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## Can God Destroy the World? St. Thomas Aquinas' View in *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*

### Introduction

Somehow, against the medieval perception of this mundane world in apocalyptic categories, St. Thomas Aquinas declared for its indestructibility. This is the consequence of the necessary nature of definite substances which, though being brought into existence in the act of creation, are deprived of the possibility of non-existence. As the cause of the indestructibility he indicates, on the one hand, God's power which is indispensable for conserving the created necessary beings in the act of existence, and on the other hand—the will of God that is followed by power (*potentia sequitur voluntatem*)<sup>1</sup> and that, therefore, determines the absolute power to being realized in the ordered way, the effect of which is exactly the being God wanted it to be like. And it is precisely because of the determination on the part of the will of God,

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<sup>1</sup> See S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Quaestiones disputatae de potentia*, in: id., *Quaestiones disputatae*, vol. 2, cura et studio P. Bazzi [and others] (Taurini–Romae: Marietti, 1965), q. 1, a. 5, ad 9 [hereafter cited as: *De pot.*].



asserts Aquinas, that the necessity of the existence of created beings has an unconditional character (*absoluta necessitas essendi*).<sup>2</sup>

While accepting that the will of God endows beings (created as indestructible natures) with the unconditioned necessity of existence, St. Thomas had to cope with the problem of the theoretical limits to the Divine power—that is, among other things, with the question of whether God can annihilate created things. Essentially, the point is to provide a negative explanation answering the question of whether it is impossible for the Absolute Being to annihilate creatures, since if it is not logically impossible (contradictory), then, on the grounds of metaphysical and cognitive realism, this means that there is in Him a real active potency to annihilate all created beings. Such a highly theoretical problem is the subject of the considerations presented below, based on the *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*, where St. Thomas put forward the question under discussion in a most comprehensive way. In the first part of our analysis, we will deal with the order of *potentia Dei absoluta* and we will concentrate upon the dilemma of whether God has the power to annihilate creation and what such an action would consist in. It seems that the Absolute, who is the full Act of existence and grants this existence to all other beings, is not capable of action aiming at destruction and turning what is into non-being. However, contrary to that, it is difficult to deny Him such a capability as He is the omnipotent Being who causes things out of His own “self-obligation” and “self-determination.” In the second part, the object of our study will be the ordered power (*potentia Dei ordinata*), and especially the question of whether God, whose work is the really created world, would want to annihilate it? There, except for power, we must also take into account the Divine will (the third part), which in the act of the absolutely free choice, has been directed towards the creation of the concrete effect in the form of exactly this world and the beings endowed with everlasting existence.

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<sup>2</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 12.

### “Limits” to the Power of God

St. Thomas, just like in other cases where the being in relation is at stake, thinks that defining possibilities inhering in beings existing *per participationem*, except for considering their nature, demands taking into account as well what is possible because of the second member of the relation—that is, because of the power of the efficient cause which is the being existing *per se*.<sup>3</sup> The question of the possibility or impossibility of the annihilation of the world by the ultimate efficient factor is not something that could be read from any contingent being or from the created world as a whole. It is clear for Aquinas—who consistently uses the metaphysical method in philosophical explanations consisting in the search for the reasons which do not contradict the facts given in experience—that a reliable analysis of this problem cannot, however, be just considerations on the probable God’s action, which is *de facto* the object of logic. In order to have cognitive value, such an analysis must be limited to what can be read from the nature of God, which is the pure act of existence cognizable on the basis of contingent beings.

Because He is the perfect act of existence, God is ascribed total fulfillment which consists, among other things, in being the fullness of action—and in connection with that—He is ascribed the absolute power as the principle of action *ad extra*. St. Thomas, in his considerations of whether in God there is power and what is its nature, showed that—from the cognitive perspective of man—the scope of the absolute power of God as the principle of action and, at the same time, of any possible result, may be properly defined only in a negative way—namely, by showing the theoretical limits to this power which result exactly from the nature of God as the pure act. According to

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<sup>3</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, resp.

Aquinas, “each active power is the outcome of the act and the being of what it belongs to”<sup>4</sup>; this is why God as the most perfect being and the fullness of existence in His action can aim, exclusively, towards the effect which is similar to Him. This means that the proper end of the Divine action can be exclusively something that possesses existence—that is, being. However, as an after-effect—somehow as the consequence of the efficacy of the existence of one thing—there might be destroyed another thing whose existence is irreconcilable with the one brought into existence, and then the result of action may also be non-being.<sup>5</sup> Taking this into consideration, St. Thomas must, therefore, explain the nature of God’s action aiming at the annihilation of the whole created world, since—as we can see on the basis on the above thesis—such action can never directly aim at turning something into nothingness. Secondly, he also must answer the question of whether a possible effect in the form of non-being of some creature can come under the concept of a “relative” non-being understood as the opposite of the currently existing being; so the question is whether the former is the case, or rather, as the result, the absolute non-being is implied and thus, a metaphysical contradiction making the latter effect impossible.

Determining whether God is able to annihilate creation demands therefore, in the first place, the investigation on the negative side as to whether such an action stands within the scope of the absolute power of God, or in other words, if it is not contradictory to this power so that then it cannot be the Divine action. St. Thomas applies here the criteria he adopted when defining in the I question of *De potentia* what God

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<sup>4</sup> Św. Tomasz z Akwinu, *Kwestie dyskutowane o mocy Boga* [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*] [Latin-Polish text], vol. 1, ed. Mikołaj Olszewski, Michał Paluch (Kęty–Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki–Instytut Tomistyczny, 2008), q. 1, a. 3, resp. I quote citations from the texts of St. Thomas in my own translation.

