, rather than giving swift attention to several authors, let me comment on one Mullins mentions, Aquinas, since he is the author I know best.⁴⁵

To support his position, Mullins quotes Aquinas as saying, 'nothing can be co-eternal with God, because nothing can be immutable save God alone.' (2016, 101; *On the Eternity of the World*, tr. by Baldner & Carroll, 1997, p. 121) From the non-eternality of creation Mullins infers that Aquinas must have thought God satisfies Precreation.⁴⁶ I think this is a mistake which can be seen by paying closer attention to the wider context of the passage. First note that Aquinas is arguing that God can be the creator and create *ex nihilo* even if the world is eternal. This might seem odd, especially as the quote explicitly says only God can be eternal. But Aquinas uses eternal in two different ways. Firstly, as in the quote above, eternal refers to something lacking all succession, which is why Aquinas speaks of God's immutability,

⁴³ Ward speaks of logical priority in the page Mullins cites and elsewhere (2020, 15, 5).

⁴⁴ Mullins (2021, 92; 2025, 22) cites Broadie to this effect, with Broadie writing, 'In the High Middle Ages all the major theologians of the Christian West teach that God created our world *ex nihilo*, that is, that first there is God and no world, and then, by an act of divine will, there is a world which is, in some sense, at a distance from and therefore other than God.' (2010, 53) Once again there is a question as to how to understand Broadie's language of 'first', since if it is only to imply a logical, causal, or ontological first then God satisfying Precreation is not entailed. Further, even if Broadie does affirm that God satisfies Precreation, he gives us no reason within his text as to why we should think he's right that major theologians taught this.

⁴⁵ A key reason for being unconvinced that other historical authorities affirmed that God satisfies Precreation is due to its incompatibility with other things they affirm, such as God being atemporal and satisfying Accompanied. For instance, it seems to me that interpreting Augustine in this way would go against many interpretations of him and the implication of his views (Matthews, 2005, 76–81; Karfíková, 2020, 180–183; Knuutila, 2014, 84–86; Clemons, 2021, 11–12; Eodice, 2021, 22–23; Ayoub, 2021, p. 75; Rossiter, 2021, 213–214). However, space prohibits me from considering this further here.

⁴⁶ Mullins takes this to be a more genuine entailment, writing, affirming 'the doctrine of creation out of nothing, which denies that the created order is co-eternal with God... entails that there is a state of affairs where God exists without a universe of any sort.' (2025, 50).

since immutable things lack succession. But Aquinas also speaks of something being eternal where the thing in question does involve succession and change, something he explicitly states a couple of lines before the cited text. Here Aquinas quotes from Boethius, with the fuller Boethian passage reading,

‘Those philosophers are wrong, then, who took Plato’s dictum that the world had no beginning and had no end and inferred from that that the created world is co-eternal with the Creator. It is one thing to proceed through infinite time, as Plato posits, but quite another to embrace the whole of time in one simultaneous present. This is obviously a property of the mind of God.... The endless and infinite changing of things in time is an attempt to imitate eternity, but it cannot equal its immobility and it fails to achieve the eternal present, producing only an infinite number of future and past moments. It never ceases to be and therefore is an imitation of eternity.... And since it could not abide in permanence, it seized instead on the infinite flow of time, an endless succession of moments, and in that way could appear to have a continuity, which is not the same as permanence. All this is to say that if we use proper terms, then, following Plato, we should say that God is eternal but the world is perpetual.’ (*Consolation of Philosophy* V.6, 2008, 169–170)⁴⁷

Therefore, when eternal is used in reference to those things that involve succession and change, it means infinitely successive, such that there is no temporal beginning point, what Boethius calls perpetual. Aquinas thinks the world could be eternal in this sense and that God create it ex nihilo, thereby denying that creation ex nihilo requires that God satisfies Precreation. Additionally, the reason why Aquinas raises this point is because he thinks other historical sources are sometimes misunderstood when they speak about eternity. He makes this clear a few lines earlier by referencing John of Damascus, saying that even he, when interpreted correctly, can allow that creation always existed and yet not be equal to God in duration (*On the Eternity of the World*, tr. by Baldner & Carroll, 1997, 120–121).⁴⁸ If Aquinas’s interpretation is correct, then this would speak against another person Mullins cites for historical affirmation, since Mullins employs the exact quotation which Aquinas speaks of, to argue that John must think God satisfies Precreation (2016, 101; 2021, 92; 2025, 50).

