Creating Space for Opportunity

■ New Europe – I consider the ability to aspire to good intentions to be one of mankind’s finest characteristics. To do so means to have a vision, and thus have a hand in shaping the future. At the turn of the millennium, the European Union resolved to become the world’s most dynamic knowledge-based economic area by the year 2010. That was, and is, a lofty aspiration, and it is questionable whether Europe can still achieve it. But steps have been taken in the right direction. One very important step, in my opinion, was the establishment of the European Research Council (ERC), which took up its work at the beginning of this year. The Secretary General of the Research Council is Ernst-Ludwig Winnacker, former President of the German Research Foundation. In this issue he presents a personal introduction to this new body (starting on page 14). For the Max Planck Society, the establishment of the ERC is a remarkable development. It is an example of European research funding in accordance with a principle that has always been of central importance to us: supporting the finest minds in the field of basic research. Decisions on how to distribute the funding in the new Research Council will be made exclusively by scientists, based solely on the quality of the applications. In this way, the ERC can ensure that it is supporting truly outstanding research. I am delighted that the European Union has created this body and granted it the necessary autonomy.

■ Old rules – Since late last year, stem cell research has once again become the focus of political debate in Germany. The discussion centers on the cut-off date: according to the law, German scientists may work only on embryonic stem cell lines that originated prior to January 1, 2002. Anything else would be a punishable offense. This ruling was arrived at four years ago as a compromise between the opponents of stem cell research, who are primarily concerned with protecting the life of the embryo, and its proponents, who anticipate that such research will benefit medicine. The problem that has since arisen is that the cell lines approved in Germany are contaminated with animal cell products and no longer meet international scientific standards. The greatest disadvantage, however, is that the cells cannot be used for potential medical applications. The Max Planck Society thus supports the call for new rules. For the research community, it would be best if the cut-off date were abolished. However, we naturally recognize the concern that embryos could be gathered solely for research. A new compromise that could prevent this would be, for example, a “trailing” cut-off date. In other words, cells would have to have originated a certain period of time prior to the current date. And in any case, any potentially successful treatments that might be developed abroad in the future would have to be approved in Germany. Patients could otherwise claim that their lives were being put at risk. My wish for the New Year would be for politicians in Germany to arrive at a solution that enables German scientists to contribute to medical progress.

■ New focus – Advances in medicine will continue to be the main focus of the center of advanced European studies and research (caesar) in Bonn. The research center, which is backed by a foundation funded by the German government and the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, will now be focusing on neurodegeneration and neuroregeneration, as well as neurosensory science and neuroprosthetics. At the request of the founders, the Max Planck Society has not only developed a new concept for caesar, but is now also lending its expertise and experience to support the center in implementing this reorientation. By embracing our proven principles and methods, which have long been the cornerstone of excellence at our Max Planck institutes, caesar, too, can achieve the ambitious goal that was set for it when it was first founded: to open up a new dimension in research that extends beyond Germany’s borders.