



Not on the same Page: Mullins's misreadings and still no strong justification for precreation

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Abstract

In a recent article Mullins (2026) offers a reply to Page's (2025a) contention that a defender of timelessness can deny the existence of a 'Precreation moment' in order to avoid various arguments against timelessness and can do so without doing anything theologically suspect. Mullins suggests this cannot be done, and that a defender of timelessness is going to be left embracing a theologically unorthodox account of God's relationship to creation. Here I'll argue that Mullins's response misses the mark in various ways and leaves everything Page claimed unscathed.

Keywords Creation ex nihilo · Timelessness · Precreation · Eternity · Ben Page · Ryan Mullins

In a recent article Mullins (2026) offers a reply to my contention (Page, 2025a) that a defender of timelessness can deny the existence of a 'Precreation moment' in order to avoid various arguments against timelessness and can do so without doing anything theologically suspect. Mullins suggests this cannot be done, and that a defender of timelessness is going to be left embracing a theologically unorthodox account of God's relationship to creation. Here I'll argue that Mullins's response misses the mark in various ways and leaves everything I claimed unscathed.

Getting up to speed

In two articles (Page, 2023a, 2025a), I have sought to defang various arguments that Mullins, and others, give against divine timelessness. The first of these articles (2023a), responded to an argument that I called the 'Creation Objection' against time-

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lessness. In this paper I rebut every one of the premises of Mullins's version of the argument, as it is to be found in his (2021, 93).

Despite this, Mullins's reply offers a very similar argument (2026, 11) to the one I had rebutted (2023a), while only mentioning this paper twice in his reply. First, it is cited in a passing footnote (2026, 1, n.1), and a second time when he claims that 'Craig's reliance on the precreation moment is said to be one of Page's reasons for offering his reinterpretation of creation ex nihilo sans precreation moment' (2026, 6). However, nowhere in (2023a) do I claim that Craig's reliance on Precreation is a reason I have for reinterpreting creation ex nihilo, and I don't think I undertake any reinterpretation of creation ex nihilo in that paper either.

The only reinterpretation I explicitly undertook in the paper concerns the arguments that Mullins and Craig give against divine timelessness. Here I reinterpret their arguments in order to reveal what I take to be their underlying assumption, namely that creation ex nihilo requires Precreation. I then reformulate their argument in order to make this underlying assumption explicit and then merely note that there is a widespread understanding of creation ex nihilo which doesn't require Precreation (2023a, 182–183).

I then went on to argue, that regardless of whether there is a Precreation moment, the so-called 'Creation Objection' to divine timelessness fails, because a defender of timelessness will deny any premise that has God undergoing change (2023a, 184).¹ Yet against this backdrop I offered a final version of the 'Creation Objection' which didn't rely upon finding a change that God underwent.² Nevertheless, the argument still required the assumption that creation ex nihilo requires Precreation (2023a, 184–186). But given the dialectical structure of the paper, it should be clear that I wasn't endorsing that assumption, but instead contending that 'all the action will ... rest on whether ... [a Precreation-affirming] account of creation ex nihilo is correct' (2023a, 186). As I noted in that paper, I don't think one has to accept such an account of creation ex nihilo, but showing that would have to wait for another time (2023a, 186). Mullins's reply doesn't say anything to defend any of the many premises that I rebutted. Moreover, he still seems to be propounding arguments that are very similar to the one that I defanged (Mullins, 2026, 11; 2025, 76–82).³ It would have been nice, therefore, to understand why he thinks my objections fail.

Instead, what Mullins responds to is my (2025a) paper, where the main contention of that paper was that the arguments for adopting Precreation are weak. I concluded that paper as follows,

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 satis-

¹ For details as to how and why they might do this see my (2023a, 184).

² Many of Mullins's arguments, such as the one addressed in my (2023a) paper, argue against God being timeless on the basis of finding a change God must undergo and then claiming this is inconsistent with timelessness. For instance, the arguments of Mullins that are cited in my (2025a, 148–152) paper do this.

³ In my (2025a) I show how most of the arguments in Mullins (2025, 76–82) rely on the idea of Precreation, and also that some change or beginning takes place. I attempted to address these two latter points in my (2023a).

fies both Precreation and Accompanied.⁴ 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 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. Finally, they need not throw out scripture in order to think that God doesn't satisfy Precreation. What more could a divine atemporalist want! (2025a, 168-169)

I stand by this conclusion, despite Mullins's (2026) reply, as I don't think anything in Mullins's response should give defenders of timelessness pause for thinking that what I said above cannot be the case.

Nevertheless, before justifying this, a bit more background is needed, by first getting clear as to what a Precreation 'moment' or 'state of affairs' is.⁵ Here is a rough and ready account of it from Mullins's reply, namely a 'moment where God exists all alone.' (2026, 3)⁶ One thing that might not be clear from this statement is that the 'moment' in question is meant to be an *actual* moment rather than merely a *possible* moment, for as I noted (2025a, 146–147) even defenders of timelessness can believe that God *could have* existed alone if He had not created. Therefore, according to Mullins, Precreation refers to an actual moment where God exists all alone.

However, as I previously contended (2025a, 148), more needs to be said by advocates of Precreation. In my (2025a) paper I focused on the definition of Precreation where it was taken to be an actual 'state of affairs' in which God existed alone, with Mullins also speaking this way in his current reply (2026, 3, 5, 7), rather than it being an actual 'moment', which seems to now be how Mullins prefers thinking about this.⁷ The point I made there was that there is a vast literature as to what 'states of affairs' are, and that they are standardly taken to add something into one's ontological inventory. As such, it seems hard to make sense of God existing alone, if a 'state of affairs' also exists. Much the same worry can be directed at Mullins's definition which includes a 'moment', since as Mullins tells us, 'moments are sometimes taken to be sets of nearly maximal propositions, or proposition-like entities' (2025, 48) and 'that they are locations or describe a *when* something takes place.' (2025, 49) All of this, however, suggests that the same concern will arise again, albeit now concerning a 'moment'. God will therefore never *truly* be *all alone*. If there is no such worry here, it would be good for Mullins to explain why.

⁴ I shall explain more fully what 'Precreation and 'Accompanied' means momentarily.

⁵ Mullins uses both ways of speaking about Precreation in his reply (2026). I'll use the terminology of 'moment' since it seems to be what Mullins prefers in terms of his more recent usage (2025, 2026).

⁶ The claim that God exists 'all alone' is on most of the pages of Mullins's (2026) reply.

⁷ I focused on 'states of affairs' because this seemed to be the most common usage by both Craig and Mullins (2025a, 146). However, it seems Mullins now overall prefers talking of a Precreation 'moment' (2025—this is used throughout the book but most apparent in ch.3), although as is evident from his reply, he still speaks in both ways (2026), with this also being true of his (2025).

But perhaps Mullins could reply that, when he says God exists all alone, he merely means that ‘a precreation moment or state of affairs [is] where God exists without a particular universe, set of universes, or all possible universes’ (2026, 3). If Mullins only means this by Precreation, then it doesn’t require that God exists ‘all’ alone, but rather just without a universe of any sort.⁸ Since a ‘state of affairs’ or ‘moment’ is not a universe, then the problem I suggested above disappears. This definition will also be sufficient to get the worries going against timelessness, for if a timeless God has created, then it will never be the case that He actually exists without a ‘particular universe’.

Yet, although I’ve been trying to offer Mullins some help to avoid the difficulties I raised against his account, I’m not convinced that this latter definition is *actually* how Mullins defines Precreation, since the full quote I doctored above reads as follows, ‘there is a precreation moment or state of affairs where God exists without a particular universe, set of universes, or all possible universes.’ (2026, 3) The word ‘where’ here seems to express an implication of the Precreation moment, rather than providing a definition of it, and so my worries regarding ‘moments’ and ‘states of affairs’ still remain.

In my (2025a) paper I also try to help out a little by suggesting that we should drop all talk of ‘states of affairs’, and I now also add ‘moments’, and instead just talk about God satisfying the predicate ‘lonely’.⁹ The reason for this was that something can satisfy a predicate without the addition of any ontological doodad, and so *may* get around the worry I noted above (2025a, 148).¹⁰ All the arguments against timelessness that Mullins wants to give can then be substituted into talk of God satisfying the predicates ‘lonely’ and ‘accompanied’, which I also spelled out in that paper (2025a, 146–152). Mullins doesn’t say anything about any of this, and so I assume he has no objection to it, which also seems to provide further confirmation that he takes Precreation to mean that God is *all* alone. Therefore, from now on when I speak of Precreation, I shall assume it means that God satisfies the predicate ‘lonely’, so as to hopefully avoid the difficulties above.

⁸ One shouldn’t read Mullins’s ‘all possible universes’ as saying anything about God’s relationship to modality, since he makes a distinction between world actualisation and creation (2025, 47). Here we are talking about creation (2025, 49), rather than actualisation, with this latter distinction usually presupposing modal claims which God can choose between and actualise (Kraay, 2008, 855). Yet the actualising of some of these possibilities, such as a world where only God exists, does not require creation (Kraay, 2008, 856; Mullins, 2025, 47). Nevertheless, if God is truly alone, on Mullins’s account, there is a question for him to answer as to how God relates to modality, particularly since he says ‘As I understand it, a possible world is a maximally consistent proposition’ (2025, 46). For as Deasy states, ‘the most dominant form of realism has traditionally been one according to which possible worlds are abstract objects, such as ... propositions’ (2025, 25–26). These abstracta are *standardly* taken to be necessary, and as a result they exist alongside God, such that God would never be truly alone. Now perhaps Mullins doesn’t mind that view, much like Yandell (2011) and van Inwagen (2024, 26–30), but if so then he needs to tell us more about what being *alone* covers. Or maybe he has some other adequate way of accounting for these ‘propositions’, perhaps following some suggestions of Craig (2017), so that God can be truly alone. Either way, it would be good to hear more.

⁹ Here I defined the predicates ‘Accompanied’ and ‘Lonely’ as follows, “x is Accompanied iff there exists a y & ~(x=y)”, and ... ‘x is Lonely iff ~(x is Accompanied)’. (2025a, 148).

¹⁰ I also spell out this distinction in my (forthcoming; see also, Grant, 2026, 40–41).

Having clarified Precreation, my (2025a) paper then went on to ask whether there are any strong reasons for thinking that God satisfied ‘lonely’, since it is obvious that He satisfies ‘accompanied’ given that creation exists. To do this I assessed what I took to be the three main arguments in the literature for endorsing Precreation, with these being: because the Bible tells me so (2025a, 154–157); because a great cloud of witnesses endorse it (2025a, 157–164); and because a first temporal becoming implies it (2025a, 165–168). I argued that none of these gave strong reasons for claiming that God satisfied ‘lonely’, and therefore a defender of timelessness should not think that they have to endorse Precreation (2025a, 168–169). In addition to this, I addressed, albeit very briefly, a number of less significant arguments that Mullins appeared to endorse for the claim that God satisfies ‘lonely’, and again concluded that none of these were persuasive either (2025a, 165, n.67). As such, I contended that a defender of timelessness looks to be in a strong position to rebut all of the arguments that I knew of which were offered in favour of Precreation.