Nevertheless, Aquinas doesn’t think that creation is eternally successive and instead held that it had a temporal beginning, famously taking this to be an article of faith (*Summa Theologiae* I, q.46, a.2). Mullins would claim that this would imply that Aquinas’s God, who does not begin to exist in virtue of being atemporal, must satisfy Precreation, for he writes that God satisfying Precreation ‘is an entailment from the fact that God does not begin to exist, and the fact that the universe does

⁴⁷ The quote that Aquinas provides ends at the first ellipsis (Baldner & Carroll, 1997, p. 121). See also, *Summa Theologiae* I, q.46, a.2, ad. 5; *Super Sent.*, lib. 1, d.19, q.2, a.1, co.

⁴⁸ The passage in question says: ‘It is not naturally suitable that what is brought from non-being to being be so- eternal with that which is without beginning and is always.’ *The Orthodox Faith* I.8 (quoted from Baldner & Carroll, 1997, p. 120).

begin to exist.' (2022, 40; 2025, 74; 2024, 34)⁴⁹ But why couldn't an atemporal God create something that begins to exist? In several places Mullins suggests, 'If God is eternally causing X to exist, then X eternally exists' (2025, 78–79; 2022, 41; 2020, 220–221; 2016, 102; Craig, 2001a, 23). Mullins thinks that if this is true then an atemporal God couldn't create something that begins to exist, but I think the claim is ambiguous, namely regarding what 'X eternally exists' means. Firstly, it might mean that 'X exists in eternity', which only an Anselmian view of divine atemporality would accept (Leftow, 1991, Chs. 9–10). Secondly, it might mean that 'X eternally exists for God', where eternally exists here means permanently exists.⁵⁰ Or finally, it might mean that 'X has an eternal extension' and therefore does not begin, since only if X had a finite extension would it begin. I think it most likely that the latter interpretation is what Mullins means, since the two other interpretations are consistent with X's extension being finite. But Aquinas and Boethius, given what I've said above, may still think this is ambiguous, since an eternal extension, or duration, might be one that involves succession, being properly called perpetual, or no succession. This ambiguity is especially important since Mullins suggests that if one replaces X with the Son, the second person of the Trinity, or the universe, one should reach the same conclusion, and since it is agreed the Son has eternal existence then so should the universe (2025, 78; 2020, 220–221). However, eternity, when spoken of the Son, is being used in its proper sense, and implies no succession, whereas when one speaks of the universe being eternal it is used in perpetual sense, as all agree the universe undergoes succession.⁵¹ As such, removing the ambiguity from the claim and applying it to the universe, it should read, if God is eternally causing the universe to exist, then the universe's existence has an eternal extension (or is perpetual). But on this reading, it seems far from clear that the premise is true. Why can't an eternal God create something with a finite extension, such as a finite eternalist block?⁵² Given how omnipotence is typically understood, unless we have a good argument for thinking that such a thing is impossible then we should take this action to be possible for God.⁵³ Since Aquinas takes it that to temporally begin is to have a finite temporal extension, with this being something we can infer from his discussion of arguments

⁴⁹ Mullins says this in the context of speaking about Augustine, but I take it he thinks this entailment holds more generally.

⁵⁰ I take it that something can be permanent and contingent, and thus even if creation is permanent to God it can still be contingent.

⁵¹ Additionally, many will find this parallel implausible, since the inter-Trinitarian generation relations are taken to be 'unique... [fitting] into no category of generation that we know—however much we can make use of very distant likeness in the created order.' (Ayres, 2011, p. 124).

⁵² I use this example for ease, rather than for thinking Aquinas was an eternalist, since he seems to be a presentist, writing, 'nothing exists of time except now.' (*Summa Theologiae* I, q.46, a.3, ad.3, 2020) See Leftow (2018); Page (2023b) for thinking about an atemporal God's relationship to a presentist creation.