<sup>5</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 3, resp.

absolutely cannot. The first criterion is the inherent contradiction in something that would be the possible effect i.e., the contradiction making it impossible in itself, thereby it cannot be the object of any power, even of the absolute power of the First Cause. Such a kind of “defect of what is impossible” causes that it does not fulfill the notion of the effect, because even if God, in His infinite power, can cause something “impossible,” then such a thing cannot happen.<sup>6</sup> The second criterion seems to be drawn by Aquinas not so much from the power conceived as the principle of effect, but from the power which is the principle of action.<sup>7</sup> This negative criterion is the necessity of the realization of the opposite state of things to the one resulting from the structure of action. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, there is a natural direction of power as the principle of action towards, exclusively, one effect. For an acting agent endowed with such active potency, it is impossible not to cause something that its power aims at by nature, for example the active potency of warmth aims exclusively, in the mode of necessity, at warming something up, and this is why it is impossible for the opposite state to happen. Also, something can be impossible for an acting being because of the necessity of the opposite state, as it is the consequence of the natural and, therefore, necessary aspiration of the being towards the ultimate end. According to Aquinas, happiness is such an end for the human being, and for God it is His own goodness that he is not able not to want. That is why Aquinas, again conceiving

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<sup>6</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 5, resp.; q. 1, a. 3, ad 2.

<sup>7</sup> The power of God can be viewed both from God's side, where it is the principle of the Divine action, as well as from the side of the created being, where it shows itself as the principle of the effect. The power of God as such does not involve the existence of its effects; however, the effects are necessary for the sake of cognition of this power, since only on the basis of the effects may one mentally identify this attribute in God. See *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1, ad 13; S. Thomae Aquinatis, *Summa contra Gentiles*, in: id., *Opera omnia* iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 13 (Romae: Typis Riccardi Garroni, 1918), lib. II, c. 10 [hereafter cited as: *SCG*].

the power of God as the principle of effect, says that it is impossible for this power to do what God cannot want—i.e., to do anything that stands in opposition to the Divine goodness and as such cannot be the potential object of the will of God.<sup>8</sup>

In the light of those criteria, the Angelic Doctor investigates next the non-being of the creatures from the point of view of whether it is impossible as the effect for the absolute power of God. In the notion of the non-being of the creatures there is no contradiction, since contingent substances are not beings in which the essence is identical with the existence. Mental negation of their existence is not synonymous with the negation of what they are and what is included in their definition, because they are not their own existence. In case of the sentence “the being which is in the potency of existing is not (the) existing (being),” the opposite of the predicative word (*oppositum praedicatorum*)—that is the predicative “exist” or “is existing” does not belong to the definition of the created being, and this is why contradiction is not the consequence of its negation, like, for example, in the case of the assertion “the human being is not a rational animal.”<sup>9</sup> That is particularly clear when we apply the above kind of sentence to the Absolute

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<sup>8</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, resp.; q. 1, a. 5, resp.

<sup>9</sup> *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, resp. The Latin version of the sentence referred to is “*creatura non est omnino*.” From the context it follows that St. Thomas wants to stress here that creatures are not everlasting and this is why there is no contradiction in their non-existence. It seems that the form of the sentence proposed by the author fully expresses what Aquinas meant, and it allows us to better grasp what the lack of the logical contradiction consists of in this kind of expression. It is worthwhile to draw attention here to the fact that Aquinas speaks about the “opposite to the predicative word” and, within the framework of analogy, he recalls subject-predicative assertion, whereas in case of the sentence “there is no creation” or “creation does not exist,” it would appear that the predicate itself is meant. The verb “*esse*” is clearly treated here as the element of definition—i.e., as the predicative word. In this case it is not what, in the realistic metaphysics, is called the “existential judgment,” which is de facto always subject-predicate assertion and, additionally, it never has a negative character. For more on the subject of

Being: “the being which actually exists is not existing” where the contradiction is obvious, since the being which is its own existence by definition, at the same time, is not what it is, because it is not existing.

Referring to the second criterion, St. Thomas ascertains that there is no metaphysical necessity of the state opposite to non-being of the creatures; such necessity would be realized if the power of God were determined in a natural way towards the effect in the form of the existence of things. Aquinas substantiates his assertion by recalling the character of the creative act, which is not an act accomplished out of the necessity of nature, but due to the free choice of God.<sup>10</sup> Nature—in the process of giving birth—always aims at producing something that is similar to the efficient cause. Such similarity is appointed by the substantial form of the being which gives birth. The determination to one, inscribed in the form of a being, is the cause of equality among beings; therefore, two substances which have the same form are equal in the aspect of the possessed nature and the membership of the same species. Inequality, on the other hand, is caused by the plurality in mutual relations and references, because of which beings are similar or dissimilar to different degrees.<sup>11</sup>

An originator, determined by nature towards something one, causes things which are equal to it. It does not do so only when it does not possess the proper active power, or the substratum of making is deprived of the proper passive potency.<sup>12</sup> God as the being endowed with omnipotence, since He does not need for His action anything in

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existential judgments, see Tomasz Duma, “The Role of Existential Judgments in Knowing the Existence of Beings,” *Espiritu* 63, no° 148 (2014): 317–331; Aleksandra Gondek, “Egzystencjalny sąd” [Existential Judgment], in: *Powszechna encyklopedia filozofii* [*The Universal Encyclopedia of Philosophy*], ed. Andrzej Maryniarczyk, vol. 3 (Lublin: PTTA, 2002), 45–52.

<sup>10</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, resp.

<sup>11</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 3, a. 15, resp.

<sup>12</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 3, a. 15, resp.

the state of passive potency, experiences no such limitation in His activity *ad extra*.<sup>13</sup> If beings originated from Him by way of natural necessity, then they should be equal to Him as far as nature is concerned. But various degrees of similarity or dissimilarity of the creatures to God and gradation among them is the sign of the multiplicity of their relations towards Him—and thus of the inequality of the whole of creation as such towards the absolute nature of God. This means that created beings could not have come into existence in a natural way, but they emerged from the power of God as the result of His free choice, in which He decided they would come into existence in their respective natures, whereby He also decreed their proper position in the hierarchy of beings. Based on that, St. Thomas states that the Divine power is not determined towards one effect, because it is not directed by the necessity of nature. This is substantiated by the gradation and inequality of the effects. The state which is opposite to non-being of the creatures—that is their existence—is not the necessary and the univocally defined effect of the Divine action and this is so because the realization of any effect is performed, exclusively, by the will of God who may want or not want the effect. So just as God, due to His infinite power, may bring into existence any being, it is not impossible for Him to stop the conservation of things in existence, which means annihilation for them, as neither of the two states (existence and non-existence of things) is metaphysically necessary, but it is the result of the choice of God.

