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**Speech by Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
at a dinner for members of the Order Pour le Mérite  
for Services to Science and the Arts  
in Schloss Bellevue  
on 3 June 2018**

I would like to welcome you all – as is traditional, I might add – to Schloss Bellevue once again this year.

The constitutional lawyers among you will know that my office brings with it a range of recurrent tasks – approving legislation, accrediting ambassadors and, once agreement has finally been reached, appointing the Federal Government. Other recurrent tasks, even if they are not mentioned in the Basic Law, include attending the public meeting of the Order Pour le Mérite and hosting the dinner for its members.

Talking with you is one of the true privileges of my office. Not only do this day and evening give me an opportunity to enjoy many stimulating discussions, but also, one might say, to do some on-the-job training.

Your lectures allow me to look beyond day-to-day politics and delve deep into current scientific and research issues. Thank you for giving me this delightful opportunity every year. And as you saw today, I am not the only one who feels that way – so did the 800 members of the audience at Konzerthaus Berlin, which was turned into a lecture hall for the afternoon. In this way, you, the members of this proud order, all show that not only are you leading figures in your own areas of expertise, you also pass on the torch of learning to others, share the spirit of the Enlightenment with society and aim to inspire us to think more imaginatively and profoundly. These days in particular, we need people who champion the importance, goals and constant challenge of reason as the cornerstone of discourse in society. That is exactly what you do and I am very grateful indeed to you for this.

In his keynote address this afternoon, Svante Pääbo asked to what extent we are still Neanderthals.

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In the spirit of thinking more imaginatively, I would like to pose a question this evening that you not consider essential, Mr Pääbo. And this question is as follows: with a view to rapid technological progress, for example in artificial intelligence, the networks arising from digital technology, nanotechnology and genetic research, one might be tempted to ask to what extent the people of the future will still be *Homo sapiens*.

My answer to that question is that it is up to us. That may seem simplistic at first, but a closer look shows it is not self-evident. When it comes to technological progress and the future, I am not keen on the idea of either dystopias or naive utopias. Thinking of the upheavals of our time, the waning of certainties and the erosion of international orders, I would say first and foremost only one thing, namely that the future is uncertain. It is more open than ever before. And that is why I believe we should deal with the technological possibilities of the future as Johannes Rau once so wisely advised – without fear or illusions, but rather with courage and the firm conviction that it is up to us how we shape this open-ended future.

What we do know is that the waves of technological development are reaching us in ever-shorter intervals and with an ever-greater impact. The same processing power in the computer that beat world chess champion Garry Kasparov 20 years ago is now found in the smartphones we carry around with us as a matter of course.

Machines created by human beings are now far better than us at certain things that have characterised us and been unique to us for millennia, such as our brain's ability to process information, analyse data and make connections.

So what value does humankind's ability to think still have? What advantages do humans have over increasingly perfect machines? Or to put it in terms of the essence of this Order, what merits will humans have in the future? In 30, 40 or 50 years, how will we define the outstanding human achievements that qualify people to join the illustrious ranks of the Order *Pour le Mérite*?

In this regard, I believe that the debate on technology and its impact no longer concerns the possibilities and limitations of technology itself. And that has already been the case for some time now. Instead, this debate makes us look at ourselves – at what defines us; at what must be retained at all costs; at intellectual, social and ethical cornerstones; and at the fundamental rights of the individual. That is also why I keep on saying that we need to discuss the ethics of digital transformation. This debate not only concerns the future of digital technology – it also concerns our very fate.

There are some who believe that humankind has already lost the race against machines. They see us as sorcerer's apprentices whose

brooms have long since been stripped of their magical powers. For decades now, since pioneers such as Alan Turing and the like, there has been speculation about the dawn of an artificial general intelligence, one that entirely surpasses human intelligence. In the meantime, as I have read, some engineers in Silicon Valley who are particularly forward-looking have founded a church – as a sort of insurance policy – in which the artificial intelligence of the future, rather than God, is worshipped. The idea is that humankind will at least make a good impression on its future rulers. Even if this is not meant entirely seriously, it is nevertheless a harbinger of the probably tremendous social and cultural changes we might face.

The 200th anniversary of Karl Marx's birth was exactly one month ago and a great deal was written about him and his ideas. There were articles about Marx the economist, the sociologist, the historian, the failed revolutionary and the caustic critic of capitalism. Re-reading Marx, I was particularly struck by how incredibly relevant his thinking still is on technological progress and its effects on society. For example, there are the famous sentences in "The German Ideology" – famous because they are so provocative – that say: "The phantoms of their brains have got out of their hands. They, the creators, have bowed down before their creations."

I do not share this pessimism about the future. Our future is not set in stone! On both a large and small scale, we can overcome the sense of powerlessness and – to use a Marxist term – alienation, if we stop calling on others to be responsible and start to realise that responsibility begins with us. Our fate lies in our own hands – what we make of it is up to us.

I think that the age of robots, algorithms and artificial intelligence should provide a welcome opportunity to us all – and especially to you, artists, natural scientists and humanities scholars – to prove Marx wrong. Not because of Marx, but for our own sake.

Thank you very much for listening. I hope you will enjoy your meal and some stimulating discussions.