⁵³ One could perhaps argue that the causal likeness principle is true and so an eternal God could only cause properly eternal existents, like the Son. But this is unlikely to be persuasive since the causal likeness principle is very likely false, and most theists will reject it as they take it that an immaterial God can cause material objects.

for the eternity of the world (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d.1, q.1, a.5, ad.17), He would certainly think creation began even though it is eternally caused by an atemporal God.⁵⁴

Perhaps Mullins would reply that it is in fact the second sense of eternal I gave above that he has in mind, for he writes, ‘On eternalism, God and the entire block of time are co-eternal’ (2025, 251), with the eternal in co-eternal seeming to make sense only if it is understood in terms of permanence.⁵⁵ If this is right then Mullins’s claim, when thinking about the universe, should be understood as, if God is permanently causing the universe, then the universe permanently exists.⁵⁶ This seems more plausible. Yet the reason Mullins thinks this implies that the universe can’t begin is because he claims, ‘there is a widespread assumption within Western philosophical theology that whatever begins to exist does so after not existing.’ (2025, 50, 71) Given that permanence, as in the quotation above, is meant to apply to God’s existence too, I take it that that which is permanent, in Mullins’s sense, doesn’t exist after not existing. God’s permanent causing of a universe therefore results in a permanent universe, and thus one without beginning. Here, I suggest that Mullins has the wrong understanding of beginning to exist.⁵⁷ To see why I think this, note that your existence in the eternalist block is permanent in the sense that you always are in the range of the universal quantifier. Yet you exist only for an incredibly small temporally finite portion of the block. It seems odd to me to say that you don’t begin to exist. Rather, you do begin to exist, but this is because your temporal extension is finite rather than infinite. If you can be permanent, in some sense, and yet begin to exist because of your temporal finite extension, then so long as the universe is temporally finite it too can begin to exist even if it is in another sense permanent. At the very least, Aquinas would seem to think this way, given how he understands temporal beginnings.⁵⁸

Another text Mullins (2025, 52) employs for thinking that Aquinas takes God to satisfy Precreation is the following,

‘In like manner, in the production of the entire creature, outside which there is no time, and together with which time is produced simultaneously, we do not have to consider the reason why it was produced now and not before (so that we be led to grant the infinity of time), but only why it was not always produced, or

⁵⁴ Aquinas writes, ‘The first agent is a voluntary agent. And although He had the eternal will to produce some effect, yet He did not produce an eternal effect.’ (*Summa Theologiae* I, q.46, a.3, ad.6, 2020).

⁵⁵ Eternal can’t mean succession since an eternalist block includes this (Mullins, 2020p. 5, 92) and it can’t mean temporally infinite in extension, as a block does not need to be. Additionally, as Daniel Rubio in personal correspondence pointed out, ‘co-eternal’ will have to be understood in a non-temporal manner, since the block, when considered as a whole, is not a temporal entity, for there is no time or span of times at which it is located.

⁵⁶ Daniel Rubio suggested to me that given the issues with other interpretations, ‘co-eternal’ might be taken to mean fundamental here. But as he noted, theistic eternalists do not have to accept that.

⁵⁷ I’m also sceptical that it is as widespread as he claims.

⁵⁸ I suspect Mullins’s concern about eternal causation is based off a more general worry, namely whether sense can be made of an atemporal cause having temporal effects. But this is a different question and requires a different response.

why after non-being, or so as to imply a beginning.' (*Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 35, 2020)⁵⁹

But this doesn't imply that God satisfies Precreation either. I take it that the phrases, 'not always produced' and 'so as to imply a beginning' speak to creation's temporal finitude, which as I've already argued, does not imply that God satisfies Precreation.⁶⁰ This part of Aquinas's question can therefore be understood as asking why didn't God create something temporally eternal such that it is always produced and had no beginning? His answer to this, and as to 'why after non-being', is because it manifests God's transcendence and voluntary nature (*Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 35). Yet we might ask what it means to be 'after non-being', with this seemingly more relevant to the question about whether God satisfies Precreation.⁶¹ Elsewhere Aquinas explains his use of 'non-being' when speaking about creation, writing,

'in a thing that is said to be created, non-being is prior to being, not by a priority of time or duration, as if it first was not and afterwards was, but by a priority of nature such that the created thing, if left to itself, would come to non-being, since it has being only from the influence of a higher cause.' (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d.1, q.1, a.2, co.; *Compendium of Theology* I, 99, 2020).