The non-necessity of the existence of things, which results from the lack of determination of the action of God to some definite effect, is a significant premise for the possibility of the annihilation of creation by God. As mentioned above, the direction of the power of God towards the existence rather than the non-existence of beings comes from the

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Frank B. Dilley, “A Finite God Reconsidered,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 47, no. 1 (February 2000): 29–41.



second principle of action—that is from the will directed by the intellect—and this is the will which wants the existence of the creation, though it seems that, at the same time, it could not want the creation to last forever. However, St. Thomas thinks that the object of the power of God can be everything that God can want and that is in agreement with the ultimate goal of his action—that is with the Divine goodness. For this reason, in order to prove that God can turn everything into nothingness—except for showing that He causes effects not out of necessity but out of His will—one must also consider whether it is not impossible for the most perfect and the best Being to want the non-being of creatures.

St. Thomas concentrates on the question of inter-dependence between the Divine goodness and the existence of the world, and he observes that creatures do not add anything to the Divine goodness.<sup>14</sup> This is so, because, according to Aquinas, the ultimate goal of the action of God is not to give the Divine goodness, but the very goodness as such. The reason why God wants to give His goodness in bringing creation into existence is that He loves His own goodness, which Aquinas describes in the following way: “God [...] does not act [...] out of His goodness as if He wanted something that He does not possess, but as if He wanted to give what He possesses: He does not act out of the desire of some goal but for the love of it.”<sup>15</sup> Thus if He did not want to give His goodness to any other being, the goodness itself in its essence would not be deprived of anything, so such an action would not be impossible as something contradictory to the Divine goodness.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, resp.

<sup>15</sup> Św. Tomasz z Akwinu, *Kwestie dyskutowane o mocy Boga*, [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*] [Latin-Polish text], vol. 2, issue 2, ed. Mikołaj Olszewski, Michał Paluch, Andrzej Dumala (Kęty–Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki–Instytut Tomistyczny, 2009), q. 3, a. 15, ad 14.

<sup>16</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 3, a. 15, ad 12.

One can say that goodness as the proper object of the will is the necessary object of God's wanting and the natural goal of His action. The existence of the world is one of the many possible goods which the will of God can want or not want for the sake of the manifestation of the infinite and perfect goodness God is. The Absolute is not able not to want the goodness He is in His very essence but, as the free Personal Being, He cannot relate to goodness in the way univocally determined. This means that He does not have to manifest His goodness in the form of causing the existence of created beings.<sup>17</sup> Thus the non-being of creatures would be connected only with the lack of spreading the Divine goodness outside, and not with something that, in any way, would diminish this goodness.

According to St. Thomas, the ultimate and the best reason for God's action, which consists in the creation of things *ex nihilo* and conserving them in their existence, is His wisdom and goodness—thanks to those, the “ordering” of the Divine absolute power is accomplished, as well as directing it towards the concrete creation.<sup>18</sup> This reason would last if creation were totally different, and also, if it turned into nothingness; this means that God can accomplish what He has not accomplished so far—i.e. that is He can stop His creative activity and bring the world to annihilation while directing Himself by the best reason, although when creating the world, the action best corresponding to His goodness was the conservation of things in existence.<sup>19</sup> This, however,

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<sup>17</sup> “[...] bonum est proprium obiectum voluntatis; unde bonitas Dei, in quantum est ad ipso volita et amata, mediante voluntate est creaturae causa” (*De pot.*, q. 3, a. 15, ad 5). St. Thomas seems to point out that, as far as the will of God necessarily wants goodness, at the same time, the act of love for the goodness is the act of the free choice by the Divine will.

<sup>18</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 5, ad 14.

<sup>19</sup> On the subject of connection of goodness with existence which is the act of being, see Mateusz Przanowski, *Święty Tomasz z Akwinu o Bogu [St. Thomas Aquinas on God]* (Warszawa: Instytut Tomistyczny, 2017), 274–283.

would be connected with changing the thought and the decision of God which were realized in creation and within the framework of which some beings were called to last eternally.<sup>20</sup> In further analysis we will undertake the problem of whether such a change of the Divine plan will really happen. In the order of *potentia Dei absoluta*, giving up the creating action, the result of which is turning the existing beings into non-being—or, in other words, ceasing by God what He is actually doing—is not theoretically impossible, since, as it has been shown on the basis on the above-mentioned criteria, the annihilation of the contingent beings (1) is not internally contradictory, (2) its opposite (i.e. creation) is not the necessary effect of the power of God, (3) it does not violate the goodness of God.<sup>21</sup>

### The Hypothesis of Destroying the World

Next—in order to prove that it is possible for the absolute power of God to annihilate creation—we must explain how it should be done. As it has been noted, the active potency of God, which is the consequence of the infinite act of existence, is the principle of action aiming towards the effect marked by the similarity to the principle itself. Then the question arises why there is in the power of God the possibility of turning creation into non-being when the outcome of His action is only

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<sup>20</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 5, ad 15.