Mullins’s reply doesn’t engage with the vast majority of this. He says nothing to defend what I took to be Mullins’s own less significant reasons for Precreation, and says nothing in response to my criticisms of the first and third significant reasons for endorsing Precreation, albeit having defended the first in the past.¹¹ Mullins does comment, somewhat, on the second significant reason, but all the while passing over pretty much everything I had to say about it.

What then does Mullins’s reply consist of? It is almost entirely concerned with the contention that creation ex nihilo should be understood as requiring Precreation and two reasons for thinking this.

The content of creation ex nihilo, once again

In my (2025a) paper, I suggested that it wasn’t necessary to get into an argument about what the content of creation ex nihilo was, since, as I noted, there is variation in the literature as to what it means and what it implies. Rather, I suggested that all that is needed for the argument against timelessness to work is the acceptance of Precreation itself, and that since the other definitions of creation ex nihilo, which I referenced and which deny Precreation as part of its content are still compatible with endorsing Precreation as an additional belief (2025a, 152–154), we should instead focus on the arguments for adopting Precreation. My reason for suggesting this route was that if we have good arguments for endorsing Precreation, it won’t matter whether it is included in the definition of creation ex nihilo, for one will still have to endorse Precreation and the argument against timelessness can get running. Arguing that Precreation is an essential part of creation ex nihilo, therefore, seems to me a bit of a distraction from what is really at issue. My suggestion was therefore meant to make things *easier* for Mullins.

Mullins, however, doesn’t want to take this option, but instead is insistent that Precreation is essential to creation ex nihilo. He writes, ‘Page thinks that there are

¹¹ The third argument, as one can see from my discussion of it (2025a, 165–168), is based on some thoughts from William Lane Craig.

many popular interpretations of creation ex nihilo that do not involve the affirmation of God's Precreation moment. I say that there are no such legitimate interpretations' (2026, 6). Let's start with the popularity claim, which I affirm.

In both my (2023a) and (2025a) papers, I suggested that there were different understandings of what creation ex nihilo means in the contemporary literature. For instance, I noted that 'in a recent introduction to an edited collection on creation ex nihilo, the authors claim the doctrine [of creation ex nihilo] refers to God freely creating 'the world out of nothing—from no pre-existent matter, no space or time.' (Burrell et al., 2010, 1)' (2025a, 153; 2023a, 182–183). This definition, as the authors themselves point out, has nothing to do with the world being temporally finite (Burrell et al., 2010, 8–10), and therefore is in principle consistent with the denial of creation being temporally finite in the past. As a result of this, this account does not imply that creation ex nihilo requires Precreation, since on this understanding creation ex nihilo is consistent with a creation that is *not* temporally finite, and so, as Mullins might put it (2026, 3), a universe that is co-eternal with God.¹² What's more, the theme that creation ex nihilo says nothing about the temporal finitude of creation is regularly noted within this edited collection (Burrell et al., 2010, 25–26, 142, 172, 213, 222), as well as in *another* recent edited collection on the same doctrine (Anderson et al., 2018, 38, 181, 195, 372). Additionally, I noted that MacFarland's recent book, *From Nothing: A Theology of Creation* (2014), makes the same point, writing that the doctrine of creation ex nihilo 'is completely unaffected by... whether or not... the world had a temporal beginning' (2014, xv). I have no doubt that with a bit more searching I could find many more additional supporters of such a view, and this, to my mind, means that I have strong grounds for saying that this is a popular contemporary account of creation ex nihilo which doesn't require Precreation.

I also listed another view of creation ex nihilo, which adds to the previous account that creation is temporally finite in the past, and I noted that this alone does not imply a Precreation either (2025a, 153–154; 2023a, 183). If, however, one wished to argue that it does, then some additional principle would need to be added in order to make this the case. For instance, they might, like Mullins, suggest that 'X begins to exist if X is preceded by non-existence. First there is no X, and then there is X.' (2026, 3) In order to get to a Precreation here, we will need to understand the preceding of X and there being no X as entailing an *actual* 'moment' or 'state of affairs' where there is no X and that being temporally finite implies a beginning. We can then argue that, as creation begins, there must be an actual prior 'moment' or 'state of affairs' where it is not. But although some people might have considered this to be an adequate account of what it means to begin to exist historically, I don't think it is an adequate account today, with this being something I also argued in both pieces (2023a, 172–173; 2025a, 161), with Mullins offering no reply.

¹²I don't like calling creation 'eternal', since as I've suggested elsewhere, following Boethius, eternity is often used, when talking about God, to mean something very different from being temporally infinite in the past (2025a, 159). Boethius therefore suggests we should call the latter being 'perpetual' (*Consolation of Philosophy* V.6, 2008, 168–170). Augustine (Eodice, 2021, 22) and Aquinas (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 1 q. 1 a. 5 ad s. c. 7) also make much the same point.

To see this, suppose you are a materialist and also think that the big bang is the absolute beginning of all space and time.¹³ I think it makes sense to say that space and time began at the big bang, even though there was no actual ‘moment’ or ‘state of affairs’ where there was no space and time. But given this, we are going to have to understand what it is to begin in a different way to the way Mullins seems to suggest. Craig, however, offers another type of argument which contends that from the temporal finitude of the past we can infer a Precreation. This is what I call Craig’s argument from ‘The first temporal becoming’. But as I’ve already noted, I responded to that argument in my (2025a, 165–168) paper and suggested it was weak, and Mullins has offered no reply regarding what I said about it. As such, I still stand by my contention that there is a second popular account of creation *ex nihilo*, which adds that creation is temporally finite in the past and yet denies Precreation.

Perhaps Mullins might concede that these are popular accounts in the contemporary literature, but instead insist that the two accounts I mentioned are not ‘legitimate interpretations’ (2026, 6) of the doctrine. Yet Mullins doesn’t even seem to do that in his reply, for instead he focuses upon what he suggests is my own definition of creation *ex nihilo*. Since he is responding to me, that would be a sensible thing to do *if* I had given my own definition of creation *ex nihilo*. But *nowhere* in either paper do I offer such a thing. Rather, the only accounts I offer are the two listed above, as well as Mullins’s own definition, which includes the addition of Precreation within it (2025a, 152–154; 2023a, 182–183).¹⁴ So what is Mullins referring to when he speaks of Page’s definition? He writes,

‘Page says that the doctrine only needs to affirm that God is ontologically and/or causally prior to all else. I ask readers to notice how incredibly minimal this definition is. Once again, for Page, creation *ex nihilo* means that God is ontologically and/or causally prior to anything that is not God.’ (2026, 3–4, see also 17)

I agree with Mullins that *if* I gave this as an account of creation *ex nihilo*, then it is fairly minimal, and it *may* cause some issues.¹⁵ But as I’ve already stated, I don’t give such a definition anywhere. Mullins provides a reference to my (2025a, 147–148) for

¹³ I take no stand here as to whether the big bang actually is the absolute beginning of all space and time, but am just assuming it to be for the purpose of illustration.

¹⁴ Mullins provides his definition again in his reply, with it reading: ‘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.’ (2026, 3; 2025, 54, 224).

¹⁵ However, it *may* be better than Mullins thinks, as it does still make two substantive claims: 1. God didn’t use any material that is ontologically or causally prior to the universe in order to create the universe. 2. God is ontologically and causally prior to the universe. If we were to add an additional claim, which admittedly goes beyond what Mullins claims my definition is, 3. The universe is temporally finite, then we’ve got a pretty substantive doctrine. The first claim would then allow us to deny what some medievals viewed as Plato’s view, and the third claim would allow us to deny Aristotle’s view. I thank Sam Lebens for pointing this out to me.

this supposed definition,¹⁶ but all that I point out in this part of the paper is that one cannot infer that there exists an actual Precreation moment from God's ontological or causal priority.¹⁷ The only definitions of creation ex nihilo that I give in the paper come slightly later in the section entitled 'The content of creation ex nihilo' (2025a, 152–154), with these being the three I noted above, the two Precreation-less accounts and Mullins's own.

Now perhaps Mullins thinks the two popular accounts of creation ex nihilo that I included which don't require Precreation, are also 'illegitimate interpretations' (2026, 6), but that is a strong claim, and there had better be some good reasons for it. Mullins's reply seems to provide two. One is that if we adopt a Precreation-less account of creation ex nihilo, we cannot distinguish it from other views of creation. The second claims that pretty much everyone thinks Precreation is essential to creation ex nihilo and therefore we should follow suit (2026, 2). Let's take each in turn.

Indistinguishable?

Mullins writes, 'Page's peculiar interpretation of creation ex nihilo makes the doctrine indistinguishable from several of its historical rivals.' (2026, 2) Here Mullins is thinking about the definition of creation ex nihilo he misattributed to me, that I mentioned above, and a supposed implication of this definition. While we could ask whether Mullins is correct that this definition—one I *do not* provide—can be distinguished from other historical views of creation, a more fruitful approach would be to interrogate the two popular accounts of Precreation-less creation ex nihilo that I do list (2025a, 168–169). We can then ask whether these accounts can be distinguished from other accounts of creation.

Start with pantheism. Mullins writes,

thinking that 'God is merely causally prior, logically prior, or ontologically prior to the universe [cannot be all that is meant by creation ex nihilo] since all of those notions are explicitly affirmed by pantheists who explicitly reject the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. As a general rule of thumb, I suggest not articulating creation ex nihilo in a way that makes it indistinguishable from its 2000 year old rival.' (2026, 6)

So are the two popular Precreation-less accounts of creation ex nihilo indistinguishable from pantheism? To answer this question note that according to Mullins, a

¹⁶Mullins's reference is to pages 3–4 of my paper (2026, 3, n.4), whereas I have given the final page numbers of the published version that pages 3–4 refer to.

¹⁷Some might attempt to question this, but I'll offer a reply to this later in the paper. Note also that in my (2025a, 147) I just take the concepts of 'causal priority' and 'ontological priority' from Mullins and Craig, since it is some of the terminology they use when describing a timeless God's relationship to time. I take the latter claim to be about creation ontologically depending upon God. However, if this ontological relationship gives rise to the implication that if God exists creation also exists, then I would deny that a timeless God needs to stand in this relationship, since I hold that it is possible that a timeless God is free to create or not create (2025a, 146–147).

panentheist holds that God does not freely create (2025, 30) and that God must produce a world, affirming what Mullins calls the ‘necessity of the cosmos’ (2025, 30). But the initial definition of creation that I cited includes the idea that God freely creates, and since the second definition just adds that creation is temporally finite it includes it too. As such, creation is not necessary on this view and so we can distinguish these Precreation-less accounts of creation *ex nihilo* from panentheism in this regard.