If this is all Aquinas means in *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 35 then it won't imply that God satisfies Precreation, for all he means to ask is why God gives being to things that without His action wouldn't exist. However, this may not be what Aquinas means in this passage, since he also says that creation has non-being prior to being by duration too, writing,

'For God willed that it [Creation] would have being after non-being, in duration just as in nature. And if it had existed from eternity, this would have been lacking to it.' (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d.1, q.1, a.5, ad.14; *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d.1, q.1, a.2, co.)

Does this imply that God satisfies Precreation? Again, I think not, for Aquinas holds that "duration" signifies a certain permanence' (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d.1, q.1, a.5, ad.23), and as we've seen, for Aquinas the world's duration is temporally finite rather than temporally infinite, therefore being characterised as having being after non-being in duration.

⁵⁹ Since Mullins's reference is just to *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 35, I assume this is the relevant section.

⁶⁰ Additionally, Mullins (2025, 52) cites *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 31 seemingly as evidence for the claim that Aquinas thought God satisfied Precreation, but all this passage claims is that God didn't necessarily have to create creatures. This is consistent with saying that because God did create, God doesn't satisfy Precreation, but that if God hadn't created then God would satisfy Precreation.

⁶¹ Mullins (2025, 52) also cites the start of *Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 19 where Aquinas speaks of creation coming from non-being in support of God satisfying Precreation. What I go on to say will show why this passage won't help either.

Nevertheless, Aquinas acknowledges that we are inclined to *imagine* God as first existing alone. But for Aquinas, this is all that this is, namely something imaginary. He writes,

‘However, although there was no time prior to the world and no place outside the world, we speak as if there were. Thus, we say that before the world existed there was nothing except God, and that there is no body lying outside the world. But in thus speaking of ‘before’ and ‘outside,’ we have in mind nothing but time and place as they exist in our imagination.’ (*Compendium of Theology I*, 98, 2020).⁶²

And elsewhere,

‘When a thing comes to be from nothing, the being of what comes to be is first in an instant, and its non-being is not in that instant nor in anything real, but only in something imaginary. For as outside the universe there is not a real but only an imaginary dimension, in respect of which we may say that God is able to make something outside the universe or just so far from the universe, so too, before the beginning of the world there was no real time, but only an imaginary time; in this it is possible to imagine some instant in which was the last non-being. Nor does it follow that there must have been a time between those two instants, since true time is not continuous with imaginary time.’ (*De Potentia Dei*, q.3, a.1, ad.10, 2020).

In fact, Aquinas speaks quite frequently of our use of imaginary time when we talk about things being before time or creation (Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, Bk 8, Lecture 2, Sect. 990; *De Potentia Dei*, q.3. a.13, ad.6; a.17, ad.12; a.17, ad.20; *Summa Theologiae I*, q.46, a.1, ad. 6 & 8; *Summa Contra Gentiles II*, 36, 7; *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d.1, q.1, a.5, ad.13).⁶³ Yet the key point is that for Aquinas this is something merely imaginary and as such does not imply that God satisfies Precreation.⁶⁴

Finally, one might think Aquinas accepts that God satisfies Precreation by noting that he holds that,

⁶² Mullins (2025, 52) also cites *Summa Contra Gentiles II*, 68 in support of God satisfying Precreation but I cannot find the text he cites or anything closely related in this passage. Nevertheless, the claim that ‘He was from eternity before there was any place’, does not mean God satisfies Precreation, as this text implies, but merely that we have something in our imagination.

⁶³ Additionally, in *Summa Theologiae I*, q.46, a.1, ad.6 he suggests it is a mistake to think of God changing from not acting to acting when He creates.

⁶⁴ Mullins (2025, 59, n.51) also cites *Super Sent.*, lib. 2, d.12, q.1, a.2, ad.3, which is about created things not having being intrinsically, with God first willing them to not be and then later to be. Depending upon how this is read, either what I've said regarding the imagination shows that this doesn't imply that God satisfies Precreation. Otherwise, if the worry is about the possibility of God creating things at different times, which is what a.2 is more generally about, then all I note here is that defenders of timelessness, including Aquinas (*Summa Contra Gentiles II*, 35), will argue that although God's willing may occur all at once in eternity, His effects need not (Leftow, 1991, 302–309).

