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Exploring the Meaning of Democratic Deliberation over Synthetic Biology

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From ethics to policy

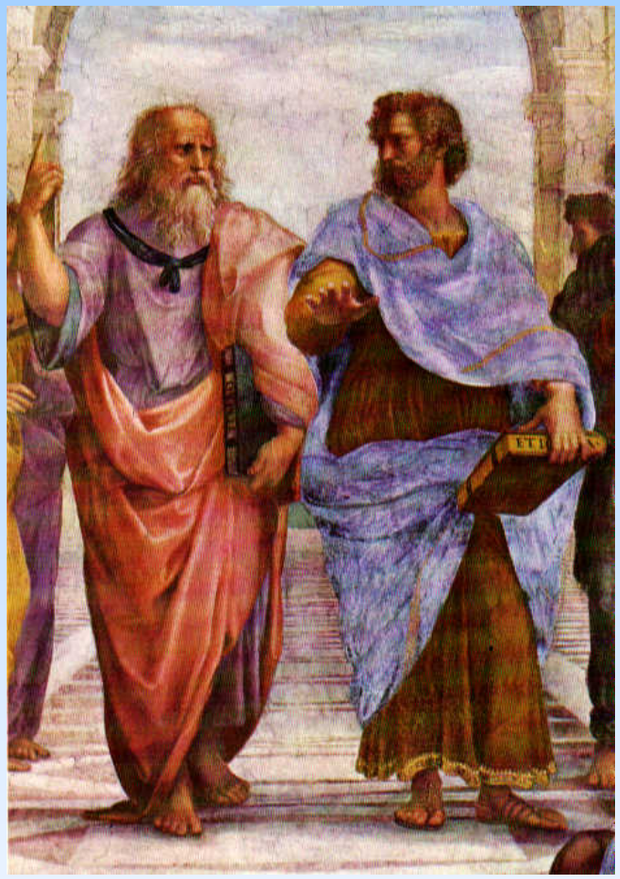
Broad categories of moral questions

- How does it change the human relationship to nature?
- What are the potential harms and benefits?
- Will it lead to more or less just outcomes?

What is the Meaning of Public Deliberation?

- Questions about the value of deliberation
- Questions about who the relevant “public” is
- Questions about what “deliberation” means

What is deliberative democracy?



- Public discussion that seeks collective solutions to challenging social problems
- Go beyond the aggregation of interests
  - –What if moral conflict is so deep that participants are unwilling to consider other viewpoints?
- “The operational requirements…are daunting”

Power and Participation

- Who are the relevant stakeholders?
- The problem of deferring to experts
  - Power and inequality impede genuine discussion over important topics
- The use of “able” representatives
  - How representative are representatives?
  - Bono: “I represent a lot of people [in Africa] who have no voice at all . . . they haven’t asked me to represent them.”

How inclusive should the process be?

- Avoiding the “urgency narrative”
  - Rachel Grob and NBS: a subset of vocal advocates shaped a powerful discourse around NBS which equates NBS with saving lives -- the “urgency narrative.”
- Balancing the need for more voices and the value of regular interaction among small groups

The need for “balanced, factual information”

- PCSBI: urged the use of “clear and accurate language”
- How will material be vetted?
- How will the government address scientific ambiguity or political dispute about how to define and/or weigh benefits and risks?

