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[Thank you. Good evening. It is a tremendous honor to be here.

Frank Schirrmacher was an intellectual giant. I had the privilege of meeting him only once. We had an intense conversation about the future of technology and the problem of the future itself, as seen from Silicon Valley and from Germany. This was just one of many subjects in which he was keenly interested and incredibly well-read, and it is on a related theme that I will make a few comments tonight.]

German Poetry Is Not Enough

It is a cliché that Germany is the land of poets and thinkers, and this is one cliché that is in some respects very obviously true.

One cannot speak of political ideas in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without speaking of German ideas. First communism and then, less uniquely, fascism, were both pioneered in Germany. The latecomer to modernity became the laboratory for its most radical and catastrophic experiments.

More important than political ideas, when it comes to natural science one cannot say a word without mentioning Germany, which was the unrivalled capital of science in the early twentieth century and the birthplace of quantum mechanics and of modern physics.

It is in some ways a commonplace and yet still underrated just how much it was always true that Europe, and within Europe Germany in particular, was the source of the ideas that would determine the destiny of the West. As for America, it has been successful through the importation of German scientific ideas, often in the embodied form of refugees from one or the other of Europe's crazy political ideas. Both the Manhattan Project of the 1940s and the Apollo program of the 1960s would have been unthinkable without European science.

As the wartime and Cold War contexts of those successes may remind us, both political ideas and scientific ideas are dangerous. Political ideas are risky, not just because they are not guaranteed to work, but because politics itself is bound up with violence. And technological ideas are risky because every new technology is potentially a new kind of weapon.

The 1950s phrase "Atoms for Peace" protested too much, immediately reminding its audience that modern physics gave us nuclear bombs. The occasion for the recent and impressive success of mRNA vaccines immediately reminds us of the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the bland phrase "gain of function," which seems to be an Orwellian euphemism for bioweapons research. Whether psychology is a real discipline at all may be in question, but one suspects that, if it worked, it could be used just as much for brainwashing as for benign self-improvement.

It is not clear whether the tradition of German natural science was able to fully reproduce itself on the foreign soil of America. Meanwhile Germans learned a key lesson from the violence of the twentieth century: they learned to fear extremes in both politics and technology. The recent decision to dismantle Germany's carbon-free base load nuclear power plants was a downstream consequence of this fear of extremes and yearning for safety.

For any vision of the future to have power, it must promise a future that looks different from the present. When Germans look to the future, they see these options:

Behind "door #1", Islamic theocracy: every woman is forced to wear a burqa.

Behind "door #2", Chinese Communist surveillance: every movement of every person is tracked at all times by a centralized AI.

Finally, behind "door #3", Greta's green future: everyone rides a bicycle.

There is no "door #4."

Concreteness lends power to a vision of the future, and Greta's promise seems reassuringly concrete. Compare the Greens, for example, to the CDU. How is a future governed by the CDU different in any concrete way from the present? The name itself of the CDU, reduced to a three-letter acronym, has become more abstract, less concrete, running away from its origins.

Nevertheless, despite the concreteness of bicycles, a significant part of the power of the green vision comes from what it rejects: endorsing the green future may be the only publicly acceptable way to express a veto over the other two futures. The green future also expresses a veto at a more fundamental level: it tends toward a rejection of as much action as can be rejected, a kind of minimalism driven by precautionary fear of human agency.

The all-powerful veto is less a German idea than a German mood: a longing to retreat from modernity into a poetic picture of life in green nature. Given the disasters of the twentieth century, this quietism is understandable. But indulging it will not guarantee a future of picturesque safety and stability.

Locally sourced organic food could perhaps feed a single privileged country; it cannot feed the world. Wind power can contribute to a complex energy mix; it cannot reliably keep any country warm in a cold winter. And even if renouncing GMOs were to reduce the occurrence of cancer, it cannot cure cancer, nor Alzheimer's, nor other diseases of old age.

In this sense, German poetry is not enough. What the world needs from Germany is ideas. Since Germany is the land where the disasters of the past most powerfully tempt people to hide from human agency and its terrifying potential, Germany is the key battleground for the future of the West: the choice facing Germans whether or not to think new thoughts in science and

technology may determine whether humanity as a whole has any chance to meet its challenges.

There is at least one German poet who managed to express the paradox of our predicament: Hölderlin, when he wrote in Patmos: „Wo aber Gefahr ist, wächst das Rettende auch.“

New ideas are dangerous. But we will not be saved without them. We should not forget that “peace and safety” is the slogan of the Antichrist. And today the Antichrist is more to be feared than Armageddon.

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