‘God precedes the world not only by nature but also by duration’ (*Super Sent.*, lib.2, d.1, q.1, a.5, ad.7, 2020; *Summa Theologiae* I, q.46, a.1, ad.8)⁶⁵

Yet here, once again, Aquinas speaks of our imagination, continuing,

‘yet not by a duration of time, but rather by one of eternity, since before the world there was not time that existed in reality but only in the imagination. For now we imagine that on the “before” side God could have added many years to this finite time, and eternity would be present to all these years.’ (*Super Sent.*, lib.2, d.1, q.1, a.5, ad.7, 2020; *Summa Theologiae* I, q.46, a.1, ad.8).

As such this doesn’t imply that God satisfies Precreation either.⁶⁶ Additionally, in *Super Sent.*, lib. 1, d.19, q.2, a.1, co. Aquinas explains what he means by duration, writing that the duration of everything depends on its being in act; for a thing is said to last (*durare*) so long as it is in act, and not while it is in potency. He then proceeds to make distinctions between ways in which something could be in act, writing,

‘There is a certain act that is not underpinned by any potency, and this is the divine existence and its activity—and eternity corresponds to this, in place of a measure. There is another act under which stands a certain potency, but the acquired act in that potency is nonetheless complete—and aeviternity corresponds to this. Moreover, there is another act that is underpinned by potency, and the potency is blended with it for an act complete according to succession, the potency receiving the addition of perfection—and time corresponds to this.’ (*Super Sent.*, lib. 1, d.19, q.2, a.1, co., 2020).

Yet if this is all that is meant by duration, with God being prior in duration because He is not underpinned by any potency, this won’t imply that God satisfies Precreation either.

The result of all this is that Aquinas is not someone Mullins can appeal to in support of his view.

⁶⁵ This passage makes it clear that Aquinas *does* hold God to be prior in duration, and therefore Aquinas doesn’t affirm the condemnations of 1277 in Paris (for some examples see: Klima et al., 2007, ch.22). Nevertheless, even if he did affirm them, the condemnations were very localised and would not be deemed authoritative for Catholics today. Additionally, Aquinas’s use of the distinction between nature and duration provides an exception to Mullins’s claim that ‘For classical theists, conceptual distinctions are repugnant to divine simplicity and must be denied of God.’ (2021, 101; 2016, 53; 2025, 21). For later in this question (*Super Sent.*, lib.2, d.1, q.1, a.5 ad.23) Aquinas is explicit that there *is* a distinction of reason here, which I take to be what Mullins means by a conceptual distinction (2016, 52–53).

⁶⁶ I must admit to being slightly confused as in recent work Craig seems to suggest that Precreation is an imaginary phase (2021, 361 n.8). But if it’s merely imaginary then it’s difficult to see why eternalism excludes Precreation, as Craig (2001a, 254–255) contends. He does also say this Precreation phase is a ‘real phase’ (2021, 361, n.8), but it’s unclear what this means – existing? But then what is it to be imaginary? Additionally, if God’s Precreation phase is merely imaginary I don’t see how Craig’s version of the ‘Revenge of the Creational Change’ argument (2001a, 59–60) will get the change he requires, since surely two non-imaginary phases are required for a change.

The first temporal becoming

The final significant reason for thinking that God satisfies Precreation relies on a particular understanding of beginning to exist,⁶⁷ and claims that God bringing to existence a first temporal moment implies that He satisfies Precreation.⁶⁸ I think Craig has something like this in mind when he objects to tenseless views of creation, such as eternalist accounts, writing that they can only claim a beginning in virtue of the block having a ‘front edge’ and therefore imply that ‘in the actual world there is no states of affairs of God existing alone without the spacetime universe’ thus providing an ‘emasculated doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*’ (2001a, 254; 2001b, 66) since the first moment is ‘never really coming into being out of non-being.’ (2001a, 255).

Obviously, those adopting a tenseless view of time will disagree that their definition of beginning to exist is inadequate even if it doesn’t require that God satisfies Precreation so that creation begins. Nevertheless, let’s assume Craig is right and there is something missing from tenseless accounts of beginning to exist, namely in failing to provide an adequate account of being coming from non-being. Exactly how we are to understand this notion will be important if it is to require that God satisfies Precreation if He is to make a world with a beginning, and elsewhere Craig speaks as though we should understand it as concerning what he calls temporal becoming. However, frustratingly, as far as I can tell, he never offers a precise account of what exactly he takes temporal becoming to be. In one place he writes,

‘on a consistent A-Theory of time—what Fitzgerald calls a “reality acquisition model” of temporal becoming—, only the present obtains or is actual. The past and the future can be said to exist in the sense that non-actual past and future states of affairs exist. But neither the past nor the future obtains.’ (2000b, 133).