Now perhaps Mullins might respond to this by claiming that a timeless God cannot act freely, since free action requires succession, and so, although the two definitions of creation *ex nihilo* that I gave are distinguishable from what the panentheist claims, they cannot be adopted by a defender of timelessness.¹⁸ But defenders of timelessness will, to my mind, rightly deny this (Leftow, 1991, 299–302), claiming that the principle of alternative possibilities, which one might think is required for genuine freedom, should be understood modally and therefore only requires that it is possible that God could have acted otherwise.¹⁹

Mullins also thinks that the panentheist will hold that the universe is co-eternal with God (2025, 30), which also goes against another aspect of the second definition of creation *ex nihilo* that I gave, since the universe, on that account, is temporally finite. Therefore, it seems to me both accounts of Precreation-less creation *ex nihilo* are distinguishable from panentheism in virtue of both upholding creational freedom, and the second also claiming the universe is temporally finite. As such, there is no issue of indistinguishability when it comes to panentheism.

Mullins is also concerned that one won’t be able to distinguish emanation from a Precreation-less account of creation *ex nihilo* either, writing,

‘Page’s reinterpretation of creation *ex nihilo* makes it indistinguishable from a theory of emanation. This is a fairly solid reason for rejecting this reinterpretation of creation *ex nihilo* since, historically, proponents of creation out of nothing thought that their view was dramatically and explicitly different from an emanation.’ (2026, 14)

What then does emanation claim? Mullins defines it as ‘An emanation occurs if and only if a particular universe, set of universes, or all possible universes, necessarily follows from the nature of God.’ (2025, 49) But given what I’ve said above, it should be clear that the two Precreation-less accounts of creation *ex nihilo* which I gave, *can* be distinguished from this, for both maintain that creation flows from God’s free decision. So once again, we *can* make the distinction that Mullins is after even without affirming Precreation.

From what Mullins says, it’s also not immediately clear how panentheism and emanationism are to be distinguished. Mullins claims that they’re compatible (2025,

¹⁸ I think Mullins does hold that free action is a problem for a timeless God, with this being something I noted and said something about previously (2025a, 147, n.5, 165, n.67). Note also that the problem here is closely related to something I talk about below in this paper concerning Rhoda.

¹⁹ I discuss this elsewhere in the context of whether an eternalist view of time rules out libertarian freedom (2022, 85–89), but it should be clear how what I say there can be applied here.

53). But he also recognises that some pantheists deny emanation (2025, 53). So, how does he think they differ? Perhaps the thought is that emanation is due to creation arising from God's *nature*, whereas pantheism can say it arises from God's *will*, even if the 'necessity of the cosmos' is common to both views. Or maybe emanation says that the particular type of cosmos God creates is necessary, arising from His nature, but for a pantheist, although there is the 'necessity of the cosmos', exactly what type of cosmos there is can vary. In either case we can still distinguish these views from the two accounts of Precreation-less creation *ex nihilo* that I gave from the literature.

Another important type of creation that Mullins says we need to distinguish between is eternal creation and creation *ex nihilo*, which he claims 'is something that Page's sparse account cannot do since his definition entails no meaningful difference between these two rival views' (2026, 8). What, then, is an eternal creation?²⁰ Mullins mentions Lebens's account which holds, 'The universe has always existed, with no beginning. It is nevertheless God's creation. He is eternally creating it; giving it being.' (Mullins 2026, 7; Lebens 2020, 31)²¹ Let me expound upon this definition a little to avoid any misconceptions.

I take it that the claim that the universe has always existed is meant to imply that it is temporally infinite in the past, or what Boethius calls being perpetual (*Consolation of Philosophy* V.6, 2008, 170).²² It is therefore a claim about the temporal length of creation. Whereas the claim that God is eternally creating it is about God's action. If God is eternal, which we can presently understand as Him being timeless, then there is a sense in which He eternally performs whatever action He performs, since there is no succession in eternity. However, rather than call this action eternal, since I think it

²⁰Note that how Mullins thinks of creation being eternal does not seem to have the implication that creation is necessary and self-sufficient, which Baldner and Caroll argue (1997, 6–7, 15–18) is an implication many historically thought to be the case. Craig, however, seems to think a *similar* implication (more to do with self-sufficiency than necessity) might follow from another theory of time which has 'eternal' in its name, namely eternalism (note that Craig speaks of a tenseless view of time, but I take it what he has in mind is what usually goes by the name eternalism). He writes, according to this view of time 'the parts of reality referred to in the premisses [of the argument he is considering] do not come into being at all but simply exist tenselessly at their appointed stations. On such a tenseless view of time, it is far less obvious that parts of reality which exist later than the initial state must have causes and that the things existing tenselessly at the initial state cannot exist without a cause, since they do not come into being at that time.' (2010, 73–74) Yet as I noted in (2025a, 160), an eternalist view of time is compatible with creation having a finite temporal length, and if we understand, as Aquinas does, that anything that is a 'creature is of itself really nothing—its non-being is naturally prior to its being' (Baldner and Caroll 1997, 44) then it will be the case that the first instant of the eternalist block, as well as all other instants, will still require God's action for their existence. (Note that 'Creature', in the quotation, is to be contrasted with God, who is the 'Creator').

²¹Mullins seems happier with Lebens's account in his (2025, 50), but is less so in his (2026, 7) where he suggests it needs adjusting slightly. The reason for the adjustment is not totally clear to me from what he says, but I think it is due to Lebens's account applying to only a particular universe, and so will not apply to views which have successive universes. If that is the reason for the proposed adjustment, then not much change will be needed to make it adequate. Also note that Lebens does not call his definition an eternal creation, but rather *Creatio continua* (2020, 31).

²²Boethius, Augustine (Eodice, 2021, 22) and Aquinas (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 1 q. 1 a. 5 ad s. c. 7) all want to make a distinction like this, since none of them think God's eternity is the same as what is called eternity when thinking about time, by which we really mean infinite temporal succession.

may be the source of some confusion, I'll call it permanent.²³ Yet from this, note that it would be a mistake to think that because an eternal/timeless God performs a permanent action, the effect must be perpetual rather than temporally finite.²⁴ The effect may be permanent to an eternal God, but the effect's temporal length is not determined by this permanence.²⁵ Now Lebens's definition doesn't imply that a permanent action must produce a perpetual effect, but I note this here since, as we'll soon see, it seems like Mullins thinks that a permanent action will produce a perpetual effect, or as he puts it, an eternal cause will produce something that eternally exists (2025, 78–79; 2016, 102). In any case, using my terminology, what Mullins takes to be Lebens's definition of eternal creation holds that the universe is perpetual, with God permanently giving it being.

Suppose, then, that we focus for a minute on the second Precreation-less account of creation ex nihilo that I offered from the literature, which said that creation is temporally finite in the past. It should be obvious that we can distinguish this view from Lebens's understanding of eternal creation. However, when we consider the first view of Precreation-less creation ex nihilo that I cited from the literature, it seems that it does squarely fall within the parameters of what Lebens calls eternal creation. So what? All that results is that creation ex nihilo is a family of views that is wider than Lebens's understanding of eternal creation. Given the first popular Precreation-less account of creation ex nihilo that I list, it turns out that creation ex nihilo is compatible with creation being either perpetual or temporally finite.

Mullins might think this is problematic, but those propounding this view of creation ex nihilo do not. In fact they think it is a feature of their view that something perpetual can also be created ex nihilo. In this they are following Aquinas, who's philosophical components of creation ex nihilo (Baldner & Carroll, 1997, 2, 74–77),²⁶ are compatible with an eternal creation, and purposefully so, since he took it to be a real possibility that creation was eternal and yet created ex nihilo (Wippel, 1984, 191–214; Baldner & Carroll, 1997, 26; Torchia, 2019, 209–211).²⁷ More on this later, but for now, it should just be noted that if a defender of timelessness wants to be able to distinguish between Lebens's understanding of eternal creation, and creation ex

²³Note, however, that it would be a mistake to think the permanence of a timeless God's action means that it cannot be contingent, since permanence does not imply that His action is necessary nor unfree.

²⁴I had already made some of these distinctions in my (2025a, 159–161) when I commented on an ambiguity in Mullins's own view about an eternal cause producing an eternal effect. This, however, is also something Mullins does not reply to.

²⁵Leftow (1991, 290–291) makes it clear why an eternal God's effect would be permanent to him, and what I say should make it clear too (2023a; 2025a). Nevertheless, just because an effect is permanent to God, does not mean it is permanent to us within creation. Whether that will be the case will depend upon one's view of time concerning creation. If we adopt an eternalist view of time, then the whole eternalist block will be permanent both to God and to us within creation. However, if time is presentist, it will only be the case that the whole of time is permanent to God, even though it is not permanent to us. For more on how to understand this latter view see (Leftow, 2018; Page, 2023b; manuscript a).

²⁶The latter page numbers refer to Baldner and Carroll's translation of Aquinas's *Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 1 q. 1 a. 2 co.

²⁷See the translations of Aquinas's work on creation by Baldner and Carroll (1997) for primary source references.

nihilo, they can by adopting the second popular Precreation-less account of creation ex nihilo that I gave.

Now Mullins also gives his own account of eternal creation, which he defines as follows: ‘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.’ (2026, 3; 2025, 54, 224) Let’s think about this view in terms of the terminology I introduced above. If God is eternal/timeless, whatever universe He creates is permanent to Him, just as His action is permanent (Leftow, 1991, 290–291; Page, 2023a, 2025a). This will mean that if the universe, or universes, are temporally finite they will be permanent to Him, and if they are perpetual they will also be permanent to Him. On Mullins’s view, both of these views count as a type of eternal creation. Here, then, we have the converse of what my first popular Precreation-less view of creation ex nihilo implied.

On the first Precreation-less reading of creation ex nihilo that I presented, the temporal length of creation could have been temporally finite *or* perpetual. By contrast, Mullins’s view has it that God’s creation could be temporally finite or perpetual and yet still be an eternal creation. God, in His eternal present, could be creating a temporally finite universe, or a perpetual universe and Mullins’s account will call this an eternal creation. But given this, if we agree with Mullins that accounts of creation should be preferred insofar as they allow us to distinguish the full array of potential views, then his definition of eternal creation seems to need some more work.

I did try to note this implication previously, albeit briefly in a footnote (2025a, 154, n.28), stating that it seemed a strange consequence of Mullins’s view that a universe which is temporally finite could still count as an eternal creation. Yet Mullins thought this acknowledgment totally ‘undermines the entire thesis’ of Page’s, or in other words my, paper (2026, 11), for it implies the two Precreation-less accounts of creation ex nihilo which I gave are in fact models of eternal creation.²⁸ But this would only be devastating to me if I accepted Mullins’s peculiar definition of eternal creation. But—as should be clear—I don’t.