<sup>21</sup> The problem of annihilating the World considered from the perspective of *potentia Dei absoluta* is, in a way, the reverse question of whether God can do something that He does not do—i.e. if His absolute power includes more things than those which have ever been or will ever be created. In case of the annihilation of the world the problem concerns, specifically, the possibility of non-doing by God (conservation of things in existence) what He until now Has not stopped doing. The question of change of God's plan belongs to the order of *potentia Dei ordinata*, since it assumes the “prior” choice of God expressed in bringing into existence the indestructible contingent things.

being? St. Thomas explains this question by answering many objections in which the annihilation of the world is mistakenly understood as some kind of Divine activity.<sup>22</sup> He defines His standpoint by drawing consequences from the previous assertions, according to which things cannot last in existence by themselves, but they must be continually conserved in existence by the creative cause. On that basis, Aquinas says that if God wanted to turn creatures into nothingness, He would not accomplish that through some specific action, but through stopping the creative act of *conservation*.<sup>23</sup> If he wished to annihilate the world, He would simply stop acting in favor of the conservation of beings in existence. This also applies to the indestructible beings which owe the necessity of existence to the fact that in their nature there is no possibility of non-existence caused by the disposition towards the opposite, inherent in matter. Such beings are either self-existing forms or beings whose matter is totally actualized, and cannot take another form.<sup>24</sup> Their eternal lasting in the substantial order is founded by “essential principles” (*principia essentialia*): form in case of non-corporeal beings, and, also, specific matter in case of celestial bodies. Those principles, however, are not the causes of the existence which belongs to the composite beings due to the form, or to the beings which are self-existing forms.<sup>25</sup> Although those factors, and especially the form, are in their proper order the principles of the existence of a being-substance, the lack of the Divine action, which consists in the

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<sup>22</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, arg. 1, 2, 3.

<sup>23</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 1, 2, 3.

<sup>24</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 5, a. 3, resp.

<sup>25</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 3; S. Thomae de Aquino, *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, in: id., *Opera omnia* iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 24, vol. 1, ed. B. C. Bazán, (Roma–Paris: Commissio Leonina–Éditions Du Cerf, 1996), a. 14, ad 5. For more on form as the principle which constitutes substance, which is nevertheless not the efficient cause of the existence of the substance, see Étienne Gilson, *Being and Some Philosophers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1952), 173ff.

incessant creation of a thing through conserving it in its existence, would be tantamount to the annihilation of those principles, and thus—the annihilation of the whole substance, even the one which has been made eternal in its very nature.<sup>26</sup>

The cause of destruction, which consists in the total loss of existence by all beings, cannot be the disposition of matter of being submitted to the opposites. The potency of matter decides that the efficacious factor, actualizing a new form which is irreconcilable with the old one, leads to the disintegration of the substantial being constituted by the previous form, but it does not lead to the total annihilation of the elements which are matter and form.<sup>27</sup> Meanwhile, as it was said above about the principles of being, if God withdrew from creative action, matter would stop existing and therefore the beings, which are destructible, would not turn into nothing because of the potency of the material substratum for many forms, but because they emerged *ex nihilo*. The proper cause of the annihilation of all beings—whether the destructible or the indestructible—is, according to St. Thomas, the lack in them of the reason-principle due to which they exist. So if the Divine action stopped, the being created from nothing would come back, so to speak, to “the starting point,” and that would happen not because “nothing (*nihilum*) would act in favor of the destruction, but because nothing would cause the conservation.”<sup>28</sup> This also concerns the indestructible beings (so called “separate substances”), since when not conserved in existence, such beings would not so much undergo

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<sup>26</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 1, ad 3, 10.

<sup>27</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 2; S. Thomae de Aquino, *Quaestiones disputatae de anima*, op. cit., q. 14.

<sup>28</sup> Św. Tomasz z Akwinu, *Kwestie dyskutowane o mocy Boga* [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*] [Latin-Polish text], vol. 3, ed. Mikołaj Olszewski, Janusz Pyda (Kęty–Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki–Instytut Tomistyczny, 2010), q. 5, a. 1, ad 8.

the destruction of the eternity inherent in them, but their whole nature would be annihilated.<sup>29</sup>

The above analysis requires more precision in defining what exactly is meant by stopping the Divine action. It seems that the disappearance of such action, even if viewed only as the object of the absolute power of God which would never be realized, means change in God Himself, which, in case of the Absolute perceived as full act and perfection, must be excluded. The Angelic Doctor thinks that giving up the Divine intervention—i.e., ceasing to conserve the world in existence—is a lack of action only from the perspective of created beings. However, in the creative action seen from the point of view of the Absolute Being, we need to distinguish—according to St. Thomas—two aspects: (1) the substance of action and (2) the relation to the effect.<sup>30</sup> Since God acts through His essence—or to put it more precisely, action belongs to His very nature—the substance of the Divine action is exactly the Divine essence. Because of that, omnipotence is ascribed to God as the conceptual principle of action, and not as if the essence in itself possessed any principle really or conceptually.<sup>31</sup> Substantial action, which is identical with the essence of God—irrespective of having an internal or external character—must be eternal and, just as the whole Divine nature, absolutely existing.<sup>32</sup> Ceasing the creative action cannot, therefore, be connected with any change concerning the essence of God, which means that He still remains the efficient cause in action—that is the Creator.<sup>33</sup> What then would undergo change in case of the annihilation of the world? St. Thomas argues that the annihilation of the world would entail the change concerning God's

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<sup>29</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 10.

<sup>30</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 6.

<sup>31</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1, 5.

<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 6.

<sup>33</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 5, a. 3, arg. 6; ad 6.

relation to the effect. The reason for this is that Divine action is subordinated to the effect through the mediation of the principle of creation—i.e., through the mediation of the Divine will. If the latter would resolve to stop the relation of the creative Divine action towards the effect in the form of the created being, then the world would undergo annihilation, in spite of the fact that God would still remain in His essence the actual efficient creative cause.<sup>34</sup>

Such an explanation on the ground of the system of metaphysics developed by Aquinas remains coherent with the thesis that the creative relation is something real in creatures, and on the side of God, the relation has a mental character.<sup>35</sup> For St. Thomas, creation actively conceived means the “Divine essence together with a co-cognized relation.”<sup>36</sup> And the Creation understood passively is the real relation which contingent beings have with the Absolute.<sup>37</sup> The creative act includes, therefore, both action-activity and relation; saying this, we must necessarily add that while action in God is really identical with His essence, His relation to the creatures is in Him only mental. If the annihilation happened to the effect of having the form of the created being, in which the real relation, called by Aquinas the “creation understood passively,” is realized, then it would be tantamount to the fact that God stopped cognizing His essence as the one which is really imitated by the beings which come from Him.<sup>38</sup> In this way, ideas in

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<sup>34</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 6.