If this tells us what temporal becoming is, then it won’t require God to satisfy Precreation, for we can hold that when the first temporal moment was present it obtained and was actual and that no other temporal moment obtained or was actual, and that the first temporal moment no longer obtains since it is no longer present, now being past and therefore non-actual.

⁶⁷ I say *significant* since Mullins notes some other arguments for God satisfying Precreation all of which I take to be very weak. One is based on the work of Pink (1975, 9) and claims that God satisfying Precreation helps us *understand* ‘the solitary greatness and self-sufficiency of God’s perfection’ (Mullins, 2021, p. 92; 2025, 52). But even if we grant this, it in no way *demonstrates* that God satisfying Precreation is required for God to be essentially great or self-sufficient. A second concerns God’s free act of creation (Mullins, 2021, p. 92; 2016, 102), whereby God’s satisfying Precreation is thought to help us make sense of God’s freedom. But as I’ve already noted, God’s free act of creation can be explained by His free contingent willing, which doesn’t require God to satisfy Precreation (Leftow, 1991, 299–302). Finally, it has been suggested that without God satisfying Precreation we cannot make sense of claims such as ‘God was always Father, but not always Creator.’ (Torrance, 1996, p. 23; Mullins, 2016, p. 101) But this too is false; the difference will be modal, as God is not essentially creator, as He didn’t have to create, but essentially Father.

⁶⁸ In the context of speaking about creation ex nihilo, Craig (2001a, 274, 276, 280; Copan & Craig, 2004, p. 199, 253, 258) and Mullins (2020, 233, 236) both speak of creation having a first moment, so I’ll ignore complications arising from something beginning in virtue of being finite whilst not having a first member.

Elsewhere Craig talks about temporal becoming in another way, writing that according to the tensed theory of time ‘the physical world undergoes objective changes in tense; indeed, this is the essence of temporal becoming. There are tensed facts, such as that *It is presently t*, that are constantly changing’. (2001a, 100)⁶⁹ But this also won’t require God to satisfy Precreation either, for we can say that the physical world’s first moment was objectively tensed present and the truth values concerning propositions about the first moment will change once this moment is past.⁷⁰

A final conception of temporal becoming that Craig relies on can be seen when he writes, ‘past and future things or events do not lack some quality of presentness or possess in its place the qualities of pastness or futurity instead. Rather they simply do not exist at all. Temporal becoming consists in things’ coming to be absolutely.’ (2000a, 179) Here Craig, following Broad (Craig, 2000a, Ch.6), holds that temporal becoming is not a type of qualitative change, but a coming to be absolutely. One might therefore think that temporal becoming is just like Aquinas’s notion of creation, since he distinguishes the act of creation from change (*Summa Contra Gentiles* II, 17; 19).⁷¹ However, this can’t be what Craig has in mind, for Aquinas’s notion of creation is compatible with an eternalist block being created, since the block does not have being in and of itself and so God is required to give it being. Yet Craig contends that a block theorist cannot really affirm that the universe came into being (2001a, 255), since they do not endorse temporal becoming and so cannot adopt the appropriate notion of coming to be absolutely. Therefore, Craig must mean something different from Aquinas, and if temporal becoming is to imply that God satisfies Precreation then coming to be absolutely must mean something like: X temporally becomes if reality satisfies the conditions for the predicate ‘not-X’ prior to reality satisfying the conditions for the predicate ‘X’.⁷²

If we agree with Craig up to this point, and I suspect many won’t, then we must ask whether we can make sense of the first moment of time coming to be absolutely on this construal. I’m sceptical that we can. To see this, note that if the first temporal moment came to be absolutely, then there must be some actual ‘prior’ reality where the first moment of time does not exist, and given that there is no time ‘before’ the first moment, that which is ‘prior’ must be atemporal. The question now becomes whether that atemporal ‘prior’ reality, from which the first temporal moment came to be, can actually exist without the first temporal moment.⁷³ To contemplate this question consider a view which is gaining popularity, namely that time isn’t fundamental

⁶⁹ In another passage (Craig, 2000a, p. 81), both the features mentioned in this paragraph and the previous one seem to be what is meant by temporal becoming.