As I said previously, ‘Obviously one can define terms as they wish’ (2025a, 28), but that doesn’t mean we have to follow the definition Mullins has given. In fact, I think Mullins himself should see from the implication I pointed out previously, and have reiterated here, that his definition is too broad and needs reformulating. This is especially the case given other things Mullins says about what it is to be an eternal creation. For instance, he writes, ‘This is because eternal creation affirms that God and the created order are co-eternal, whereas creation out of nothing denies that God and the created order are co-eternal’ (2026, 3). But Mullins’s own account of eternal creation, as I’ve shown, captures a view where the created order is *not* eternal/perpetual, but rather temporally finite. Later Mullins says, ‘I think the better definition of eternal creation is to say that God and the created cosmos are co-eternal’ (2026,

²⁸ Even if it did undermine part of my (2025a) paper, which I don’t think it does, it wouldn’t undermine all of it, since my paper wasn’t about what the correct understanding of creation ex nihilo is. For as I’ve already noted, I attempted to put this question to one side (2025a, 152–154) so to address the more specific arguments for Precreation.

8). But once again, Mullins's own account of eternal creation *doesn't* imply that the cosmos is co-eternal/perpetual, since it could, as we have seen, be temporally finite. There are other quotations one could give within his work which would imply much the same thing, but let me instead conclude this point with his assessment of what he takes to be the implication of Page's own view of creation *ex nihilo* (overlooking, for now, the fact that I never actually gave my own definition of the doctrine). Mullins writes,

'This [view] also has the bizarre entailment that all of the debates in the past over these distinct doctrines of creation involve no disagreement at all. When Aquinas and Maimonides say that reason brings us to a stalemate between eternal creation and creation *ex nihilo*, I suppose they would have to mean that reason brings us to see that there is really only one doctrine there all along.' (2026, 11)

But it would be Mullins's own view of eternal creation, at least according to Aquinas, that has this 'bizarre entailment'. For when Aquinas discusses arguments for the eternity of the world, something Mullins himself references (2026, 8), the issue concerns whether the temporal length of the world is perpetual or finite. According to Mullins's own view of eternal creation, whatever view Aquinas came to regarding the temporal length of the universe, it would still be an eternal creation.²⁹ Yet, Mullins agrees that Aquinas endorses creation out of nothing (2026, 8), since he notes that Aquinas held by faith that the universe was temporally finite. But the result of all this must be that Mullins's own account of eternal creation must be mistaken, since it includes views, including Aquinas's own, where creation is temporally finite. The only reason his definition does so, however, is because his account says that if one rejects Precreation, then as long as God freely creates, one is endorsing eternal creation, whether or not the world is temporally finite.

Now Mullins might try and reply to this by claiming that an eternal God can only produce an eternal effect (2025, 78–79; 2016, 102), or in my terminology, that an eternal God can only produce a perpetual effect, and therefore it won't be possible for an eternal God to produce a temporally finite universe. If this is right then even though Mullins's account of eternal creation implies that an eternal God would perform an act of eternal creation no matter whether the universe was temporally finite or perpetual, we don't need to worry about this implication for it is in fact impossible for an eternal God to create a temporally finite universe. But I don't see any good reason for endorsing the claim that an eternal being can only produce an eternal/perpetual effect. In fact, this is a thesis against which I explicitly argued (2025a, 160–161) and which Mullins has offered no reply to.

One reason Mullins gave for thinking that an eternal being can only produce an eternal effect is that in the tradition there are cases where God's eternally causing something means that the thing in question eternally exists (2025, 78). His examples

²⁹This is because Aquinas, due to thinking God is timeless, thinks His action is permanent and that creation would be permanent, albeit contingent, to Him. See Leftow (1991, 290–291) and my (2023a; 2025a) for more as to why this is.

concern the generation of the Son and the Spirit in the Trinity.³⁰ But the tradition, as far as I can tell, in no way implies that an eternal God can *only* cause eternal effects, even if it is *possible* that He can. Further, ‘eternal’ here, when said in reference to the Son and Spirit, means something different from when ‘eternal’ is used when speaking of creation. For when speaking of creation eternal means perpetual, but this is not what eternal means when speaking of the Son and Spirit, since they are not perpetual given the doctrine of the Trinity. We therefore cannot conflate the effect of the Son and the Spirit (which are eternal) and the effect of the Creation (which is perpetual).

Moreover, why think an omnipotent and eternal being can only cause eternal things? There doesn’t seem to me to be anything contradictory in thinking that an eternal omnipotent being can bring about temporal effects, and therefore we have some reason to think that this is a possible action that He could perform, and so within the range of an omnipotent being’s power.³¹ I therefore don’t see any strong reason for denying that an eternal being can produce a temporally finite effect, and until Mullins offers a reply to my reasons for thinking this, I don’t think that arguments that rely on this premise should be endorsed.

Given all of this, it seems that at least one of the two views of Precreation-less creation *ex nihilo* I mentioned, *can* distinguish itself from eternal creation, as Lebens understands it. But neither of the views can distinguish themselves from how Mullins defines eternal creation. Yet that is because Mullins’s definition is too broad—even *for his own purposes*, given what he wants to say about the views of people like Aquinas. Nonetheless as I’ve also noted, advocates of the first understanding of Precreation-less creation *ex nihilo* will think it is a feature of their view that a perpetual or temporally finite creation could still be created *ex nihilo*. In this they follow the development of the doctrine by Aquinas. For as Baldner and Carroll write,

‘It was the genius of Aquinas, who acknowledged a considerable debt to Avicenna on this point, to see that the positive meaning of *ex nihilo* is that the creature is of itself really nothing—its non-being is naturally prior to its being—and that, therefore, the creature is completely dependent upon the Creator for its

³⁰ One might also be wary of drawing too much from this example, since many think the generation relations spoken of in the trinity are unique and largely go unexplained in the literature (Hasker, 2013, 220; Leftow, 2004, 314).

³¹ For instance, as Roca-Royes notes, ‘Conceivability accounts can vary substantially from one another, but a common feature of them (as per Roca-Royes 2011, §5 and §7) is that, regardless of the specific conceivability notion at hand, the conceivability of *p* ultimately depends on the absence (or the unawareness) of a contradiction; and its inconceivability ultimately depends on the presence (or appearance as) of a contradiction.’ (2023, 218) If we think that conceivability gives us some guide to possibility, then unless we see a contradiction in the idea of an eternal being producing a temporally finite effect, then we have some reason for thinking this action is possible. Perhaps Mullins might reply that a timeless being cannot produce a temporal effect more generally (2025, 75–76; 2016, 106–107), indeed he cites Baron and Miller approvingly who in their *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Time* say as much (2019, 117; Mullins, 2025, 80). But as they note later in that same introductory book, there might be hope for a counterfactual account (2019, 165–167), and in their later monograph, *Out of Time*, co-authored with Tallant, they spend a chapter showing how causation, at least in a certain sense, is compatible with a timeless world (Baron et al., 2022, ch.8). It would take us too far afield to discuss whether an eternal God can produce a temporal effect in detail, but let me just say here, that those who defend that God is timeless (e.g. Leftow, 1991; 2018), contend that he can (I argue this is a possibility elsewhere too: 2025b, 55–56; manuscript b).

being. Near the end of his career, in *De aeternitate mundi*, Aquinas will take up, in his most sophisticated treatise on the subject, the intelligibility of an eternal, created universe. There he will write: to say that something has been made by God and that it has always existed, is not logically inconsistent.’ (1997, 44)

But more on this in the next section.

Finally, in his reply, Mullins goes on to talk about two other views, what he calls ‘creation out of pre-existent matter’ (2026, 15–17) and ‘creation out of feeling’ (2026, 17–19). The first view, which he takes to be Gersonides’s own, holds ‘that God creates out of preexistent matter.’ (2026, 16) It should be obvious to the reader that this is easily distinguishable to the first popular view of Precreation-less creation ex nihilo that I cited, ‘God freely creating ‘the world out of nothing—from no pre-existent matter, no space or time.’ (Burrell et al., 2010, 1)’ (2025a, 153) After all, this definition says a creation ex nihilo uses no pre-existent matter, whereas Gersonides’s own view says it is created out of pre-existent matter. Since the second Precreation-less definition of creation ex nihilo only adds that creation is temporally finite in the past, this too is distinguishable from Gersonides’s position. We thus can distinguish between the accounts even without a Precreation.

The second view, ‘creation out of feeling’, Mullins understands as saying something a little different, since we’re told that this view denies that God creates out of pre-existent matter (2026, 17). Rather Mullins contends that this position holds that ‘God creates out of preexistent free-floating feelings that are momentary, have no thought, and are unconscious.’ (2026, 18) Now admittedly the two popular accounts of Precreation-less creation ex nihilo that I gave don’t say anything about this. But I strongly suspect that this is because they never thought that what is being proposed here was a viable option which they needed to rule out. Since Mullins says that advocates of the ‘feeling’ view deny creation ex nihilo (2026, 17), we can make the two popular Precreation-less accounts of creation ex nihilo clearly distinguishable from this by just adding to both definitions that God does not create out of any pre-existent feelings either. Having done this, we will once again get the result that we can distinguish this ‘feelings’ account from Precreation-less understandings of creation ex nihilo.

With all of this said, it should be evident that Mullins’s first reason for thinking that Precreation is essential to creation ex nihilo is unsuccessful.

A great cloud of witnesses?

Mullins’s second reason for thinking that a definition of creation ex nihilo that doesn’t include Precreation is ‘illegitimate’ (2026, 6) comes from his thinking that pretty much everyone, both in history, and on the contemporary scene, defines creation ex nihilo so to include Precreation. Mullins is pretty strident in this claim, with him elsewhere writing that ‘some people doubt my claims about this Precreation moment because they lack a basic knowledge of the history of philosophical theology.’ (2024, 2) This is some strong rhetoric, but what we want to know is whether it is equally strong in substance.

I have previously already commented on some aspects of this argument (2025a, 157), although in that paper I took the argument to be one for *endorsing* Precreation, irrespective as to how one understands creation ex nihilo.³² However, from Mullins's reply (2026), it becomes clear that his argument from attestation is really about the content of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo. It is an argument that Precreation is understood, both in history and on the contemporary scene, as an essential ingredient of creation ex nihilo. This is why, he claims, even people who don't endorse the doctrine of creation ex nihilo at least respect the fact that it must contain a commitment to Precreation.³³ Mullins's argument—so clarified—is that, because there is widespread, perhaps universal, endorsement of the fact that creation ex nihilo (whether or not the doctrine is true or false) includes commitment to Precreation, this must be what the doctrine actually means, such that any other understanding of it is 'illegitimate'.

