

In light of the war in Ukraine
On the Categorical Imperative
of Modernity

Initiative Part V

The Working Group **Common House Europe**
C. F. v. Weizsäcker-Society
Knowledge and Responsibility e.V.

In Part V

of its initiative paper, the working group – following Part IV entitled “*A Copernican Revolution for Peace*” – presents a compass for this “world drifting towards chaos” (v. Weizsäcker) for debate, for public debate: the draft of a ***Categorical Imperative for Modernity***.

The motive lies in the accelerating erosion of cooperative security policy – resulting in a renewed arms race in both conventional and nuclear weapons systems – precisely because ‘modern technology can turn war into a total catastrophe’ (v. Weizsäcker).

The occasion is Henry Kissinger's “**Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy**”, more precisely the note accompanying it and, finally, the doubt with which the note concludes: *Are we even capable today of conducting a public debate, “dispassionately” as Kissinger demands, regarding a categorical imperative on the horizon of a “final decision” in which “the vital interests of sovereign states” vs. “the lives of us all” – “perhaps” – are at stake?**

Nevertheless, **the signatories** share the desire and confidence that by initiating a “dispassionate public debate” on the *Categorical Imperative of Modernity* – provided that a debate of this nature is established and accepted – they will also “help those who must make these final decisions.” (H. Kissinger)

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Justus Frantz Retired General Harald Kujat Dr Bruno Redeker Professor Dr Horst Teltschik

* See annex: Note (B. Redeker) on Henry Kissinger's viewpoint and Europe today: **Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy** (R. Oldenburg Verlag 1974, 2nd edition, with an introduction by Helmut Schmidt; first edition New York 1957)

On the Categorical Imperative of Modernity – Man's Duty to His Existence¹

The draft is based on the writings of the working group and the fundamental reflections of the Weizsäcker societies, to which the draft in turn refers – analogous to the “circle of knowledge” (v. Weizsäcker) that must be traversed again and again, in which, on the other hand, “it is not decisive where we enter it”.

With the “ethics of modernity” as its hard core, so to speak, the categorical imperative of modernity both contains and reveals the message of the writings in their densest form:

Always act according to the maxim that humanity must not destroy itself, but rather, in its diversity, secure and preserve the possibility of a dignified future.

Mankind has many ways of destroying itself: from the gradual and obvious ruin of natural and socio-cultural foundations of life to interventions in their genetic makeup that “undermine the integrity of our image of humanity” (Hans Jonas).

However, one form of self-destruction now surpasses all others: war, even though, as von Weizsäcker said, “war is at least as old as advanced civilisation.” In the past, “not always nations, but humanity as a whole survived the greatest wars that were technically possible at the time.” Thus, it was once possible to say: *fiat iustitia, pereat mundus* – justice shall be done, even if the world perishes. Today, however, the situation is “**fundamentally** different from **all** previous ones” (v. Weizsäcker). It is so fundamentally different due to modern technology and, not least, the sword of Damocles that is nuclear weapons systems and the advancing algorithmisation of decision-making processes that today the “mortal adventure” of human existence is at stake and with it “the first premise of all obligation” and all law. (H. Jonas)

War is still possible; wars will continue to be waged. Immanuel Kant's three central questions, as transformed by v. Weizsäcker, remind us that “*we should know, what we must do*, to ensure and preserve a dignified future for humanity. *Then we can hope* to be able to bear the power and responsibility that the culture of will and reason of the modern age, with its scientific and technological revolution, has placed in our hands. We must be aware that we are not only responsible for ourselves, but also for others.”²

Annex: Note on Henry Kissinger's point of view and Europe today: **Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy**

- 1) The attempt to put the categorical imperative into words in the context of a “final decision” presupposes the duty of human beings to their existence – as evident, especially since we do not know whether evolution in the vastness of the universe has produced other such or similar forms of life over eons of development.

Carl Friedrich v. Weizsäcker reminds us: “The broadening of our horizons to millions of galaxies, to billions upon billions of stars, teaches us, of course, not to answer the question of the meaning of the world simply from the perspective of Earth.” – **Not simply** from the perspective of Earth! – The fact that humans exist does not imply or justify a duty to their permanent existence, any more than it implies or justifies the existence of life itself. That there should be life and ultimately humans can ultimately only be justified metaphysically, from a perspective that is suitable, among other things, for rehabilitating the concept of the sacred in the secular world.

- 2) Hans Jonas, for example, qualifies this responsibility with the words: “No hidden morality of private existence, only public-collective action for the sake of local effect can counter this”. And: “It is impossible to foresee what alliances with evil the good will have to enter into in order to prevent the even worse, indeed the absolutely inadmissible,” namely, “that man destroys himself”. (Organism and Freedom, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1973, p. 337)

“Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy”

Note (B. Redeker) on Henry Kissinger's point of view and Europe today

The “unchanged structure of power politics” analysed by v. Weizsäcker has “condemned” the major powers to the discovery that even in years of “cooperative bipolarity” and détente, they are “opposing candidates for hegemony The moment when this discovery would once again determine world politics was something I (v. Weizsäcker) already considered in the 1960s to be the most dangerous moment of the coming decades; today, it has arrived.”¹ That “today” was 1982. Now, war has returned to Europe, with the conflict over Ukraine and Russia's geostrategic position for the second time since the Second World War.