⁷⁰ If divine atemporalism is compatible with presentism, as Leftow (2018) and Page claim (2023b), then a presentist world will have the features Craig speaks about in this paragraph and the previous without God satisfying Precreation.

⁷¹ Elsewhere Aquinas says creation resembles a change insofar as ‘we imagine that one and the same thing previously did not exist, and later existed.’ (*Compendium of Theology* 1, 99, 2020).

⁷² Or to use Craig’s terminology of states of affairs, X temporally becomes if there is an actual ‘prior’ state of affairs in which X does not exist, and a distinct actual ‘subsequent’ state of affairs in which X does exist.

⁷³ The question here is not, could there have been *some* actual atemporal reality in which the first temporal moment does not exist? But instead, could the atemporal reality that is ‘prior’ to the first temporal moment exist without the first temporal moment?

but ‘arises’ from an atemporal base (Wüthrich et al., 2021). In this case could the ‘prior’ atemporal base be such that even though it existed the first moment of time didn’t? It seems not, for an atemporal base cannot change given that it doesn’t exist through successive states, and so can’t go from being one way that does not produce the first temporal moment to being another way which does. Change, on very standard views, requires temporal extension (Maudlin, 2002, p. 17) or more generally time (Pickup, 2021, p. 199), and so an atemporal base, which has no temporal extension and no temporal dimension, cannot change. But in that case, if the atemporal base brings about the first moment of time then it must permanently have all it needs to bring it about. One might wonder whether the ‘prior’ atemporal base can wait to bring about the first temporal moment, but nothing atemporal can wait, since waiting requires successive states, with these ordered from earlier to later, and nothing atemporal undergoes succession. The result of this is that if there is a ‘prior’ atemporal base which brings about the first temporal moment, it won’t be Lonely, in the sense of existing without the first temporal moment.⁷⁴

One might reply that if the atemporal base is non-deterministic, such as in the case of a libertarianly free God, then the ‘prior’ atemporal base, in this case God, can be Lonely. However, this by itself won’t do, for if God is atemporal then there is no ‘part’ of God’s atemporal life in which He is not willing creation, with this being for the same reason as before, namely that there is no change for something that exists at no time. Nevertheless, this doesn’t preclude an atemporal God from being libertarianly free, since God’s decision to create wasn’t determined by prior factors and it is *possible* that God could have willed otherwise (Leftow, 1991, 299–302).

I suspect Craig will reply by suggesting that we should alter our understanding of atemporality such that it only implies that something *does not* change rather than it *cannot* change.⁷⁵ Given this understanding, something can be atemporal and there-

⁷⁴ It has been suggested to me that bouncing universe models might help make sense of the idea that there can be a ‘prior’ reality from which a subsequent spacetime comes to be absolutely. I’m unconvinced for the ‘prior’ reality is a prior existing spacetime, and therefore the base for the new time is temporal. This might lead us to think all the bouncing universe case gives us is the absolute becoming of a new physical time, rather than metaphysical time, which may hold between the bounces. Yet since we are interested in the coming to be of metaphysical time, given what creation is said to range over, our base will have to lack time altogether. Additionally, if the relationship between the two universes is thought not to be temporal, so to avoid them having the same time, and to do with metaphysical time rather than physical time, it’s unclear that the ‘prior’ universe can ever be said to exist without the one it brings about (for discussion, see the parallel case of God’s atemporal relationship to creation in Leftow (2018); Page (2023b). Finally, Wüthrich’s suggestion about what one should say in a bouncing universe case doesn’t seem to help either, for he writes,

if the ‘standard interpretation of the bounce... [is] not [to] be *completely meaningless*’ (2022, 226), then we should ‘extrapolate our local time and its direction beyond the scope of its proper applicability’ (2022, 225), so to say that ‘the atemporal phase at the Big Bang is in our past, before our current era. [And therefore] Even if by itself timeless, it is thus meaningful to say that the Big Bang is in the past relative to our local determination of the direction of time. Hence, it occurred ‘before’ our era.’ (2022, 225–226).