Reading Mullins's reply, one might be forgiven for thinking that the main contention of my (2025a) article is that, contrary to Mullins, it is in fact *really* difficult to find people who proposed an account of creation ex nihilo that included Precreation. After all, if in fact no one endorsed the claim that essential to creation ex nihilo is Precreation, then Mullins's argument from multiple attestation falls flat. For instance, Mullins writes, that Page, 'believes that the affirmation of a precreation moment is difficult to find' (2026, 2, 4, 6, 9, 10). And then more strongly says, 'Recall that Page cannot find the affirmation of a precreation moment' (2026, 7).³⁴ However, *nowhere* in my (2023a) or (2025a) do I say Precreation is 'difficult to find' or 'cannot' be found. The closest I come to saying such a thing is where I say that there are less advocates of Precreation than Mullins thinks there are (2025a, 158), and that I am 'unconvinced that many/most classical philosophical theologians held that God satisfies Precreation given that He has created' (2025a, 158). Neither of these statements entail that I 'cannot' find the affirmation of a Precreation moment anywhere, or that it was really 'difficult to find' any advocates.³⁵ Rather, all they say is that I contend that there are a lot less advocates than Mullins thinks there are.

The only other reason that I can think of as to why Mullins thinks I say something stronger is due to the title of my (2025a) paper, 'O Precreation, where Art thou?', and this causing him to *assume* that the main content of my article is about it being hard to find adherents of Precreation. But any careful reading would have made it clear that this was not what the article was about, or at the very least, primarily about, and given this, perhaps a more appropriate title for the paper would have been 'O Precreation,

³²This again was largely because it meant there was less for advocates of the argument to do. Rather than needing to show Precreation was understood an essential part to creation ex nihilo, they only needed to show that Precreation was endorsed, regardless of its relationship to creation ex nihilo.

³³To give just one example, see what Mullins says about Gersonides (2026, 15–17).

³⁴Given the wider context I take it that this comment is meant to apply to more than just my assessment of Lebens's own view, which is what is being discussed immediately before this quotation, but rather my assessment of the state of play more generally. Yet if it is meant to only be in reference to Lebens's own view of creation ex nihilo, then I do indeed say that there is no affirmation of Precreation to be found here, with Lebens, in personal correspondence, agreeing with my assessment (Page, 2023a, 183; 2025, 157).

³⁵In my (2025a, 158) I even explicitly say that there might be *some* contemporary affirmation.

where Art thy strong justification?', albeit probably less catchy.³⁶ In any case, to make things crystal clear, I will say that I am happy to assert that at least some people thought or think that creation ex nihilo requires Precreation, nevertheless, I contend there is far less attestation of this idea than Mullins thinks.

To see this, it will be helpful to split the different sources to which Mullins attributes Precreation as being either from historical or contemporary authorities as I did in my (2025a, 157). Whilst previously I started with contemporary authorities, here I'll start with historical, since it is historical figures that Mullins spends most of his time discussing in his reply. However, before addressing some of the thinkers Mullins offers in his reply, let me note that in my (2025a) paper, I offered a response to Mullins's interpretation of Aquinas, since he was someone Mullins has relied upon in the past for attestation of Precreation, and as he was the author I knew best (2025a, 158). Additionally, I focused on one historical authority, because often you cannot determine what a thinker thought by considering just a line or two of their work, but rather need to evaluate their work more holistically (2025a, 158). As such I devoted about a third of the paper to argue that Aquinas did not endorse Precreation (2025a, 158–164). Note however, that although Mullins in his reply acknowledges that Aquinas affirms creation ex nihilo (2026, 8, 11), he offers no reply to my exegesis of Aquinas and insistence that he did not endorse Precreation.

There were also three other additional reasons why I focused on just Aquinas, rather than many of the other thinkers Mullins cites. The first is because Aquinas is a big deal within the tradition. According to some, he's too much of a big deal, but since he is known as both the angelic doctor and the universal doctor in the Catholic church, we can at the very least say that his work is highly influential, even today.³⁷ I don't say this in order to claim that Aquinas cannot be mistaken, but only to say that it suggests that what Aquinas said on different topics might be worth paying some attention to. Secondly, unlike many of the other thinkers Mullins cites, Aquinas explicitly addresses the point of Precreation, and therefore we don't need to make shaky inferences based upon individual phrases. Aquinas has given us a great deal of text to pour over, with some of it specifically being about the relevant doctrines.³⁸

Here are just three examples in which Aquinas makes claims that are directly relevant.³⁹ Firstly, as I've mentioned above and is well known by Aquinas scholars, Aquinas was explicit that creation ex nihilo, at least in its philosophical sense, was compatible with a perpetual creation.⁴⁰

Secondly, when Aquinas discusses what Mullins would call 'Precreation,' he writes,

³⁶And less like the film title, 'O Brother, Where Art Thou?' which my title was parodying.

³⁷I would suggest that Aquinas's work, on the whole, is also probably more influential than any of the other thinkers Mullins cites in his (2026) reply, at least for Christians.

³⁸It may well be the case that Aquinas in fact wrote more that is relevant to the topic than all the other historical sources that Mullins cites, but I don't want to be beholden to that claim since I have not checked it, and doing so would take much time and effort!

³⁹There is much more to be said than this, but see my (2025a, 158–164) for this.

⁴⁰See for instance (Baldner & Carroll, 1997, 26–62; Wippel, 1984, 191–214; Torchia, 2019, 209–211).

‘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 Theologiae*, lib. 1 cap. 98, 2020).⁴¹

And thirdly, when commenting on what it means to begin to exist, which Mullins thinks implies Precreation (2026, 15), Aquinas writes approvingly that,

‘He [Avicenna] says, indeed, that all things have been created by God and that creation is from nothing, that is, the creature has being after non-being. This, however, should be understood in two ways. If it indicates an order of duration, then it is false, but if it indicates an order of nature, then it is true. What a thing has in itself is prior by nature in the thing to what it has from something else. Everything, however, other than God, has its being from another. By nature, therefore any thing would be non-being, if it did not have its being from God.’ (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 1 q. 1 a. 5 AD s. c. 2 Baldner & Carroll, 1997, 102).⁴²

As such, Aquinas thinks, that beginning to exist, when properly understood to be in reference to creation and God’s action, does not imply Precreation either.

There is much more to be said about what Aquinas does say that is relevant to the topic, and I direct the interested reader to my (2025a, 158–164), but let me note one final reason as to why I focused my attention on Aquinas, namely because his thought comes later in the tradition. This is important, for as historians of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo acknowledge, there was development within the doctrine itself (Baldner & Carroll, 1997, 1–29; Torchia, 2019, xxiii; May, 1994, viii).⁴³ Yet some see Aquinas as developing this doctrine further, so that creation ex nihilo, when properly understood, can allow for the possibility of an eternal created universe. For example, according to Baldner and Carroll, Aquinas’s ‘magisterial treatment of the doctrine of creation is one of the enduring accomplishments of the thirteenth century. It is an accomplishment that sets him apart from his predecessors and his contemporaries.’ (1997, 26) Now it was certainly the case that some disagreed with Aquinas’s assessment, for instance Bonaventure (*II Sent.*, d. 1, pars 1, art. 1, qu. 2—see (Noone et al. 2023, sec.3.2) for the text in question), but after Aquinas, this understanding of creation ex nihilo became a significant option on the table which received many advocates, with the first popular Precreation-less definition of creation ex nihilo that I gave being inspired by his thought.

As I say, Mullins says nothing in response to what I say about Aquinas, but moves on to other thinkers he suggests understood creation ex nihilo as implying Precre-

⁴¹ See my (2025a, 163–164) for more references for Aquinas on the imagination.

⁴² Note that this is Aquinas’s second aspect of what he thinks creation means (*Super Sent.*, lib. 2 d. 1 q. 1 a. 2 co.)

⁴³ For a wide ranging, but more detailed account of the history and development of the doctrine of creation ex nihilo than Mullins’s own (2026), see (Baldner & Carroll, 1997, 1–29; May, 1994; Torchia, 2019).

ation, by once again offering mostly singular quotations.⁴⁴ These thinkers, one will notice, come from a very wide range of traditions, with thinkers being represented from Islam, Judaism, Eastern thought and Christianity (Mullins, 2026). Since I am no expert in most of these areas, I will only comment on some of the thinkers that Mullins speaks about from the Christian tradition, since it is the tradition I know best. However, before doing so, let me suggest that at least according to some historians of creation *ex nihilo*, Precreation is not an essential part as to how they understand the doctrine and nor the early Christians who developed it.

For instance, in a recent article ‘*Creatio ex nihilo* in Palestinian Judaism and Early Christianity’ (2012), Bockmuehl argues that from examining texts like the dead sea scrolls and early rabbinic literature, ‘the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* in its origin states the creation’s comprehensive and absolute contingency on the Creator while at the same time affirming his unlimited sovereignty and freedom.’ (2012, 269) Here, as one will notice, there is nothing about Precreation and nothing about temporal finitude in this understanding of *ex nihilo*, and nothing that seems to imply these things either. Yet if Bockmuehl, is right, and even if this was just the *original* understanding of creation *ex nihilo*, it would show that not everyone has understood it in the way Mullins suggests.

To give another example, May’s book *Creatio Ex Nihilo: The Doctrine of ‘Creation out of Nothing’ in Early Christian Thought* (1994) argues that the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* took a little while to develop amongst early Christians, where the doctrine itself ‘proclaims’, according to May, ‘in the most pointed manner the absolutely unconditioned nature of the creation and specifies God’s omnipotence as its sole ground. Together with the corresponding idea of the unconditioned freedom and contingency of God’s creative work, it possesses constructive meaning for the Christian understanding of creation.’ (1994, xi) Once again, however, this account of creation *ex nihilo* does not speak of Precreation or temporal finitude and doesn’t seem to imply these either. In fact, May even asserts that Irenaeus, one of the first to formulate creation *ex nihilo*, wouldn’t have even asked the questions one would need to in order to assert Precreation (1994, 173–174, 177–178). Nevertheless, according to May, ‘Irenaeus [is one of] the specific founders of the church doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*.’ (1994, 178) Yet if Mullins is right about the centrality of Precreation to the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, wouldn’t one have expected one of the founders of the doctrine to have at least thought about it?

Finally, take Torchia’s *Creation and Contingency in Early Patristic Thought*. He writes, ‘Succinctly stated, the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* upholds the total dependence of creatures upon God for their very being. ... God depends upon nothing whatsoever in creating, and creatures depend upon God for their very existence.’ (2019, xxi-xxii). This definition of creation *ex nihilo*, once again, does not imply that

⁴⁴I have elsewhere called into question interpretations Mullins makes of other thinkers concerning the compatibility of timelessness and Cambridge changes (2025b, 61–65), with Mullins’s interpretations also being largely based on singular quotations. This further confirms my contention that far more work needs to be done in order to determine what it is likely that historical thinkers thought.

creation is temporally finite and neither does it affirm Precreation.⁴⁵ But if Mullins's is right, all of these understandings of creation ex nihilo are 'illegitimate' (2026, 6). Further, if Mullins is right that creation ex nihilo requires Precreation then it will also be the case that the doctrine of creation ex nihilo emerged later than these historians of creation ex nihilo suggest. At the very least, what should be clear, is that the first Precreation-less account of creation ex nihilo that I gave from the literature, was and is in fact held by many thinkers, contrary to what Mullins seems to suggest (2026), with it being pretty much the same account of the doctrine that Bockmuehl, May, and Torchia give, not to mention the early Christians.

