

OPEN LETTER BY THE MAX PLANCK SOCIETY



The recent open letter from FENS and SfN, which suggested that the Max Planck Society (MPG) failed to provide support to Dr. Nikos Logothetis and his work with animals at the Max-Planck-Institute for Biological Cybernetics was unfortunately based on an incomplete and one-sided view of the situation. Up until now, the MPG has tried to limit public comments about the situation in order to protect the personal interests of Dr. Logothetis. However, the recent highly sensationalized discussions about the decision of the MPG to suspend part of Dr. Logothetis management function, has led to serious misunderstandings in the public sphere, and the MPG would like to take this opportunity to clarify the facts of the situation:

The scientific excellence of Dr. Nikos Logothetis and the value that his work brings to the study of the brain is without question. Furthermore, the MPG and its President have publicly stated their continued commitment to animal research several times (<https://www.mpg.de/9228364/>; <https://www.mpg.de/12165102/>; <https://www.zeit.de/2018/25/tierversuche-experimente-affen-china-max-planck-gesellschaft-martin-stratmann>), including research with non-human primates. The decision to stop research with non-human primates was solely that of Dr. Logothetis. This choice was much to our regret, as we had advised him otherwise. At no time did anyone at the MPG suggest that he make this change, which not only affected his work, but also the research of junior scientists active in the department. Dr. Logothetis' research had, and still has, the support of the Max Planck Society. The threats and harassment he has received are unacceptable, unconscionable, and should have been the focus of the collective outrage of the scientific community. The MPG paid and provided full legal and security support to Dr. Logothetis and his family, and continues to do so. The MPG has, for example, taken successful legal action against illegal online videos about Dr. Logothetis' department. Criticism that the MPG should have pursued legal action against those who created this hostile situation does not take into consideration German laws that in case of public interest protect those who film undercover footage.

We are fully convinced that experiments with non-human primates will be of increasing importance in the future and as such, they will require public support. We have defined our ethical standards for performing animal research in a white paper (www.mpg.de/10882259/) which the MPG's Senate adopted in November 2016. This paper clearly states the necessity of animal experimentation in biomedical research and defines our unwavering commitment to the responsibility of each Max Planck researcher for treating our laboratory animals with the highest ethical respect.

The role of a Max Planck Director is unique because a Director is not only a scientist, but also responsible for all managing duties within his or her department. This means that in addition to their primary research function, Directors are responsible for organizational questions, hiring of coworkers, and overseeing day-to-day management functions of the institute as a whole. This dual role is particularly critical for departments involved in animal experimentation. In a situation where so much responsibility lies with one person, it goes without saying that any and all shortcomings need to be remedied immediately when they become apparent. This is also in the interest of all other researchers working with animals.

After carefully reviewing the situation in the Logothetis department, the MPG became aware of a number of organizational and management shortcomings in addition to the alleged violations of animal protection laws. We were for example extremely disappointed to find that simple compliance guidelines, such as separation of responsibilities for animal welfare, animal husbandry, and animal experimentation were not met in the Logothetis department.

In parallel, German authorities initiated an independent investigation of animal welfare issues at the institute and arrived at the decision to impose a penalty order against Dr. Logothetis and several other members of his department for allegedly grave violations of German animal welfare laws. The court did not make use of the less serious possibility to terminate the proceeding in exchange for payment of a fine. This penalty order is currently under appeal, a process that may take time to resolve. The penalty order is, after all, a judicial decision to which we must attach some importance.

The President asked Dr. Logothetis, as a matter of best practice, to voluntarily withdraw from his position of responsibility for animal experiments at the institute while the legal proceedings continue. Dr. Logothetis refused to do this, and the Executive Committee of the MPG thus decided that it was necessary to suspend this one aspect of his management function, i.e. the part for supervision of animal welfare and experimentation (www.mpg.de/11950954/). It is important to emphasize that this action does not prevent Dr. Logothetis from continuing to pursue his research interests. He is still responsible for his research program, deciding the scope, the specific questions that are addressed, the approach that is taken, the persons responsible for pursuing a particular research question, data analysis, interpretation, manuscript preparation etc. Indeed, the MPG continues its substantial financial support of research in the Logothetis department including ongoing investments in facilities that will allow Dr. Logothetis to follow through on his decision to pursue future research interests in rodents. Research in the Logothetis laboratory continues, but Dr. Logothetis is no longer responsible for oversight of the animal facility, or for performing animal experiments.

In democratic societies, animal experiments in basic research can only be conducted based on trust in our institutions. Because we recognize the critical importance of these experiments, we must ensure that this confidence in us is never called into doubt. Likewise, we must not prejudice anyone, but we must also not make excuses for a possible case of misconduct and for substandard organization. Until a legally valid judgement has been made, Dr. Logothetis must be assumed to be innocent – just as in any other case. Therefore, the MPG continues to support him in both legal and scientific aspects as we have done in the past.

Regarding the evaluation of the Logothetis department's research, the MPG would like to state the following: The confidentiality of the situation in fall 2017 with a penalty order imminent prohibited the full disclosure of information to the Scientific Advisory Board (SAB) as it is otherwise standard procedure. An amalgamation of scientific evaluation and imminent criminal proceedings was foreseeable, therefore the SAB's original date was cancelled. Taking into account the importance of scientific evaluations for young researchers, a written evaluation by experts was offered to all junior research group leaders.

The MPG takes full responsibility for the decisions to pause Dr. Logothetis' oversight of the animal facility and his personal performance of animal experiments, to support him in the legal process, and to continue investing in animal experimentation.