But it seems highly debatable that what is said here is *meaningful*, for as Wüthrich acknowledges, we are extrapolating ideas beyond their scope of *proper applicability*, and typically this makes these ideas meaningless in those contexts. Therefore, I’m sceptical that the bouncing universe analogy will help.

⁷⁵ Evidence for this comes from Craig writing, ‘Imagine God existing changelessly alone in a possible world in which He refrains from creation. In such a world, God is reasonably conceived to be timeless.’ (2010, 699; 2001a, 271, 278) Elsewhere Craig notes that an atemporal entity cannot stand in earlier and

fore unchanging, and nonetheless choose to change, perhaps through a libertarian willing, and in virtue of this will no longer be atemporal since it is changing and existing in time. As such, if we take God to be the atemporal base, He exists unchanging without creation, and in virtue of creating, exists in a distinct and changing way with creation. However, there will likely be pushback against this type of move. For starters, even if we allowed it, it certainly wouldn't be what the tradition has called atemporality or eternity, since this has always concerned permeance, in the sense that something could not change, rather than merely something being unchanging.⁷⁶ Additionally, if one holds to a modal conception of time, thinking that something is temporal if it is possibly changeable, then this will imply that Craig's base isn't atemporal.⁷⁷ One reason for endorsing this is that it allows for the first moment of time, on a presentist view, to be counted as temporal, for the first instant will stand in no temporal relations and have undergone no succession, even though it possibly will.⁷⁸ Therefore, it seems there will be reasons to reject Craig's move, and the more general account of God's relationship to time which gives rise to it, and as such it seems unlikely that we can make sense of the first moment of time coming to be given the way Craig understands this notion.⁷⁹

In light of this, even if we agree with the controversial view that temporal becoming is required to adequately make sense of beginning to exist, and the specific understanding of this notion which *might* imply that God satisfies Precreation, we still won't have a strong reason for thinking that God satisfies Precreation given that He has created, since this will also require a very contentious view on God's relationship to time.

O Precreation, where Art thou?

In this paper I've suggested that the arguments for thinking that God satisfies Precreation, irrespective of whether He creates, are weak and therefore atemporalists are well within their rights to reject premises that imply that God satisfies both Precreation and Accompanied. Atemporalists should reject that God satisfies Precreation *if* God has created, for if He has created, creation will be permanently present to Him. Nevertheless, both His act of creation and what He has created can still be considered contingent and dependent on His free action. God can still be said to create ex

later relations (2001b, 159), however I omit the lack of temporal relations above due to explication purposes, and since unchangeability is the key move.

⁷⁶ For instance, Augustine, Boethius, Anselm, and Aquinas all think this.

⁷⁷ Aquinas must have had something like this in mind when he wrote, 'As eternity is the proper measure of permanent being, so time is the proper measure of movement... for time measures not only things actually changed, but also things changeable'. (*Summa Theologiae* I, q.10, a.4, ad.3 (2020).

⁷⁸ We could then argue that an atemporal world is one which is not possibly successive. Craig would not be convinced by this, since he claims that a modal conception of time is 'gratuitous' (2001a, 278), although he appears to give no explicit reason for thinking this.

⁷⁹ I side with Leftow in thinking that if something 'starts out' atemporal it remains so (Leftow, 2018, p. 178, n.21; 2022, 125, n.25), yet this is not Craig's view (2000c, 33). But even if it is possible to be both atemporal and temporal, I think God's atemporal existence (standardly conceived) would preclude Him satisfying Precreation given that He has created.

nihilo, with two popular understandings of this doctrine not requiring Him to satisfy Precreation. Additionally, God can be said to create a temporally finite world, such that it can be said to begin to exist, and even, under several interpretations, to temporally become.⁸⁰ Finally, they need not throw out scripture in order to think that God doesn't satisfy Precreation. What more could a divine atemporalist want!⁸¹

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⁸⁰ Although they will need to embrace presentism in order to say that creation temporally becomes. (See Leftow (2018); Page (2023b) for how divine atemporality and presentism are compatible).

⁸¹ Since Mullins thinks that 'Christian theology is built' on the notion of Precreation (2024, 35), claiming it is part of 'the standard Christian story' (2025, 35), there may be more he thinks Christians should want, but I'm yet to be convinced that there are Christian doctrines an atemporalist who denies Precreation must reject.

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