Let me now comment, albeit briefly, on some of the thinkers Mullins does mention when giving evidence for his claim that creation ex nihilo requires Precreation.⁴⁶ One thinker Mullins references is Plato (2026, 11–13), and whilst he does acknowledge that the story in the *Timaeus* is not a creation ex nihilo (2026, 12), since the Demiurge does not create the universe from nothing, he still thinks it is important for the subsequent development of creation ex nihilo, and in particular Precreation. Mullins is not alone in thinking that Plato's work is important for the development of creation ex nihilo, for Torchia's historical work on the origin of the doctrine suggests much the same (2019, ch.2). However, as Torchia notes in his discussion of the *Timaeus*, the reading of 'before' and 'after' in this passage should not be understood in a temporal fashion. He writes, 'For Plato, cosmic generation constitutes the point of demarcation between the "before" and the "after," between an antecedent and a subsequent state. The three "Kinds," however, assume an ontological priority (although Plato's language suggests a temporal one) over what comes into existence.' (2019, 39) As Torchia goes on to state,

'The fact that Plato himself emphasized the tentative character of his narrative (as a "likely" account) only compounds the interpretative challenges. But in light of his teaching that time is a "moving image" of an Eternal Model, it would be contradictory to apply temporal distinctions to what occurred prior to the world's coming to be. In Platonic terms, what is eternal is immune to change, and time always presupposes becoming. From our limited perspective, however, it is difficult (if not impossible) to avoid describing what prompted cosmic genesis in anything but temporal language (that is, in terms of what transpired "before" the world's origin). This is precisely why Plato stresses the provisional quality of his narrative.' (2019, 40)

The point, then, is that we should not infer from a face-value reading of Plato's language that he is referring to what temporally preceded the coming to be of the world. This is the case even though it is true that when we talk about the coming to be of

⁴⁵ Note also that having looked at all the reviews of this book that are published in academic journals, none of them take Torchia to task for his definition of creation ex nihilo, rather they all seem to accept it. However, if Mullins is right about the centrality of Precreation for the doctrine of creation ex nihilo, and how this is how the doctrine is generally understood, both now and historically, one would have thought someone would have at least raised this as an objection to Torchia's book, namely that he misunderstands the doctrine his book is concerned with.

⁴⁶ Mullins makes it clear that his understanding of Plato is informed by how he reads Wilberding (2016).

things, we will usually employ temporal language, since it is the only language we have, even if doing so brings with it inaccuracies. To give a more contemporary example, suppose that *all* space and time began at the big bang,⁴⁷ and that I ask what happened before the big bang. The ‘before’ here could easily be understood temporally, but if I am asking anything at all, then interpreting it this way would be a mistake, even if it is the most natural reading. At best all I can have meant is what is ontologically or causally before the big bang or creation, and neither of these imply that something is ‘temporally’ before. The same will be true of Plato.

Now Mullins might reply that he agrees some thinkers didn’t contend there was a temporal before, but that instead there was ‘somehow [a] timeless’ Precreation ‘moment’ (2026, 12). This is how Mullins suggests Plato’s ‘precosmic stage’ should be understood (2026, 12). However, if we then read Plato’s creation story literally, Mullins notes that this will mean that the demiurge undergoes a change, resulting in him becoming a temporal being (2026, 12).⁴⁸ I agree with Leftow (2018, 178, n.21; 2022, 125, n.25) that such a change, from being timeless to being temporal, is impossible, with this being something Mullins seems to contend as well (2025, 83–88). But this problem is only foisted on Plato if we read his priority language as requiring an *actual* ‘precosmic stage’, whereas mere ontological priority, as I’ve suggested elsewhere (2025a, 147–148), will not on its own generate such a problem. Given this, reading Plato in the way Torchia suggests would seemingly allow us to remove the idea there is an *actual* ‘precosmic stage’ and an impossible change that takes place in the Demiurge (going from being timeless to temporal), all whilst still being able to affirm that things came to be.⁴⁹ Therefore, if it is good practice to offer charitable readings of people, so long as those readings do not strain credulity in light of what they actually wrote, then this understanding of Plato seems preferable.

As a result of all this, it isn’t clear that Plato’s ‘precosmic stage’ provides us with the beginnings of the ‘more radical’ Precreation, as Mullins suggests (2026, 12).⁵⁰ Yet it might be that historically people read Plato, along the lines Mullins suggests, and as a result of this Plato’s work, as a matter of history, did influence others in formulating Precreation. But it’s far from clear that this is the case either, especially as Torchia suggests that for later thinkers the priority in play when thinking about God’s

⁴⁷Such that there is no other space or time.

⁴⁸As I’ve noted previously, a defender of timelessness does not need to think that a change takes place between two timeless ‘moments’ (2023a, 184), this isn’t to say there aren’t other issues that can be raised in this scenario, since as I’ve shown, there are (2023a, 184–186; 2025a, 152, n.22), but they are not based on undergoing a change.

⁴⁹Mullins might suggest that the language of ‘coming to be’ requires something like a precosmic stage, but that all depends upon how we understand what it means for something to begin, and as I’ve shown elsewhere it is clear there are accounts of something beginning that would not require a precosmic stage (2023a). It also seems that given how Torchia suggests Plato should read, that he too would not think Plato’s talk of things coming to be should be understood as implying the Demiurge undergoes a change that would make him temporal.

⁵⁰Mullins talks here about creation *ex nihilo* being radical, but in the context it is clear he is assuming Precreation to be an essential part of it and a development of Plato’s ‘precosmic stage’.

role as creator was also ontological, just as he suggests it was for Plato.⁵¹ If this is right, then once again, Precreation won't be required by this priority. In any case, it seems to me that it is clear that far more Plato exegesis needs to be undertaken, if Mullins is to show convincingly that Plato *really* is someone who aided the development of a Precreation understanding of creation ex nihilo.

With this in the background, let me turn to other historical thinkers who thought about creation coming into being, with Torchia writing,

‘For Philo and the Alexandrian Fathers, however, God’s causal action as Creator entails a bringing into being, not just an ordering and formation of pre-existent matter. For them, creatures exhibit an active dependence upon God, not merely at the outset of their existence, but on an ongoing basis. Their task, then, lay in coordinating the notion of a “timeless beginning” with an affirmation of the act of creation in its most absolute sense. From our finite perspective, “the beginning” is ordinarily construed in temporal terms, as the initiation or start of a process. In ontological terms, however, “the beginning” assumes a foundational import as the enduring and sustaining cause (*arché*) of creation. Accordingly, the question as to “when” or “at what point in time” creation commenced is subsumed under the larger metaphysical question as to why things exist at all, or more precisely, why there is something rather than nothing.’ (2019, 196–197)

Since Torchia thinks what is said here is applicable to Origen (2019, 197), it seems he would disagree with Mullins’s assessment that Origen adopted Precreation (2026, 15). Indeed, Mullins’s assessment that Origen held to Precreation is confusing on two other accounts. Firstly, in reply to the question as to what God was doing before the world began, unlike Augustine, whose reply we will consider momentarily, Origen argued that other worlds existed before this one came into being, each preceding the former (*De Principiis* III, ch.5, 3–4, 1885). If the reply is to have any force, it seems that Origen must have thought that these worlds go on perpetually, otherwise we will have to find another way to answer to the objection he was answering. And secondly, Origen is often thought of as thinking that souls are eternal. For instance, he writes, ‘Whence we are of opinion that, seeing the soul, as we have frequently said, is immortal and eternal, it is possible that, in the many and endless periods of duration in the immeasurable and different worlds, it may descend from the highest good to the lowest evil, or be restored from the lowest evil to the highest good.’ (*De Principiis* III, ch.1, 21, 1885) Yet in light of this, it doesn’t seem as though God existed *alone* as Precreation requires, and therefore Origen cannot endorse Precreation after all.

Let me comment on two other historical thinkers Mullins presents, with the first being Augustine. Although Mullins doesn’t talk about Augustine explicitly in his reply, he does get a significant mention in his (2025) book, being another person

⁵¹ For instance, he makes this point reference to what Philo says about the world’s origin (2019, 78), and also seems to think it might be present in Tatian (2019, 159–160, n.22). Given what Torchia says, it also seems as though he thinks Clement (2019, 183–184, 196–197) and Origen (2019 187, 196–197), at least in how he understands Christ’s role as Creator in the beginning, should not be read as thinking there is a time or actual moment before creation.

Mullins thinks endorses Precreation (2025, 73–74), albeit a Precreation ‘moment’ that is timeless (2025, 83).⁵² In my earlier work I noted my scepticism as to whether Augustine endorsed Precreation (2025a, 158, n.43). Here, I’ll expand on this a little, largely by relying on some scholars who contributed to the book *Augustine and Time* (Doody et al., 2021).

Augustine is relevant for Mullins, since he seems to think that at least one reason for thinking there is a Precreation is because there were ‘major debates throughout history about “What was God doing before creation?” and “Why didn’t God create the universe sooner?”’ (2026, 3) Mullins discussed these questions partly in reference to Augustine in his (2025, 74–75) and contended that Augustine endorsed Precreation, with this in turn causing Augustine all sorts of problems (2025, 73–83). However, I think, following other scholars of Augustine, that we should deny that Augustine ever endorsed Precreation.

For instance, Ayoub asks, ‘would it be correct to say [for Augustine] that eternity exists before time? Yes and no. If we imagine that eternity existed chronologically before time was created, then the answer must be “no.” ... On the other hand, we may answer “yes” to the question above insofar as divine eternity possesses a causal anteriority because it creates all creatures (including time) out of nothing. Thus, the existence of time (and of all creatures) depends on the causal anteriority of eternity, but not on its chronological precedence.’ Ayoub (2021, 75) Yet, as I’ve previously pointed out (2025a, 147–148), causal priority itself does not imply Precreation.

Rossiter thinks much the same writing, ‘God’s being is strictly prior, as efficient cause, to the movement of the universe, and thus prior to time—but not “prior” in a temporal sense, since there is no time before time. In whatever sense, then, that we can speak of God preceding time, it is only through statements concerning God’s essence (God’s changelessness, necessity, goodness, etc.) as timelessly eternal. We cannot, however, speak of any pre-creation succession of God’s actions, including the act of creation itself, since such a succession requires the existence of time.’ (2021, 213–214) Once again, here we might have a claim to God being causally prior, but this alone will not guarantee a Precreation either (2025a, 147–148). Much the same conclusion, in terms of Augustine affirming only causal priority, can be inferred by what other contributors to the volume assert (Clemmons, 2021, 11–12; Eodice, 2021, 22–23; Hatherly, 2021, 171).⁵³ But if they are right in their interpretation of Augustine, and if causal priority does not imply Precreation, then it doesn’t seem we have a good reason for thinking that Augustine embraced Precreation, even if we agree that he affirmed creation ex nihilo (Mullins, 2025, 74, 76). As such it doesn’t

⁵² Perhaps Augustine is somewhat implicitly mentioned in Mullins’s reply, since he talks about the question of ‘What was God doing before creation?’ (2026, 3), which, as is well known, is usually associated with Augustine.