Importance of *framing*

- Loss aversion

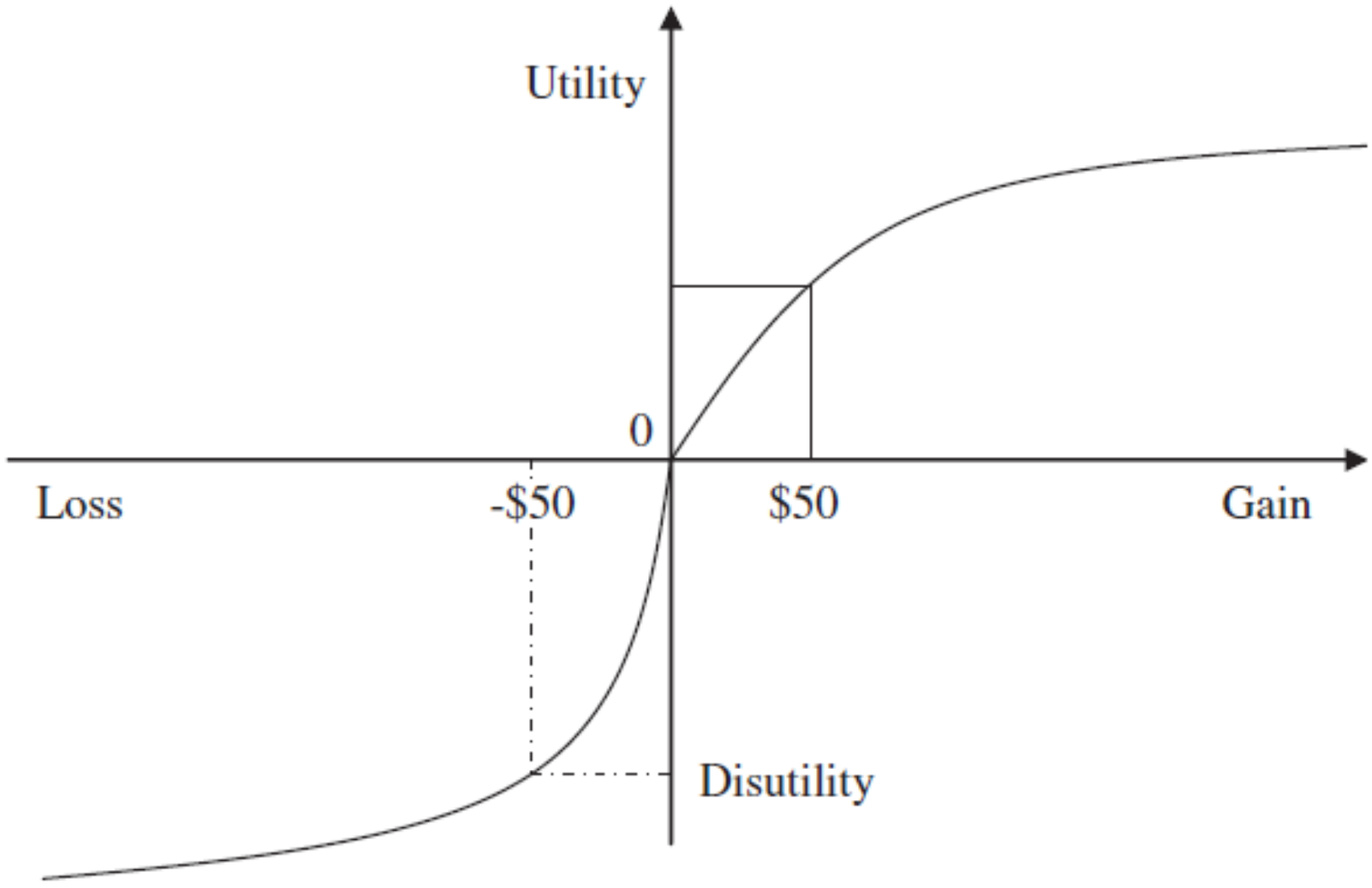


Figure 1 Loss Aversion Utility Function

Importance of *framing*

- Loss aversion
- Hyperbolic discounting

Is it possible to create a successful public deliberation?

- Explosion of deliberative forums in the 1990s
- Problem Formulation and Options Assessment (PFOA) methodology
  - –explicitly designed to encourage deliberation about the regulation of nanotechnology and genetically engineered organisms
  - –The process strives to be “transparent, inclusive and informed by the best available science”
- Need to be explicit about tradeoffs

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