



**Federal President Frank Walter Steinmeier  
at a dinner for members of the Order Pour le Mérite  
in Schloss Bellevue  
on 11 June 2017**

It is really a special pleasure for me tonight to welcome you, the members of this celebrated Order, to Schloss Bellevue for what is at least for me the first time as President. Let me extend a very warm welcome to each of you!

Chancellor Merkel already outlined the history of the Order this afternoon. 175 years ago – on 31 May 1842 – King Friedrich Wilhelm IV founded the civil class of the Order, the Order Pour le Mérite for Services to Science and the Arts. 65 years ago, the Order was “augmented once again” at the behest of President Theodor Heuss, it was “renewed”, as it was said, after it had – for reasons known to us all – shrunk to just a few members under the Nazi dictatorship.

It was no less a figure than Alexander von Humboldt who, as the first Chancellor of the Order, played a key role in shaping the civil class in its early years.

As a human being, Humboldt was driven by an unquenchable sense of curiosity. As a humanist, Humboldt firmly believed that “all are in like degree designed for freedom.” As a scientist, Humboldt was one of the first to realise what impact human actions could have on the ecological balance, having seen the catastrophic effects of deforestation around Lake Valencia in Venezuela.

Alexander von Humboldt concluded that “everything is interrelated” back in the mid 1800s. Today – more than 200 years later – this relatively simple but infinitely important insight has unfortunately been forgotten by many, including certain influential state leaders.

For that reason, another sentiment expressed by Alexander von Humboldt, which I liked to quote in my days as Foreign Minister when warning of treating with other states on the basis of resentments and prejudices, was perhaps just as foresighted. Alexander von Humboldt

said: "The most dangerous world view is the world view of those who have never viewed the world." That reads like a comment on the state of the world today.

This year we will mark the 250th birthday of his brother Wilhelm von Humboldt, the great educational reformer. He, too, attached importance to each person's individuality and looked beyond that to the bigger picture. The true purpose of man, Wilhelm believed, was, I quote, "the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole. Freedom is the first and indispensable condition for such development."

In today's world, Alexander's holistic view of nature is highly topical once again, as is Wilhelm's commitment to academic freedom.

The Humboldt brothers were children of the Enlightenment – as we should be, too. And we especially really should be, we who live in a world whose secrets have almost all been unveiled – only to reveal new, unexplored territory.

We can fly through space and send robots to explore other planets in our solar system. As a result of our research, we have vanquished some diseases and made others manageable, diseases that previously claimed millions of lives. Science is based on a thirst for knowledge, on scepticism, on argument, on verifiability – in brief on the power of reason. But wherever unreason and irrationality win the upper hand, where – for example – the efficacy of vaccinations is impugned, where scientific findings about man made climate change are denied, people become immune to facts and realities. They start propounding world views that explain the world as they would like it to be.

This really cannot be the legacy of the Enlightenment. However, it is a fact that principles and values which have their roots in the Enlightenment, which were recognised and accepted, which were prerequisites for civilisation and the advent of democracy, liberty and the rule of law in modern Western societies, are now being challenged, are at risk of being sucked into the maelstrom of 140 character communication, in which the distinction between fact and lies, a distinction of existential importance for any democracy, risks being bulldozed. When academic freedom is at stake, it is the researchers, the teachers, the scientists themselves who are called upon to defend this freedom and to fight half truths and "alternative facts". And recently academics did precisely that, when they took to the streets in various university towns, including Berlin, to make their voices heard.

However, I do wish that these voices would make an even greater effort to get through to those sections of the public that are not so academically grounded. Communicating the complexities of science in a comprehensible manner, whilst retaining the necessary accuracy,

is a difficult but probably crucial task. I can tell you a thing or two about it from where I stand! But if we are concerned about echo chambers in the social media, if we criticise them – the echo chambers – then it has to be our common interest to ensure that science, and likewise politics, does not end up locked away in an ivory tower or enclosed in an echo chamber either.

By the way, Alexander von Humboldt was ahead of his time in this respect, too. His “Cosmos” lectures in Berlin were open to all – not just to members of the university, but also to any individuals interested in the topic.

There is no doubt that in a turbulent world our need for scientific expertise and a clear focus is greater than ever, if we are to keep a cool head and act rationally. We need free discourse, cultural receptiveness, and of course academic cooperation across national borders, of the kind that you pursue amongst yourselves. We have already reached a point of which Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt could only have dreamed: we are now in a position, at least in principle, to solve problems together, as the international community. But equally only through joint action by the international community. And it is for precisely this reason that it is an unsound and, I would add, a harmful message when the most important country in the world wants to withdraw from the Paris Climate Agreement – the greatest success story of global cooperation this decade. Let us stand united against this, let us strengthen cooperation around the world, wherever we can, and in this endeavour let us place our trust in science and reason.

I am glad, ladies and gentlemen, that you are here. Let me congratulate the newest members of the Order once again. I hope we all learn something from our conversations tonight, and I wish us all a pleasurable evening – that is allowed, after all!