Ethics in Natural Sciences: Pros and Cons of an Ethics Memorandum at the University

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He is the recipient of the DECHEMA Award 1988 for developing a new cloning system in staphylococcus carnosus, and of the DGHM Award 1990 for outstanding achievements in microbiological genetics.

Professor Friedrich Götz writes about his topic:
In a wearisome process modern science finally became independent of tutelage by clergy and government. Liberty and independence of research is a highly respected good in most European counties; in Germany it is guaranteed in the basic law. The dominating ethos in science today is mainly orientated to gain and increase knowledge; there is a high degree of consensus in this respect. However, there are other elements of scientific practice such as the selection of scientific aims and methods or research close to application which are so far not covered by a common scientific community is faced with fundamental criticism and skepticism.

Against this background it is being discussed at some universities to work out an ethics memorandum containing an ethics code for scientists on a non-contentious basis. However, there are a number of questions which deserve careful consideration: Is it wise to create a special ethics for scientists unlinked to a universally valid ethics? Why to chain only scientists to ethics guidelines and not those too who make use of the scientific outcomes (e.g. industry)? Must an isolated ethics for a special profession, which is not in a living exchange with a common ethics, not be necessarily sterile? Is it not true that a special scientific ethics makes only sense as part of a general ethics which originates from our culture and not from the university? What are the ethical problems in science, especially in natural science, which require regulation? Are there alternatives to an ethics memorandum?