



# Koen Margodt

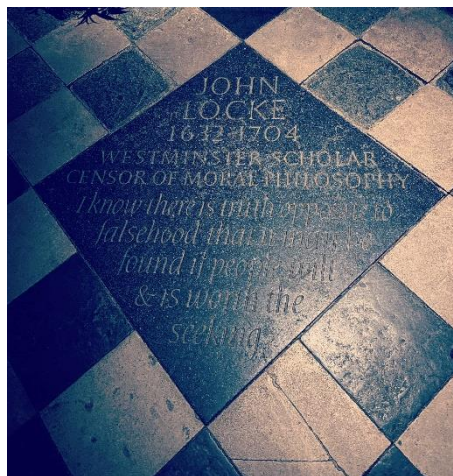
Ph.D. in Moral Philosophy

[www.koenmargodt.com](http://www.koenmargodt.com)

## Science, Ethics and Truth

Dr Koen Margodt

**My recent involvement in a debate on dolphin captivity reminded me of the value of these three words – science, ethics and truth. The animal debate is not only about what’s in the animals’ best interests, but it’s also about truth and truthfulness. Any debate benefits from an open-minded approach, where a variety of sound arguments come from many different angles of expertise. It is about having the courage to challenge your own thinking and listening to those you disagree with. The world needs independent thinkers, to whom science, ethics and truth all matter in equal measure. I’m sharing here some reflections on a few of my experiences over the years - both positive and negative.**



*“I know there is truth opposite to falsehood  
that it may be found if people will & is worth the seeking.”*

Quote on a plaque-stone commemorating philosopher John Locke  
at Christ Church Cathedral, Oxford.

Picture by Dr Anna Scarna

Nearly twenty years ago, I was a member of the Belgian Deontological Committee on Animal Experiments. I was invited as an ethicist, as I had just finished my PhD on animal ethics. The other members were mainly involved with animal experiments, as Professors for universities or researchers in the corporate world. At the time there was a great deal of public attention on the remaining places in Belgium that performed primate experiments. Minister Laurette Onkelinx, responsible for animal welfare, asked our committee to set up a working group to discuss the ethics of primate experiments. I was quite excited and keen to contribute. We

discussed her request with some twenty members, all seated around a large round table, in Brussels. I realized quickly that I was the only one in support of such a working group. What were the arguments from the others?

One Professor argued that prohibiting the use of primates would lead to a ban on using dogs and other animals; fearing thus a slippery slope. Another commented that the Minister hadn't listened to the Deontological Committee regarding legislation prohibiting the use of great apes, so why listen to her now? Someone from a pharmaceutical company remarked that ethics is merely about opinions while science is about protocols. Ethics thus lacked objectivity and is a matter of personal taste, a bit like whether you prefer the colour red or green. I questioned him about whether he believed the same about other ethical topics such as abortion and euthanasia. He was clearly puzzled by my proposition.

A Professor at Leuven University, involved with primate research, attended the following meeting. He presented his argument in quite an authoritarian way. While looking me straight into the eyes, he said he was only interested in talking with experts who had a portfolio of internationally peer reviewed publications. I had just finished an 850-page PhD on the moral status of great apes. I considered my time at Ghent University as a sabbatical, four years of interruption from my job in the private sector. I was focused initially on completing my PhD writing, not on contributing to publications. I could have responded that I only wanted to discuss ethical topics with fellow ethicists, but felt I'd lower myself to his level of disparaging discourse. When it became clear that the working group would not become a reality, I resigned. I explained in my letter to Minister Onkelinx that I didn't want the committee to use the excuse that they counted an ethicist amongst them, while not even being interested in serious ethical considerations. I received a warm, supportive note back.

In March 2024, I was invited to the Flemish parliament to bring ethical reflections on the keeping of dolphins in captivity. I showed a video testimony by Dr Jane Goodall and brought an analysis, which I explained was backed up by various international marine mammal scientists, each of them dolphin experts. Afterwards, Director Lars van den Ham of dolphinarium Boudewijn Seapark, who had been invited as a speaker too, was quoted in the press as saying that those who had expressed criticism of dolphinariums weren't dolphin experts. In a follow-up meeting he wondered who knew Koen Margodt and that speaker Michel Vandebosch – the leading animal advocate in Belgium – only came to their dolphinarium with journalists. It jumped into my mind that he didn't wonder who knows Mr van den Ham and who knows Dr Jane Goodall.

Minister Weyts had ordered a study on the last dolphinarium in Belgium, by a marine zoologist who is working as a consultant in the captive dolphin industry. When reading the study, I noticed that she emphasized the importance of captive breeding but didn't mention any detail on the breeding history at the dolphinarium or provide any data on survival rates. Fortunately, through my own research, I discovered a website that collected data on breeding in dolphinariums. It turned out that since 1987 thirty dolphins were born in this park. 25 died, five are still alive. This is a high mortality for a long-lived species like bottlenose dolphins. I wondered why this important information was lacking in the study. It is a bit like a student submitting a master's thesis, where a chapter is missing in support of the main conclusion. Similarly, construction of an outdoor pool was suggested as the way forward for the dolphins. However, once again scientific research showing that pool construction can cause a lot of stress for the dolphins was not mentioned.<sup>1</sup> The study appeared to be very biased based on the information I was able to uncover.