<sup>35</sup> See Andrzej Maryniarczyk, *The Realistic Interpretation of Reality*, trans. Hugh McDonald (Lublin: PTTA, 2015), 86–87.

<sup>36</sup> Św. Tomasz z Akwinu, *Kwestie dyskutowane o mocy Boga* [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*], [Latin-Polish text], vol. 2, issue 1, ed. Mikołaj Olszewski, Michał Paluch, Andrzej Dumala (Kęty–Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Marek Derewiecki–Instytut Tomistyczny, 2009), q. 3, a. 3, ad 2.

<sup>37</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 3, a. 3, resp.

<sup>38</sup> Practical cognition, including specifically actually practical cognition, in the framework of which God cognizes beings through ideas, is not only a mental way of conceiving of the creatures, but it is also—except for the will and the power of God—

their proper meaning—i.e. the ideas that are models due to which things imitating them come into being—would disappear, or to put it precisely, they would become “not full”—that is, they would become what St. Thomas calls reasons or representations—since they would lose the determination on the part of the will which causes the content of these ideas to be thought by God as something that he wants to act according to (i.e. something that He wants to actively make).<sup>39</sup> So these ideas would stop belonging actually to the order of practical cognition, and they would habitually become part of the Divine practical cognition, which means that, through these ideas, God would cognize the objects of His own power—that is, He would cognize not what He wants to make and makes, but only what he wants to be able to make.<sup>40</sup> Thus He would cognize His own essence as the one that can be imitated in many various ways, though actually it is not imitated by something existing outside Him.<sup>41</sup> It seems that, in this way, God, in spite of

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the principle of their being. For this reason, the status of the actual and potential creatures—i.e., of what is, was, or will be and of what is not, was not and will not be—is always the imitation of the principles or patterns, which are God’s ideas.

<sup>39</sup> See S. Thomae de Aquino, *Questiones disputatae de veritate*, in: id., *Opera omnia* iussu Leonis XIII P. M. edita, t. 22, vol. 1, (Roma: Ad Sanctae Sabinae, Editori di San Tommaso, 1970), q. 3, a. 3, resp. [hereafter cited as: *De veritate*].

<sup>40</sup> This is confirmed by Aquinas’ words concerning the cognition God has in relation to non-beings: “Non tamen omnia non entia eandem habent habitudinem ad eius scientiam. Ea enim quae non sunt nec erunt nec fuerunt, a Deo sciuntur quasi eius virtuti possibilis. Unde non cognoscit ea ut existentia aliquo modo in seipsis, sed ut existentia solum in potentia divina. Quae quidem a quibusdam dicuntur a Deo cognosci secundum notitiam simplicis intelligentiae” (*SCG*, lib. I, c. 66, n. 9, 10). Meanwhile the things, which exist at present or in the future, God conceives, according to Aquinas, in the cognition of vision. Such beings “[...] cognoscit Deus secundum quo sunt in sua potentia, et in propriis causis, et in seipsis” (*SCG*, lib. I, c. 66, n. 11).

<sup>41</sup> Aquinas draws our attention to the fact that “[...] exemplar, quamvis importet respectum ad id quo est extra, tamen ad illud extrinsecum importat habitudinem causae; et ideo, proprie loquendo, ad cognitionem pertinet quae est practica habitu vel virtute; non autem solum ad islam quae est actu practica” (*De veritate*, q. 3, a. 3, ad 3).



the annihilation of any external effect of His action, would cognize Himself as the Being, within Whose absolute power is bringing things to existence—that is, He would conceive Himself as the one whose essence is the principle of acting *ad extra*. So, He would have knowledge about Himself as the efficient creative cause in act which, however, is not actually subordinated to any effect existing “externally.”<sup>42</sup>

As we can see, the Divine substance or, in other words, the essence of God identical with His action, would not experience any change from the annihilation of the world. What undergoes change—because of God’s absolutely free will, which can want or not want the subordination of His action to the effect—is the relation of creation to God which gets interrupted and, thus, God’s power is no longer the principle of the effect having existence outside of God, but the principle of the Divine action and all its possible effects. This means that if God stopped performing the creative act in the sense of *conservatio*, the result of which would be turning things into nothingness, then, nevertheless, action—or, in other words, His essence being the cause of the creative action—would stay in Him, but, at the same time, the disappearance of the real relation of the creation to the Creator would be the sign that the mental relation of God to the actual creation stopped existing or, to put it differently, it changed into cognition which God has about His absolute power. Nonetheless it would not be the change that would consist in transforming the idea of practical order having

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<sup>42</sup> “[...] esse quodcumque rei Deus cognoscit per essentiam suam. Nam sua essentia est repraesentabilis per multa quae non sunt nec erunt nec fuerunt. Ipsa etiam est similitudo virtutis cuiuslibet causae, secundum quam praexistunt effectus in causis. Esse etiam cuiuslibet rei quod habet in seipsa, est ab ea exemplariter deductum” (*SCG*, lib. I, c. 66, n. 12). If God, then, cognizes His essence as the one, which can be the model for many various things, He also cognizes His power as the principle of the creative action and such knowledge constitutes the ideas of the created things, even though those things would be only the things which are not, were not and will not be, but which God wants to be able to make.

the habitual status into, a numerically different, new idea of the practical order having habitual, or even purely speculative, order. Such a change would only be expressed as the removal from the practical idea of its subordination to the act, which until now was characteristic of the idea; this would be done under the command of God's will.<sup>43</sup>

The above problem can also be explained by referring to two cognitive perspectives—the objective and the subjective. From the point of view of the effect—that is from the point of view of the created world—God does not cognize the existing things in accordance with how they exist in His absolute power, but He cognizes them as realizing the real creative relation and God's ordered power outside of Him. However, if—by stopping *conservatio*—the subordination of the Divine action to the real effect stopped, then God would still cognize those things, but in accordance with how they are conceived from His perspective—i.e. how they exist in His intellect, because they would not have any other existence.<sup>44</sup> So, as objects of His infinite power, they would be cognized through ideas, which are ontically counterpart to the Divine essence conceived as one that can be imitated in many different ways.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> “[...] idea practica et speculativa in Deo non distinguuntur quasi duae ideae; sed quia secundum kationem intelligendi, practica addit super speculativam ordinem ad actum; sicut homo addit super animal rationale; nec homo tamen et animal sunt duae res” (*De veritate*, q. 3, a. 3, ad 6).