⁵³ Note that Eodice isn’t convinced Augustine’s response is a good one (2021, 28–29), with one of the reasons being that Augustine speaks of a ‘when’ without their being any time. But if we adopt Leftow’s view that Eternity can act as a date (2002), then the ‘when’ in question can be Eternity, without it being a time. Note also that Hatherly thinks that Avicenna can still cause a problem for Augustine, given how Avicenna understands what it is to begin to exist (2021, 173). But, given what I suggested earlier, it should be apparent that we don’t, and I think shouldn’t, follow this definition.

seem as though Mullins has given us any good reason for thinking that Augustine took Precreation to be essential to creation *ex nihilo*.⁵⁴

However, perhaps one could reply to this by stating that even if Augustine didn't think that causal and/or ontological priority entailed temporal priority, he was mistaken in thinking this.⁵⁵ In order to see this I'll revert to speaking about the two Precreation-less definitions of creation *ex nihilo* from the literature which I gave, rather than talking about Augustine directly, although it should be obvious how what I say here will apply to him. One might therefore adapt something Rhoda contends when he writes,

As long as God has at least one open option requiring at least one choice on God's part, essential divine timelessness is ruled out. This is because choices are inherently temporal events essentially involving both a "before" state of contemplating the options without as yet having settled upon any of them, and an "after" state of having decided upon one of the options over the others. The relation between the two states cannot be understood as one of *merely logical* priority, for the states are mutually incompatible—one cannot be concurrently both undecided and decided with respect to the same option—whereas relations of merely logical priority can obtain only between things that are *mutually compatible*, such as the premises and conclusion of a valid argument. Moreover, the transition from not yet having decided to having decided constitutes an *intrinsic change* in the chooser. Hence, the relation must be one of *temporal* priority, of before and after. Because intrinsic change is impossible for a timeless being, it is impossible for a timeless God literally to choose and to remain timeless. An essentially timeless God therefore must not face open options. (2014, 265–266)⁵⁶

In our specific case, what Rhoda might claim is that the two Precreation-less definitions of creation *ex nihilo* that I offered to defenders of timelessness, suggest that God's causal and/or ontological relation to creation is contingent.⁵⁷ Yet because of this it might be contended that there is a state where God exists alone without creation, and a state where God exists with creation. But then one could argue that there

⁵⁴ Mullins provides a number of reasons against Augustine's view more generally (2025, 73–83), but one should be able to see how these can be responded to by looking at my (2023a; 2025a).

⁵⁵ As in my previous work (2025a, 147), I use the notions of 'causal' and 'ontological' priority since they are how Mullins and Craig speak when describing a timeless God's relationship to time. Given how Mullins and Craig use 'ontological priority', I take it as implying that creation in some way ontologically depends upon God. I shall also assume that this type of dependence doesn't imply that if God exists then creation exists, since if it does, a defender of timelessness will likely deny that God needs to be prior in this way.

⁵⁶ Mullins seems to concur with Rhoda's point given what he says elsewhere (2025, 85–86).

⁵⁷ Given the context it seems as though Rhoda's argument is only meant to target those states that are contingent, rather than necessary, although this could be clearer. After all, if this way of thinking is meant to apply to things that are necessary, then questions might be raised against the Trinity, since the Son is taken to be caused by the Father (Mullins, 2025, 78), even though the Son is also not temporally prior to the Father. To avoid this issue, I'll assume Rhoda's concerns are only meant to apply when the states are contingent.

is a contradiction between these two states and that appealing to causal and/or ontological priority will not be enough to get us out of this pickle. Rather one will need to appeal to temporal priority instead. But this would be a disaster for my project since it would mean that the two accounts of creation *ex nihilo* which I suggest are Precreation-less and that a defender of timelessness could embrace, in fact require a temporally prior Precreation.⁵⁸

But a defender of timelessness should say that the states in question are under described. For according to them, there is no *actual* state where God exists alone, if He has created, even though there is a *possible* state where God is alone, since it is possible that He did not create. As to why there is no actual state of God being alone, given timelessness, see my (2023a, 2023b, 2025a; Leftow, 1991, 290–291; 2018). But it is obvious that there is an actual state of God existing with creation, since it is evident that God has created. Yet a *possible* state and an *actual* state don't jointly give us a contradiction, and so there is no contradiction to resolve. Or to put it in the terminology I prefer, a defender of timelessness should say that all contingent causal and/or ontological priority forces them to endorse is:

S1: (God satisfying the predicate lonely) is a possible maximal state.

S2: (God satisfying the predicate accompanied) is an actual maximal state.

Yet a contradiction will only arise if both states are actual, and a defender of timelessness won't accept that they are.

What a defender of this Rhoda style reasoning will therefore need to do is give arguments to the effect that the maximal state of God satisfying the predicate lonely, which is taken to be possible by defenders of timelessness, is in fact actual. But the arguments that I examined in my (2025a) were exactly those that I took to be the most significant reasons for thinking that S1 is in fact actual, or in other words Precreation, and I argued that they were all weak.

However, Rhoda might reply that he can argue for the actuality of S1 in virtue of asking what it is that grounds the possibility of S1.⁵⁹ I would say it is in virtue of God's free action that S1 is possible (2025a, 167). But it seems that Rhoda would interject by suggesting that 'choices are inherently temporal events essentially involving both a "before" state of contemplating the options without as yet having settled upon any of them, and an "after" state of having decided upon one of the options over the others.' (2014, 265) Unsurprisingly, defenders of timelessness will disagree with all of this. At least on the basis of this quotation, they would likely argue that this is merely an assertion and begs the question against those who think God is timeless and free. Rather they contend that libertarian action requires that it is possible that God could do otherwise and that this is compatible with the denial of

⁵⁸ A colleague informs me that on social media both Rhoda and Mullins have explicitly suggested that this is a problem which they think will arise for the two Precreation-less accounts of creation *ex nihilo* that I say are consistent with timelessness. Note also that in my (2025a, 152, n.22) I offered an argument against timelessness that was based on finding a contradiction, and which ran on similar ideas to these.

⁵⁹ After all, if it is necessary that S2 is the case, then, as I've already noted, the Rhoda style inference won't work, which seems to be something Rhoda himself affirms, given what he says about views which say that God creates the best possible world (2014, 266).

an open future (Leftow, 1991, 299–309; Page, 2022).⁶⁰ They'll also point out that a perfect being arguably does not need any time in order to make a decision, since He will have all the knowledge He needs, and all the processing power He needs in order to make the decision without any temporal succession. As such, God won't need temporal duration to make a decision (Leftow, 2012, 379). Additionally, since libertarian freedom is compatible with God being intrinsically the same, and yet producing a different effect, there would not need to be any difference in God in order for Him to produce a different effect (although divine timelessness is compatible with God having different contingent acts of will).⁶¹ So nothing about divine timelessness, as far as I can tell, precludes God from acting freely.

Now it might be that Rhoda thinks this way of thinking about free action is mistaken, and that to act freely requires an actual 'before' state to one's action and an open future, but in doing so he is merely offering a new argument for thinking that the possible state S1 is in fact actual, or that we should endorse Precreation. Evaluating that argument more fully would take us too far afield from Mullins's reply. Nevertheless, from this discussion what should be clear is that it is by no means obvious that God's being causally and/or ontologically prior to creation results in Him being temporally prior, and defenders of timelessness, given how they understand free action, are within their rights to think that God can act freely without the need for a Precreation. Given this, and returning to Augustine, it seems that his view of creation ex nihilo should also be thought to avoid this type of incoherence, even though it denies Precreation.

The final historical thinker I'll comment on is Boethius, who Mullins also takes to endorse Precreation (2026, 9; 2025, 51).⁶² It is worth pointing out that although Boethius's work on eternity is highly influential, in reality he doesn't say all that much about the topic, so we don't have all that much to go on in order to determine what he thinks. In the *Consolation of Philosophy*, however, it's clear that Boethius thinks that God lives all of His life at once (2008, 168), with him also claiming, along with Aristotle, that time has no beginning and end (2008, 169). Boethius also adds that God's knowledge sees all things, including those that were and are to come (2008, 171), and so for God all of our time is present to Him. If this is Boethius's more considered view, with the *Consolation* taken to be his final work, then Boethius doesn't appear to endorse Precreation, since time is perpetual.

Yet if we add Boethius's comments from his, *On the Catholic Faith*, which is cited by Mullins (2026, 9), things become less clear. For Boethius says, 'Now this our religion which is called Christian and Catholic is founded chiefly on the following assertions. From all eternity, that is, before the world was established, and so before all that is meant by time began, there has existed one divine substance of

⁶⁰Note that my article cited is concerned with the compatibility of eternalism and libertarian free action, but it should be clear how some of the points made there can be translated here.

⁶¹The claim about something being the same and yet producing a different effect seems to just follow from how libertarians typically think about the principle of alternative possibilities, with what O'Connor and Franklin call the 'categorical analysis' of the 'freedom to do otherwise' being defined as: 'An agent *S* has the ability to choose or do otherwise than ϕ at time *t* if and only if it was possible, holding fixed everything up to *t*, that *S* choose or do otherwise than ϕ at *t*.' (O'Connor & Franklin, 2022).

⁶²Note also that Mullins takes Boethius as thinking the Precreation 'moment' is timeless (2025, 51).

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit' (1609, 53). And a little later, 'The divine nature then, abiding from all eternity and unto all eternity without any change, by the exercise of a will known only to Himself, determined of Himself to form the world, and brought it into being when it was absolutely naught' (1609, 57). The only way I can think to make what Boethius says here consistent with what he says in the *Consolation* is to interpret him as holding to a view that has similarities with what I said Aquinas claimed above. That is, we should not take the 'before' to be understood temporally, but rather in terms of some ontological dependence, with this not implying Precreation. Then we should also take 'bringing into being' as being claiming that time is nothing according to nature, and in that sense, is given being. We will also have to understand Boethius's talk of 'time began' in this way too, if it is to be consistent with the *Consolation*, since if we understand it in terms of time being temporally finite it will contradict Boethius's later claim that time has no beginning and end.