Henry Kissinger gives this unchanged structure – the logic and escalation of limited wars under the sword of Damocles of a strategic balance of nuclear weapons systems – a version that guides action, as it were: “In a community of ‘sovereign states’, a power can ultimately only enforce its interpretation of the law and the defence of its ‘vital interests’ if it is also prepared to use force if necessary. ... *Renouncing the use of force, therefore, while at the same time removing any penalty for intransigence, will deliver the international order to the mercy of the most ruthless and irresponsible partner.*” Kissinger prefaced this with: “It is an illusion of later generations that international regulations in the past were achieved solely through reasonable consideration and skilful negotiating tactics.”²

Herfried Münkler: “The ‘long road to the West’, as historian Heinrich August Winkler interpreted German history, could be followed by a short road to the East,” Münkler concludes at the end of his essay in SPIEGEL.³ Looking back at the collapse of the Soviet Union and the traditional, European-motivated world order, he sees “two fundamentally different options” for Europe in the geopolitical struggle between empires: a “European Union ... with much greater military capabilities,” at the “centre of which ... would then be its own European nuclear deterrent component.” The “alternative is to move closer to Russia and its political expectations. Then there would be no need to build up capabilities to deter the Kremlin.”⁴

Kissinger's “Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy” was published approximately five years before the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was not until years later that he acknowledged that disarmament and arms control had a certain chance of success. In the meantime, Kennedy brought the Cuban Missile Crisis to a successful conclusion “through bold and prudent action,” and “attempts at rapprochement between Moscow and Washington gradually determined world politics.” (Helmut Schmidt 1974) In his foreword, Kissinger acknowledges “the difficulty of political work” in that it “lies not in considering the problems, but in making the decision. It is said that governing means making choices. ... The terrible responsibility for the final decision, on which perhaps all our lives depend, rests on the shoulders ... of the leading statesmen, and they are given only one opportunity to make this decision.” That is why, at the end of his foreword, Kissinger calls for “a dispassionate public discussion (in order) to help those who have to make these final decisions.”

And today? Today, there are renewed calls for a public “debate on nuclear deterrence, in Europe” (Christoph Heusgen, current chairman of the Munich Security Conference [DLF, 1 p.m. news, 31 December 2024]). But awareness of the permanent danger of a nuclear war has largely faded. The supposed debates or discussions of the Ukraine war in the media discredit the policy of “change through rapprochement” in retrospect and are dominated by degenerate forms of real power politics. This means that there is no real sense of the potential danger inherent in the development of modern weapons systems, especially with regard to nuclear weapons systems and the increasing algorithmisation of decision-making processes.⁵

Are we even capable today of conducting a public debate, “dispassionately”, on a *Categorical Imperative* in the context of a “final decision” in which the “vital interests of sovereign states” versus “all our lives” – “perhaps” – are at stake?⁶

1) Possibilities and Problems on the Path to a Reasonable World Peace Order, Carl Hanser Verlag, Munich Vienna 1982, page 8; published in 2024 in Jog, Állam, Politika, University of Győr, Vol. 2024/4: translated into Hungarian by Daniel Krivanik.

2) Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy, 2nd edition, 1974, with an introduction by Helmut Schmidt, Part One (*“The Question of Survival”*), Chapter 1 (*“The Task of the Nuclear Age”*), page 4, italics by B. R.

3) The short route to the East, in: DER SPIEGEL, No. 47 / 26 November 2024

4) The “transatlantic West” would then be replaced by “the geopolitical concept of a Eurasian space stretching from Lisbon to Vladivostok, in which Moscow calls the shots.” Given “continued snubbing by the second Trump administration (and) a series of tempting offers from the Kremlin” against a backdrop of socio-political upheaval, Münkler does not rule out the possibility of the second option becoming reality.

5) It did not take into account human error and mistakes, for example, delusion and, ultimately, the fact that “the blessing we dream of can turn out to be a curse”. (Hannah Arendt, for illustration see also Stanley Kubrick's exemplary film “Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb” (1964).

6) *Kennedy in the aftermath of the Cuban Missile Crisis*: “Above all, nuclear powers, while defending their own vital interests, must avert confrontation that would force an adversary to choose between humiliating retreat and nuclear war. Such a course in the nuclear age would only prove the bankruptcy of our policy – or a collective death wish for the world.” *This, in turn, touches in a fundamental way on the question and task of an “ethics of modernity” (see the fundamental reflection on the project area of the same name by the Carl Friedrich v. Weizsäcker Societies) in the “cycle of knowledge” (C. F. v. Weizsäcker).*