<sup>44</sup> “[...] non entia cognoscit Deus in quantum aliquo modo habent esse: vel in potentia Dei, vel in causis suis, vel in seipsis” (*SCG*, lib. I, c. 66, n. 13). So it seems that the Divine cognition concerning the creation would look similarly, if its annihilation had happened. He would cognize things as much as they have existence in His infinite power, ontically identical with the Divine essence.

<sup>45</sup> “[...] Deus non cognoscit res tantum secundum quod in ipso sunt, si ly secundum quod referatur ad cognitionem ex parte cogniti, quia non cognoscit in rebus solum esse quod habent in ipso secundum quod sunt unum cum eo, sed etiam esse quod habent extra ipsum, secundum quod diversificantur ab eo; si autem ly secundum quod determinet cognitionem ex parte cognoscentis, sic verum est quod Deus non cognoscit res

The interpretation proposed above—of what it would mean, from the point of view of God, to cease the creative action and thus annihilate the world—seems to be confirmed by the following words of St. Thomas, in which he compares the existence of creatures to the point, the lack of which does not have any influence on the substance of the line: “[...] It must be asserted that, though the line lessened by one point in act does not lose anything of its greatness, nevertheless, lessened by something that cannot be limited to the point, will lose its substance. Likewise God. Nothing will be taken from God, if we assume that such creation does not exist; but His perfection will be reduced, if we deny that He has power to actually make creation. Since God does not cognize things as something that is in act, but as something that is in His power.”<sup>46</sup> The annihilation of the world as the consequence of ceasing the Divine action is not, then, tantamount to the negation of the

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nisi secundum quod sunt in ipso, quia ex similitudine rei, quae est idem cum in ipso existens” (*De veritate*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 2). St. Thomas describes the mode of God’s cognition taken from the point of view of the cognizing subject in the following way: “[...] nec in Deo, cum agat per suam essentiam, effectus eius in eo est distinctus ab essentia sua, sed omnino unum; et ideo hoc quo cognoscit effectum, non est aliud quam essentia sua [...] Deus per essentiam suam effectus suos cognoscit, sicut per similitudinem rei cognoscitur res ipsa; et ideo una cognitione se et alia cognoscit [...]” (*De veritate*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 3). According to Aquinas, the mode of the Divine cognition taken from the side of the object does not present the unity characteristic of the subject’s perspective; it varies, depending on whether the objects are the created beings or God Himself because God cognizes Himself in His very essence, and He cognizes other things through ideas in His intellect, see *De veritate*, q. 2, a. 3, ad 6. If created things had undergone annihilation, it would mean that ideas, which were reasons for their cognition and being *ad extra*, would become only reasons for cognizing them as something that exists in God as the object of His power.

<sup>46</sup> Św. Tomasz z Akwinu, *Quaestiones disputatae De ideis, De scientia dei. Dysputy problemowe O ideach, O wiedzy Boga* [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions On ideas, On God’s Knowledge*] [Latin-Polish text], trans. Aleksander Białek, text checked and corrected by Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, Andrzej Maryniarczyk, sci. ed., Andrzej Maryniarczyk (Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 2006), q. 2, a. 3, ad 11.

creative power of God, so it would in no way diminish the perfection of God.

However, the real possibility of “suspending” the creative act by God, resulting in the possible total annihilation of the world, is inseparable from the question about the purpose of such an intervention, as each action is always performed on the account of the purpose. In case of the Divine action, the purpose is God’s own goodness which is manifested and confirmed in the act of bringing things into existence. For this reason, beings become similar to the First Being, revealing Its goodness.<sup>47</sup> In this light, turning creation into non-being by God seems to lack any purpose, since the annihilation of beings is not action, but the lack of the act of *conservation*.<sup>48</sup>

Aquinas claims, however, that one can see some purpose in God ceasing to conserve things in existence. For the analyzed problem does not concern the question of whether God might not have made at all the decision about bringing things into existence and, in this way, abstain from any creative action, but it concerns the question of whether He can annihilate the beings which He decided to create. The question so posed, contrary to the one mentioned before, does not mean the lack of will on the part of God, but, just the opposite—it is connected with the possibility for Him to make a decision about stopping the creative action that was already begun and, until now, has conserved in existence every being.<sup>49</sup> Since God can stop giving existence

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<sup>47</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, arg. 4.

<sup>48</sup> Where there is no action, there is no need to indicate the end because only the real activity of the perpetrator allows us to legitimately ask the question about the reason-motive for the actualization of the action and the end of the undertaken striving. See Mieczysław A. Krąpiec, *Metaphysics. An Outline of the Theory of Being*, trans. Marie Lescoe, Andrew Woznicki, Theresa Sandok (New York: Mariel Publications, 1991), 439.