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<sup>1</sup> More information on the dolphin debate in the Flemish parliament can be found [here](#).

Scientists and ethicists – and many others – have an important role to play in discussions on the use of animals. We need reliable information and sound arguments. Unfortunately, some try to justify using animals by suggesting that ‘Science’ is at their side. That outdated cliché creates opposition between the so-called ‘calm, rational scientists’ and ‘sentimental animal lovers’ and ‘emotionally driven animal rights extremists’. Such deliberate division is not credible in our modern world. It is time to put to rest such over simplified arguments that create division and rivalry. Take Dr Jane Goodall for example. She is simultaneously one of the greatest scientists the world has known yet also a passionate animal advocate. Times are changing. These days, many scientists describe animals as individuals with complex emotional lives, intelligence and minds of their own, thanks to the trail-blazing work by Jane Goodall and others. The public is becoming increasingly aware and sensitive to animal welfare concerns and issues related to animal ethics. A recent global survey found that the majority of people are now opposed to keeping dolphins in tanks and there are growing ethical concerns about animal experiments, no matter what scientific value these may have.

It is easy to avoid a genuine debate by trying to render those you disagree with as irrelevant. Some people represent themselves as authorities but are selective in the information they present. They frame their position – highlighting what supports them, while ignoring other crucial information. They use *ad hominem* arguments, attacking people rather than criticizing their ideas. They try to discredit those who disagree with them – claiming that those who oppose them are not worth listening to. That such people are non-scientists, non-experts, nobodies. The primate researcher at the deontological committee tried this. The director of dolphinarium Boudewijn Seapark attempted the same more recently.

The road of listening to others and digesting their arguments is more complicated yet essential. My first mentor in ethics was Professor Jaap Kruithof. I wrote my very first papers on animal ethics during one of his courses, after I had discovered the work of Peter Singer. Kruithof was the first to notice my potential and invited me at once to deliver two presentations on animal ethics. Since the 1960s, Kruithof was a towering figure in Belgium. Together with Professor Leo Apostel he laid the foundation for moral philosophy at Ghent University and taught tens of thousands of students in various faculties. He played a crucial role in society, addressing topics such as emancipation, sexuality, abortion, euthanasia, animal welfare, ecology, developing countries and supporting the vulnerable. He was a gifted debater and could easily defeat others with his arguments. In short, he was an authority. Once, at the end of a public lecture, I noticed how someone with a speech disorder fiercely challenged him. The audience was sighing and expressing sounds of disapproval. Kruithof calmly asked for silence and went into a long conversation. Even though they disagreed, it resulted in a fruitful and respectful discussion. Kruithof praised the person for his arguments. I felt proud to be one of his students.



Professor Jaap Kruithof (1929-2009),  
who supported my interest in animal ethics  
(Archief Universiteit Gent ©, Archief Universiteit Gent)

When my wife Iris and I lived years ago in a small, former forester's house in the woodlands, we were visited by a far neighbor on occasions. He was the new forester. He knew we were vegetarians; we knew he was a hunter. He stalked a mother fox and her pups, with the intention of shooting them. We never told him we had seen the fox family and that their den was near our house. Even though we strongly disagreed on some of our core values, we appreciated one another in many other ways. We had fruitful conversations on topics related to animal welfare. More recently, we returned to visit him. He was seriously ill, but we were happy to reunite.

I believe in constructive debate. Scientists, ethicists and others all have an equally vital role to play. We need to argue based upon reliable, scientific information and consistent, logical arguments. We need to challenge our own thinking as much as others, all in a respectful, humane and empathetic way. We can present, discuss and evaluate a wide variety of views and positions. We need to expose incorrect and misleading information. We need to try to fill gaps and blind spots.

We should also question our own agendas. Scientists may have their own interests, which could be detrimental to the animals they work with. For example, what argument would a scientist using primates for biomedical experiments use when debating animal ethics? What would a marine zoologist working for the captive dolphinarium industry say about the welfare of dolphins in tanks? What would a zoologist working for a European zoo say about EAZA's – the European Association of Zoos and Aquaria – view on killing healthy 'surplus' animals for reasons of population management? What argument would you expect to hear from a University Professor developing more efficient techniques of factory farming and animal slaughter about eating animals? They may be willing to discuss ways of improving animal welfare, but when you question whether it is justified to use animals, it often becomes more complicated.

Over the years I've come to see that the debate on animal ethics is not only about helping animals. It is also about the rules of the debate. It is about truth and truthfulness. Any debate benefits from an open-minded approach, where a variety of sound arguments come from many different angles of expertise. There needs to be a respectful approach where those who disagree have the courage to challenge their own thinking and to listen respectfully to those whom they disagree with. Fortunately, I see a growing number of people becoming engaged in the animal debate who are genuinely interested in open dialogue. Various scientists and others are open to reflect together on complicated ethical questions. This sounds promising. We need a variety of arguments. We need independent thinking. We need a debate where science, ethics and truth all matter. It may sound idealistic, but I believe it's the only way forward.

Koen Margodt

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