

Ethics and Science: The movie as a trigger to discuss ethical aspects in science

Through out the year, there are several film screenings, organised by many different people at the BOKU. They focus on different topics and are not only organized for fun, for entertainment, but with certain rationals behind. Just like here at the Science film festival. The main focus on our event, the BOKU-Kino, is ethics.

What is ethics and why ethics? Ethics deals with human actions. Often, our actions are based on moral decisions, more often than you probably will assume. The UNESCO, initiated an Ethics Education Program in 2004. Already in 2001, Mauricio Iaccarino, General secretary of the Interational Council for Science in the UNESCO stated:

„As research and technology are changing society and the way we live, scientists can no longer claim that science is neutral but must consider the ethical and social aspects of their work.“

It makes sense. Who is responsible of the situation regarding the ecologic, economic and social conditions worldwide? It's not only companies, managers, politicians – all of us, scientists as well, are responsible of our world. Evidently, there is a need for an ethical reflection. Concerning science, we have to ask particularly for the consequences of our research, as Iaccarino claims, *„in order to adapt the use of scientific knowledge – namely new forms of technology – to a general context that is in agreement with the basic principles of our civilisation.“*

The BOKU commits itself to a set of ethical principles and values, which are are written down in the BOKU ethics charta. This charta constitutes a sound basis for reflection of working at BOKU, upon both, our acting in the past and in the future. It is our ambition to raise awareness and consciousness for the consequences of scientific research – for example by the means of the BOKU-Kino.

Our event is open to the general public, but first of all, our target groups are students as well as scientists at the BOKU:

- Students, as they are members of the BOKU and as they will work in academia, economy and institutions up to the government, often as decision makers, later on.
- Scientists, as – in academia – they are increasingly collaborating with industry and are receiving more financing therefrom than in the past.

How can we spark interest in ethical questions in students? We present **documentaries** followed by a **panel discussion**. Documentaries turned out to be adequate in this context, because scientists in academia prefer to discuss rational scenarios based on real world experimentation. The members of the panel discussions following the screenings are experts with different backgrounds.

The discussions are appreciated by the students. Why? It allows them to be in touch with interdisciplinary experts, who are open to questions from the audience. The debates reflect views on technological and scientific advances as well as on the prevailing political and socio-cultural Zeitgeist. So, all together, this could influence a sense of what is morally correct in the audience, as best, at the end of the evening.

We choose **topics** related to BOKU research areas, including issues like

- health,
- food,
- energy etc.

Examples are

- sustainability and bioeconomy
- consumption and disposability of resources,
- renewable energies,
- recycling,
- soil sealing,
- areas of conflict as for example the situation of industrialized countries compared with countries of the south, etc.

We discuss questions in the field of applied ethics, pick up topics on a meta-level like: basic questions concerning

- freedom and responsibility in scientific research,
- conflict of interests,
- education,
- integrity in research and in science communication.

A few important conclusions of what have we learned so far from our discussions, are

- After such an evening, the film and panel discussion, you go home thinking „I should change my behaviour“, in whatever way that may be, but very often you find yourself not changing anything due to dependencies or substantial needs, like providing for a family etc. or simply comfort/conformism or thinking in terms of status. But: even little changes make a difference.
- It is not always easy to get the scientists into the podium.
- Scientific questions always have a close ethical component. The dual use problematic is present in many of those questions.
- There is no „ethically neutral“ answer – each attempt to provide an answer or solve a problem comes with a personal Weltanschauung, ideology, philosophy and personal values. It is important to declare these as such and not to generalize
- Scientific and ethical questions are not easy to separate from political questions.