<sup>49</sup> The annihilation of creation is the opposite of the act of conservation of beings in existence (*conservatio*), while not bringing things into existence is the opposite of the

to things exclusively as the effect of His will's resolution, then, according to St. Thomas, one should consider as the purpose of annihilation what God's will guides itself by.<sup>50</sup> As it was pointed out, the existence of contingent beings does not increase, in any way, the good which God is for Himself. The purpose of creation's existence is to reveal the absolute and infinite goodness of the Creator. Turning existing things into nothingness could thus be motivated by God's love for the self-sufficiency of His own goodness which, for its perfection, needs neither any external manifestation nor any other being.<sup>51</sup>

### **The Inalterability of the Divine Will**

To make sure that the annihilation of the world by the Absolute is included in His absolute power and it is what God can want, brings us to the most important question from the perspective of created beings, namely the question of whether, according to Aquinas, God really wants to anni-

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creation of things from nothingness (*creatio ex nihilo*). But on account of the real unity of the act of creation, in which we distinguish only conceptually *creatio ex nihilo*, *creatio continua* and *conservatio*, in some aspect, annihilation and not bringing things into being are the same. This is so, first of all, from the perspective of God, who—in accordance with His absolute power directed by His will—may want both the existence of things and their non-existence. Non-bringing things into existence might be conceived in terms of the absence of God's decision, but also in terms of the choice of His will about the non-existence of anything beyond Himself. Such a choice made in the context of the already existing world is identical with its annihilation. However, it seems that the necessity of making conceptual distinctions in this, not at all easy, matter, makes it plausible—in case of not causing any external effects and contrary to ceasing to conserve things already created—to perceive the will of God as not connected with any option, and thus, exclusively naturally, directed towards the good—God Himself is—and not as the will that makes any actual choice of non-existence of other beings.

<sup>50</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 4.

<sup>51</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 5, a. 3, ad 4.

hilate His work? Here the problem if potentially creation might become annihilated by omnipotent God stops being purely speculative, and we come to the question whether, as the result of God's resolution, creation is really and necessarily destined, at some point of time, to be annihilated and, thus, all contingent beings will ultimately turn into non-being.<sup>52</sup>

According to Aquinas, the problem of God's willing something might be viewed not only in the way that was presented above—that is in the absolute (the unconditional) way—but also in conditional terms. The latter perspective in considerations on God's will is revealed as the effect of the fact that the nature of created things is the reflection of the eternal plan and resolution of the Creator's will.<sup>53</sup> St. Thomas' argument is that the will of God, which is by nature absolutely free, becomes conditionally necessitated because of the choice which God made when bringing beings into existence. True—the Creator might have wanted or not wanted to create the world, but since He wanted it—and what is more—He wanted the world as necessary in some of its elements, then He cannot simultaneously want the creation as a whole not to exist, which, in turn, seems to speak for the fact that the act of the Creation of the world, which is accomplished in agreement with the resolution of the Divine intellect and will—this very fact by itself is the expression of the truth that the Absolute does not want to annihilate creation, but he wants it to be everlasting. Here Aquinas recalls one of the conditions of the reality of the ontic states—namely the metaphysical law of non-contradiction.<sup>54</sup> This law says that,

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<sup>52</sup> See Michał Mrozek, "Czy jakieś stworzenie musi obrócić się w nic lub też czy obraca się w nicość. Wprowadzenie do artykułu 4" [Does some creation have to turn into nothing or does it turn into nothing. Introduction to the article 4], in: Św. Tomasz z Akwinu, *Kwestie dyskutowane o mocy Boga* [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*], vol. 3, op. cit., 112.

<sup>53</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 3, a. 15, resp.

<sup>54</sup> In light of the system of realistic metaphysics, the real existence of beings is conditioned by laws, which are read from the transcendental qualities of beings. One such

although two states—for example, Socrates is sitting and Socrates is not sitting—are not by themselves ontically contradictory, however, it is impossible to realize one state when the other is being realized (e.g., when Socrates is sitting, it is impossible for him not to be sitting).<sup>55</sup> St. Thomas claims that, also, the choice of God's will comes under this law, whereby the Absolute, being in accordance with His absolute power, might want or not want creation, but when considering what has been chosen and caused by Him proportionally to His power ordered by Him, we must observe that He cannot simultaneously want something opposite—that is, the non-existence of creation.

That notwithstanding, it still seems justifiable to have some doubt if God will not simply change His decision about establishing and conserving creation in existence or if He has not decided for the world to exist only for some finite period of time. St. Thomas is apparently aware of those difficulties, because He points out to the reasons for which, according to him, God will not change the decision once made. The first reason—says Aquinas—is the inalterability of the Divine will. This quality of God's nature decides that if He wants something at some time, then He wants it always in the necessary way, so He cannot want something opposite.<sup>56</sup> Thus it is not that the Absolute can first want the world to exist and next He wants its annihilation, since, as the non-corporeal Being, He does not come under any temporal categories, but He is the eternal act of existence.

But the eternity of the Divine act does not have to induce the necessity of the eternal existence of some particular willed effects. The fact

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law is the principle of identity that describes a being in the aspect of its contents; another one is the principle of non-contradiction that describes the unity and oneness of every being. See Andrzej Maryniarczyk, *Rationality and Finality of the World of Persons and Things*, trans. Hugh McDonald (Lublin: PTTA, 2016), 41; 57.

<sup>55</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 4, resp.

<sup>56</sup> See *ibid.*, q. 5, a. 4, resp.

of the existence of the world proves that the Creator wanted the existence of exactly this reality and, because of His inalterability, He will never stop willing it, but this does not at all involve the necessity of the eternal lasting of all elements which make up the world. God did not have to necessarily want the things He wants, and He will always want, to exist eternally. Just the opposite—He may eternally want some things to exist only in a certain moment. The assumption of the inalterability of God's will means the necessity of the fact that, if God wants something, He always wants it, but, at the same time, it is not at all necessary that, if He wants something, then He wants this as existing eternally.<sup>57</sup> When pointing out to the inalterability of the Divine nature, Aquinas is able to prove the conditional necessity of willing created things by the Absolute; therefore the Angelic Doctor can exclude from the realm of God's will not only the events which are contradictory to the ones actually realized (if God wants the existence of the world, He cannot simultaneously not want its existence), but also the future events contradictory to the ones realized at present (if God wants the existence of the world, He can never not want the existence of the world, while Socrates, for example, cannot want to sit and, at the same time, not to sit, but he can merely want first to sit, and only the next moment not to sit).<sup>58</sup> God, due to the fact that He is unchangeable, once He created the world, can never conditionally want to turn all things into non-being.

According to Aquinas, one can not only prove that God's will concerning the existence of the creation is eternal, but one can also demonstrate that God wants the effect of His will to remain eternal. God's

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<sup>57</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 4, resp.

