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ACCOUNTABILITY: WHAT DOES IT MEAN, AND HOW CAN IT BE ACHIEVED IN POLICY, POLITICS, AND LAW?

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Panel Discussion (on site) and Online Seminar

Of course, dear Daniel Benjamin, dear Mitchell Ash, dear Deborah Amos, dear Lawrence Douglas, dear Tatjana Hörnle and dear Ortwin Renn, we could not have known how dramatically topical the subject of this evening would become – the question of accountability has always been topical, its meaning and its reality in politics and law. However, in the face of an incursion in the middle of Europe in violation of international law, involving not only the Russian Federation but also Belarus, the question of accountability is even more dramatic. I do not need to say much about this – many of us have seen the photomontage showing Vladimir Putin in the dock at Nuremberg, and the great European and transatlantic solidarity we are witnessing right now gives us hope that this is not just a photomontage by a shrewd photo editor on social media.

An expert on ancient religions in the presidency of an academy is not an expert on accountability and should not try to present himself as such in a greeting. If I may, however, present two reading fruits on the subject by way of introduction.¹ The first is an observation from an essay by Maritza Lozano, Michael Atkinson, and Haizhen Mou on Democratic Accountability in Times of Crisis from last year.² The three authors write: “[...] it is easier to be accountable when outcomes are favorable, but favorable outcomes depend on adherence to the norms of democratic accountability. The democracies that suffered reversals of various kinds during and after the Great Recession were those with not only poor economic performance but also high levels of corruption and little respect for the rule of law. [...] Democratic resilience is more likely to be observed when governments both manage crises and adapt parliamentary operations to crisis conditions.”

At first glance, it seems almost trivial to emphasize the connection between accountability successfully established in the political process and other successfully designed executions of a democratic society in this way. However, in reality, of course, such conformity to rules is not trivial at all, but difficult to introduce into everyday life and to maintain in everyday life. The definition of accountability proposed by Mark Philp in 2009 – “A is accountable with respect to M, when some individual, body or institution, Y, can require A to inform and explain/justify his or her conduct with respect to M”³ – also seems simple and is, in my layman's opinion, so helpful for this reason alone: What is clearly and simply formulated (*clare et distincte* is Descartes' term) can also be better demanded and verified in everyday processes.

I still remember exactly how unkindly, almost derisively, Hans Jonas' “Prinzip Verantwortung” (in English: “Principle of Responsibility”) was spoken of within German university philosophy in my student days.

¹ I would like to thank Roland Röhmlidt very warmly for the stimulating discussions and the helpful information on the topic and the main points of this greeting.

² *Democratic Accountability in Times of Crisis: Executive Power, Fiscal Policy and COVID-19*, in: *Government and Opposition. An International Journal of Comparative Politics*, 2021, 1–22.

³ *Delimiting Democratic Accountability*, in: *Political Studies* 57 (1), 28–53, here: 32.

When I studied philosophy in Marburg in the early eighties of the twentieth century, this book was considered too woolly by the Kantians and not visionary enough by the followers of Ernst Bloch's "Principle of Hope". However, why am I introducing this central idea by Hans Jonas here at all? Well: responsibility and accountability are closely related. While responsibility refers to a person's duty, regardless of whether something has already happened or not, accountability generally refers to what happens after something has happened. In a lecture on the occasion of the fortieth anniversary of the publication of Hans Jonas's monograph, Wolfgang Huber pointed out that, like accountability, the principle of responsibility can only flourish in a culture of responsibility. The principle of responsibility must be part of everyday social and political life in a democratic society, and it can only do so, if appropriate behaviour is part of that everyday life and rules are established as well as practiced. In this respect too, responsibility and accountability are closely related. I quote the words of Huber from 2017: "An ethic of responsibility can contribute to this most readily if it can be based on a freedom that is both secured and demanded by the law. In this respect, the preservation and further development of democracies based on the rule of law proves to be a task not to be underestimated for all those who are interested in responsibly shaping the future. If one looks at the plutocratic, oligarchic, populist and presidential erosions of democracy in our time, a rich field of activity opens up in this respect as well."⁴

This is not the first event at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy to address the topic of accountability. To my no small amazement, there was an event in 2003, for example, that addressed many issues still concerning us today and which will concern us this evening. Edzard Reuter turned seventy-five in 2003 and my pre-predecessor Dieter Simon spoke of a culture of responsibility and its practice in everyday life. He presented the jubilarian as an example of such everyday culture beyond hypocrisy. There is a lack of a culture of responsibility in society, politics and science. Simon spoke of a "society of responsibility" and of the fact that it is not easy to "find someone who will stand up for what happens to us".⁵ Here we really are in the middle of our topic, but also in the middle of the conflict over Ukraine and what we here in Central Europe are doing or should have done long ago, as Timothy Gorton Ash recently bitterly remarked.

This is also not the first joint event with the American Academy, nor the first joint event Mitchell Ash has organized. Mitch Ash is a bridge builder between the Berlin universities and Harvard University, already because of his biography, but also through his activities at American and German as well as Austrian universities. I exceedingly appreciate his precise language, his charming exhortations to differentiate more carefully and to discard inherited prejudices – and in preparing for this concise presentation, I noticed that among Mitch Ash's many publications is one on the Schönbrunn Zoo, which I absolutely must read in preparation for my next visit to Vienna. I thank him wholeheartedly for preparing this evening and I am looking forward to another opportunity to collaborate with the American Academy and Daniel Benjamin. To be continued! Oder deutsch: Fortsetzung folgt!

⁴ *Ehrfurcht vor dem Heiligen. Zur Aktualität des Prinzip Verantwortung von Hans Jonas*, in: *Pastoraltheologie* 107, 411–426, here: 426 (translation by C. M.).

⁵ *Verantwortung in heutiger Zeit. Festveranstaltung anlässlich des 75. Geburtstages von Edzard Reuter*. Berlin 2003.