Now I admit that this is all somewhat speculative, but this is precisely because Boethius doesn't say all that much on the topic, and so we can't be sure of exactly what he meant. Perhaps he meant to imply a temporal beginning in *On the Catholic Faith* and then changed his mind in his later *Consolation*. Or maybe the latter wasn't meant to be a Christian work, unlike the former, but just something more generally theistic and therefore there may be differences in both texts assert. Equally, perhaps something he said in *On the Catholic Faith* was ambiguous or implied something that was contradictory with his other philosophical positions. The work, after all, is primarily not about creation, but rather about the Trinity. Alternatively, as Michael Wiitala has noted to me in personal correspondence, it was common for thinkers influenced by Neo-Platonism, as Boethius was, to use 'before' in a causal sense rather than 'temporal' sense in some contexts, and therefore it is probable that he could be using it in that fashion here. Additionally, since Boethius was heavily influenced by Augustine, and would likely have known of his reply to the question about what God was doing before time, if, as I contended above, Augustine's reply was meant to imply a denial of Precreation then it would be likely that Boethius would follow suit.⁶³ Given all these considerations, I don't think it's all that likely that Boethius thinks what Mullins claims of him, *but* ultimately I also don't think we have enough to go on from Boethius himself to make a definitive statement about what he thought on the matter.⁶⁴

The result of all of this historical consideration is that it seems to me there are many historical Christian thinkers who *did not* think Precreation was an essential component of creation ex nihilo, and many historical thinkers that did not endorse it as an additional belief either. This isn't to say that Mullins is incorrect in thinking that *some* thinkers, including Christians, adopted Precreation and/or thought of it as essential to creation ex nihilo. For instance, Mullins's exegesis of Brunner, which has him embracing Precreation (2026, 6; 2025, 52), seem to me to be correct. But rather that there is a lot less historical attestation than Mullins thinks.

⁶³ These two points were made to me by Michael Wiitala (2024) in personal correspondence, which lead him to conclude that Mullins's reading of Boethius is 'untenable'.

⁶⁴ This is also the conclusion Jonathan Evans (2024), who is far more knowledgeable of Boethius's work than I am, with it being suggested to me in personal correspondence.

What then about contemporary attestation, for if the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* underwent development in the past (Baldner & Carroll, 1997, 1–29; Torchia, 2019, xxiii; May, 1994, viii), then perhaps it might have developed more recently with pretty much everyone now including Precreation in their definition. Unfortunately for Mullins, I think not.

Given what I noted earlier in this article and in previous works (2023a, 182–183; 2025a, 152–154), we can see that there is some attestation from contemporary edited collections and monographs on creation *ex nihilo* that Precreation is not essential to the doctrine. Additionally in my (2025a, 157–158) I also suggested that some of the contemporary advocates Mullins relied upon in earlier work, do not in fact endorse Precreation, even though they all, as far as I know, embrace creation *ex nihilo*.⁶⁵ We therefore have further contemporary attestation that not all think creation *ex nihilo* should be understood as Mullins does.

However, Mullins's reply does refer to two people that I had commented on previously, with the first of these being Broadie, 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; Mullins, 2026, 13)

In my (2025a, 158, n.44) paper I suggested that one *does not* have to read ‘first’ as implying anything other than causal or ontological priority, and that because of this ‘Precreation’ won’t be entailed. Mullins replied by saying that given Broadie’s claim ‘that first there is God and no world, and then, by an act of divine will, there is a world’, it looks more like Broadie *is* endorsing Precreation (2026, 13). I think this is a fair point. However, I did also note previously that even if Broadie is meaning to imply Precreation here, he does nothing in his article to support this assertion (2025a, 158, n.44), and as I regularly tell my students ‘assertions are not arguments’. Further, given what I extensively argued about Aquinas previously (2025a, 158–164) and here in regard to other historical figures, one can see that Broadie is indeed incorrect if he meant to imply that all major western Christian theologians in the High Middle Ages adopted Precreation. However, if we interpret Broadie as merely meaning to suggest that the world is temporally finite, then what he says is more likely to be correct. For as Baldner and Carroll mention, amongst western Christian thinkers in the early thirteenth century there was no disagreement that the universe was temporally finite (1997, 24–25), whether this be due to reason or because of the teachings of the faith. Yet as I’ve noted here and previously (2025a), temporal finitude does not imply Precreation either. As such, I’m not sure Broadie’s quote really helps Mullins’s case.⁶⁶

The other person Mullins comments on is Lebens, writing that one of the reasons he believes creation *ex nihilo* involves Precreation is because Lebens gives a defini-

⁶⁵The people in question were, Brian Leftow, Thomas Ward, and David Fergusson.

⁶⁶Arguably this Broadie quote is not about contemporary attestation, for it is more about what historical thinkers thought, rather than what we should think about creation *ex nihilo* today. But since I discussed it in my contemporary attestation section previously (2025a, 158, n.44), I’ve followed suit here.

tion of creation ex nihilo which Mullins *thinks* implies it (2026, 7). The definition that Mullins refers to states,

‘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; Mullins, 2026, 7)

Unfortunately for Mullins, Lebens’s definition will only imply Precreation if the word ‘before’ is read in a particular way, for if we read it as merely implying ontological and/or causal priority then it won’t imply Precreation. In both of my previous articles (2023a, 183; 2025a, 157) to which Mullins seems to be directing his reply to, I have noted that Lebens, in personal correspondence, *did not* want his definition to imply Precreation, and therefore ‘before’ does not have to be read as Mullins suggested. In fact, one can also infer this from what Lebens says later in the chapter where this definition appears. For he considers the following argument,

Suppose ‘God is unchanging. If he wills to create a universe, then he always wills it. If he always wills the creation of a universe, and if his will is efficacious, then there must always be a universe. To deny that the creation is eternal is to imply that God lay around in solitude before changing his mind and deciding to create. But an immutable God doesn’t change his mind.’ (2020, 39)

Yet one reply Lebens offers is the following, ‘If God’s immutability matters to you, don’t worry. An unchanging God can timelessly and eternally will the creation of a temporary universe (Augustine, 1966, pp. 336–7).’ (2020, 39) As he has confirmed to me in personal correspondence, this was meant to imply that creation ex nihilo could take place even without Precreation. Given the difficulty of talking about things outside of time, it’s almost inevitable that philosophers will struggle to find ways of talking that don’t give rise to unintended temporal readings. Notwithstanding that, perhaps Lebens could have been a more precise in his definition so as to avoid giving rise to this confusion. But given all that I have said about it here, and previously, it seems evident that Lebens can no longer be someone that Mullins cites for his aid.

As such, to reaffirm what I said previously, ‘whilst there may be *some* contemporary affirmation [of Precreation], there is definitely less than Mullins claims’ (2025a, 158). Therefore, Mullins’s argument for the claim that definitions of creation ex nihilo that do not include Precreation are ‘illegitimate’ (2026, 6) because they go against the vast mainstream understanding of creation ex nihilo fails. At the very least, much more historical work will need to be done in order to show that there is some plausibility to this argument, and I am happy to leave that work to the historians of philosophy and theology.

Yet suppose it turned out that in fact there was widespread affirmation for thinking that Precreation was essential to creation ex nihilo, would this be a sufficient reason for holding that any definition of creation ex nihilo that did not include Precreation was ‘illegitimate’? I’m not so sure. At best, this argument from multiple attestation seems to be an argument from authority, but as Aquinas noted, ‘the argument from authority based on human reason is the weakest’ (*Summa Theologica* I, q.1, a.8,

ad.2). Nevertheless, Aquinas does immediately go on to say ‘yet the argument from authority based on divine revelation is the strongest’, but as I’ve already alluded to, Mullins has offered no reply to my contention that the biblical texts Mullins appealed to as reasons for affirming Precreation do not in fact provide strong justification for its acceptance (2025a, 154–157).⁶⁷ As such, even if there were lots of human attestation for thinking that creation ex nihilo included Precreation, I’m not sure it would give us strong grounds for saying that another way of understanding this doctrine was ‘illegitimate’.⁶⁸

To give something of a parallel example, it seems that historically many/most people took God to be timeless.⁶⁹ Let’s suppose for the sake of argument that all people thought God was timeless and perhaps they thought this since they took God to definitionally be perfect, and timelessness to definitionally be a perfection. But then imagine that in Mullins’s 2016 Mullins comes along with his *The End of a Timeless God* and argues that God is not, or perhaps cannot be, timeless. It seems to me that it would be an unsuccessful reply to Mullins to say, that whatever you’ve concluded, it would be ‘illegitimate’ to think that this being that is temporal is God, because everyone who has so far defined God has taken Him to be definitionally timeless. Surely Mullins would rightly reply, ‘but they’re just wrong about how God should be defined. I’ve shown (we shall *suppose*) that God cannot be timeless, and so the definition of God you had was incorrect. If you think I’m wrong, what you should really focus on are my arguments as to whether God is timeless or not, not how many people historically have attested to things to the contrary.’

I think something similar should be said in reply to Mullins here, that is even if everyone had defined creation ex nihilo to include Precreation—which they haven’t—this wouldn’t give us a really strong reason for thinking the doctrine *must* be defined as including Precreation. We need to see, not just the large number of adherents to this claim, but rather the arguments they give in support of this claim. If these arguments are good then clearly it may be ‘illegitimate’ to define creation ex nihilo in another way, but if the arguments aren’t good, then it’s hard to see why thinking about the doctrine in a way that doesn’t include Precreation would be ‘illegitimate’. As I’ve reiterated, my (2025a) attempted to look at those arguments which have been given for adopting Precreation, not just Mullins’s argument based on authority, and concluded that they were weak. Given that Mullins offered no reply to these arguments, and since I have rebutted, once more, his argument from an overwhelming

⁶⁷The reasons I give for this vary, partly depending upon the biblical text in question, so one will need to see my (2025a, 154–157) paper for more details of this. The addition is the reference to my paper.

⁶⁸Perhaps if there was some authoritative church council which proclaimed that creation ex nihilo required Precreation then it would be ‘illegitimate’ for those Christians to embrace another account of the doctrine. But as far as I know there is no such document (the Condemnations of 1277 at the University of Paris would not be such a document either (Page, 2025a, 164, n.65)). One would also have to weigh up whether one stuck with what the council said as opposed to what one’s own reason concluded if the two conflicted. For more on the relevant questions to ask in these types of situations see my (2025c, ch.3).

⁶⁹Crisp (2019, 102–103) suggests there might be a pretty good argument to timelessness based on tradition, but I suspect Mullins would not find it persuasive. But why then wouldn’t the same hold within the Precreation case, that is, even if there is widespread agreement that creation ex nihilo includes Precreation, that doesn’t mean that from this agreement alone we have strong and persuasive reasons for thinking that creation ex nihilo must include Precreation.

attestation, I still contend there are no strong reasons for adopting Precreation, be that as essential to creation *ex nihilo* or as an additional belief.

Conclusion

The result of all of this is that Mullins's reply to my (2023a) and (2025a) is wholly unsuccessful. Whilst in reality Mullins's (2026) reply only attempted a response to a relatively small section of my (2025a), it doesn't even succeed on that front. *At present*, therefore, Mullins hasn't provided us with any good reason for thinking my conclusion of my (2025a) piece is mistaken. I'll therefore conclude by reasserting this once again,

‘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 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. Finally, they need not throw out scripture in order to think that God doesn't satisfy Precreation. What more could a divine atemporalist want!’ (2025a, 168-169).

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