<sup>58</sup> When we talk about present or future events, which stand in contradiction to the events that actually happen, we consider things from the human perspective. God, who is *Ipsum Esse*, as it was already mentioned, does not come under any temporal categories.



motive, for which He brought the world into existence, speaks for that. In the case of this particular Efficient Cause—i.e. the Absolute—the effect in the form of creation, wanted by God for the sake of His own goodness, is at the same time desired as the end in itself, since the existence of the world is not the means to greater perfection of any other thing nor does it contribute to enlarging the goodness of God, which—in accord to the fullness of His actuality and being—is in itself optimum.<sup>59</sup> We see that if an author makes a thing for the sake of this very thing, if the thing does not serve as the means to achieve something else, then it seems that he wants the thing to stay forever. Only when a thing serves as the means to perfect something else, its existence is wanted merely until the moment at which the desired goal is reached.<sup>60</sup> On the basis of the analysis of God's will, St. Thomas concludes that “[from] the very fact that God established the creatures, it clearly follows that He wanted them to be forever. Because of His unchangeability it will never happen for Him to want something opposite.”<sup>61</sup>

Another argument for the thesis that God is not going to turn creation into non-being is the nature of the created contingent beings (as it was already mentioned above).<sup>62</sup> We may read what God wants them to be like from what is contained in their natures; perceived from such a perspective, they are the realization of the model-idea—that is the cognition God has within His essence as the one reflected in the creation in the precise way. Among the created beings there are the ones in whose natures there is no possibility of non-existence, which makes them necessary beings. God, who is the Efficient Cause of every nature and who directs

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<sup>59</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 4, resp. The subject of God who, willing Himself, wants also other things, is taken up in *SCG*, lib. I, c. 75.

<sup>60</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 4, resp.

<sup>61</sup> Św. Tomasz z Akwinu, *Kwestie dyskutowane o mocy Boga* [St. Thomas Aquinas, *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*], vol. 3, op. cit., q. 5, a. 4, resp.

<sup>62</sup> See *De pot.*, q. 5, a. 4, resp.

Himself in His creative action with the truth and the good, cannot endow a nature with some specific qualities and, at the same time, take those qualities away from the nature, because things are—in their essences—exactly as He knows them to be, and any such change would be connected with the change of His eternal idea about those beings.<sup>63</sup>

## Conclusion

The question of whether God can annihilate the world is given a positive answer by Aquinas. For the self-existing Act of Existence, who has the infinite power to cross the immeasurable “ontic abyss” between being and non-being, it is not impossible to turn into nothing everything that exists. St. Thomas thinks that such an effect, though non-contradictory in itself—and therefore, possible—could, however, happen only *per accidens* on account of God’s departing from the creative action which consists in the conservation of things in existence (*conservatio*). Because God, while creating, does not act out of the necessity of nature, but only through His will, the reason why He could stop such action could be His intention for His action to no longer be crowned with any external effect. If we analyze the problem on the plane of the absolute will of God, which is directed, in the necessary way, towards the good He Himself is, then the only impossible thing is what stands in contradiction to the Divine goodness and so God cannot want it; this is why it is not impossible for Him to affirm the self-sufficiency of His own goodness and stop manifesting His goodness through the existence of beings different from Himself.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> See Étienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, trans. A. H. C. Downes (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1940), 158.

<sup>64</sup> The “ontic abyss” between God and creation is also in the realm of the good. See Evan M. Fales, “Divine Freedom and the Choice of a World,” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 35, no. 2 (April 1994): 70.

But in spite of the fact that, in the light of St. Thomas' criteria, reducing the world to non-being stands within the realm of *potentia Dei absoluta*, the existence of indestructible beings—which are the effect of God's creative action—shows the real intention of the Creator for His creation. Aquinas' analyses quoted above, concerning the order of *potentia Dei ordinata*, show that creation as a whole will never be turned by God into nothingness. The substantiation for the thesis that God will not withdraw from His work of bringing things into existence and then conserving them in existence, is, for St. Thomas, the unchangeability of the Divine will. God, who wanted some things not to come under destruction or disintegration and in such natures brought them into existence, throughout eternity will stick to His plan and He will not deprive them of the quality He once gave them. If the unchangeable Absolute Being, existing beyond the limits of time, wants something at a certain moment, this “something”—because of His choice—is necessary, He wants it always and forever, so He cannot simultaneously want anything contradictory to this “something.” An important supplement to the above observations is Thomas' note that the Creator wants creation for itself, that creation is an end in itself and not a means for another end. Thus, he not only substantiates the eternity of God's desire for creation as a whole, but he also proves that God wants the effect in the form of creation to be everlasting.

Finally, it seems worthwhile to add that the fact of no reasonable grounds for substantiating the thesis of the world's annihilation and, therefore, the conviction that God will not annihilate His work, do not exclude the possibility of a thorough transformation of this mundane world by the supernatural intervention of God, as it is prophesied in the Holy Scriptures in the words about coming of “a new heaven and a new earth.”<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> *The Holy Bible*, Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), *Revelation* 21, 1.



### Can God Destroy the World?

St. Thomas Aquinas' view in *Disputed Questions on the Power of God*

#### SUMMARY

In the article, the author undertakes the problem of whether the world, which in the light of the philosophical theory of creation ex nihilo was introduced into being as indestructible in some of its elements, can be annihilated by God and turned into non-being again. The divine power, which is the principle that sustains the world in existence, is subjected to metaphysical analysis. In the first part, the considerations concern the order of *potentia Dei absoluta* and focus on whether the annihilation of creation is within the scope of God's power and what such an action may consist in. In the second part, the subject of consideration is the ordered power of God (*potentia Dei ordinata*), which is related to the search for an answer to the question of whether God, from whom the effect in the form of creation comes, not only can but actually wants to deprive the world of existence? Since the annihilation of the world is related to the issue of God's decision to stop the creative activity that has been initiated, in addition to the principle of power, God's will is also taken into account in the last part of the analysis.

**Keywords:** annihilation, power of God, Saint Thomas Aquinas, metaphysics of creatio ex nihilo, will of God

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