

**UC Berkeley  
Haas School of Business  
Economic Analysis for Business Decisions  
(EWMBA 201A)**

**The economic agent (PR 3.1-3.4, 5.1-5.3 and 5.5)  
Decision making under certainty and uncertainty**

**Lectures 1-2  
Aug. 13, 2011**

## Prologue

Many people think that economists view people as being super-rational and find the material to be highly theoretical and not very “realistic” .

*... theories do not have to be realistic to be useful...*

Even though the assumptions are pretty unrealistic, the theory predicts behavior well and is quite useful.

## Decision making under certainty

The “standard” theory of the economic agent (consumer, manager, policy maker) is best understood as follows:



Behavioral economics incorporate more “realistic” assumptions about rationality and decision making based on findings in psychology and related fields.

## Consumer preferences (PR 3.1)

Consider some finite set of alternatives or consumption bundles  $(x, y, z, \dots)$ .

- For our purposes it is convenient to consider only the case of two goods, since we can then depict the consumer's choice behavior graphically.
- We denote a bundle by a single symbol like  $x$ , where  $x$  is simply an abbreviation for a list of two numbers  $(x_1, x_2)$ .

Bear in mind: the two-good assumption is more general than you might think it first. Why?!

Formally, we represent the consumer's preferences by a binary relation  $\succsim$  defined on the set of alternatives.

For any pair of bundles (or baskets)  $x$  and  $y$ , if the consumer says that  $x$  is at least as good as  $y$ , we write  $x \succsim y$  and say that  $x$  is *weakly preferred* to  $y$ .

Bear in mind: economic theory often seeks to convince you with simple examples and then gets you to extrapolate. This simple construction works in wider (and wilder circumstances).

From the weak preference relation  $\succsim$  we derive two other relations on the set of alternatives:

- Strict performance relation

$$x \succ y \text{ if and only if } x \succsim y \text{ and not } y \succsim x.$$

The phrase  $x \succ y$  is read  $x$  is *strictly preferred* to  $y$ .

- Indifference relation

$$x \sim y \text{ if and only if } x \succsim y \text{ and } y \succsim x.$$

The phrase  $x \sim y$  is read  $x$  is *indifferent* to  $y$ .

## The basic assumptions about preferences

The theory begins with three assumptions about preferences. These assumptions are so fundamental that we can refer to them as “axioms” of consumer theory.

### [1] Completeness

$$x \succsim y \text{ or } y \succsim x$$

for any pair of bundles  $x$  and  $y$ .

### [2] Transitivity

$$\text{if } x \succsim y \text{ and } y \succsim z \text{ then } x \succsim z$$

for any three bundles  $x$ ,  $y$  and  $z$ .

Together, completeness and transitivity constitute the formal definition of *rationality* as the term is used in economics.

Rational economic agents are ones who

- have the ability to make choices [1], and
- whose choices display a logical consistency [2].

The preferences of a rational agent can be represented, or summarized, by a *utility function* (more later).



The third axiom about consumer's preferences for one bundle versus another is that "more is better" (goods are desirable).

[3] Monotonicity

if  $x_1 \geq y_1$  and  $x_2 \geq y_2$  then  $x \succsim y$

for any pair of bundles  $x$  and  $y$ .

## Indifference curves

We next represent a consumer's preferences graphically with the use of *indifference curves*.

The consumer is indifferent among all consumption bundles represented by the points graphed on the curve.

The set of indifference curves for *all* consumption bundles is called the *indifference map*.

– PR Figures 3.1-3.4 here –

## The marginal rate of substitution (MRS)

The maximum amount of a good that a consumer is willing to give up in order to obtain one additional unit of another good.

The *MRS* at any point is equal to the *slope* of the indifference curve.

If indifference curves are “convex” (bowed inwards), then the *MRS* falls as we move down the indifference curve, that is it diminishes along the curve.

– PR Figures 3.5-3.6 here –

## Utility

A numerical score representing the satisfaction (or happiness?) that a consumer has from a given bundle.

An ordinal utility function replicates the consumer's ranking of bundles – from most to least preferred.

$$x \succsim y \text{ if and only if } u(x_1, x_2) \geq u(y_1, y_2).$$

The Cobb-Douglas utility function is widely used to represent preferences

$$u(x_1, x_2) = x_1^\alpha \cdot x_2^\beta$$

where  $\alpha, \beta > 0$ . (Can you draw the Cobb-Douglas indifference curves?)

Paul Douglas (1892-1976) – a University of Chicago economist and a Democratic U.S. Senator from Illinois (1949-1967).

## Budget sets (PR 3.2)

The *budget set* includes all bundles on which the total amount of money spent given the market prices  $p_1$  and  $p_2$  is less or equal to income  $I$

$$p_1x_1 + p_2x_2 \leq I.$$

Rearranging,

$$x_2 \leq \frac{I}{p_2} - \frac{p_1}{p_2}x_1.$$

The slope of the budget line  $-p_1/p_2$  is the negative of the ratio of the two prices.

– PR Figures 3.10-3.12 here –

## Consumer choice (PR 3.3)

The *optimal* consumption bundle is at the point where an indifference curve is *tangent* to the budget line, that is

$$MRS = \frac{p_1}{p_2}.$$

But maximization is sometimes achieved at a so-called corner solution in which the equality above does not hold.

This is an important result that helps us understand and predict (using econometric tools) consumers' purchasing decisions.

– PR Figures 3.13 and 3.15 here –

## **Foundations of Economic Analysis (1947)**



**Paul A. Samuelson (1915-2009) – the first American Nobel laureate in economics and the foremost (academic) economist of the 20th century (and the uncle of Larry Summers...).**



## Revealed preferences (PR 3.4)

Economists test for consistency with maximization using *revealed preference* axioms.

Revealed preference techniques can be used to “recover” the underlying preferences and to forecast behavior in new situations.

The Revealed preference barouche was first suggested by Paul Samuelson in his remarkable *Foundations of Economic Analysis* (1947).

– PR Figures 3.17-3.18 here –

## Takeaways

- We explained what economists mean by rationality, because that term is often misunderstood.
- The techniques of economic analysis may be brought to bear on modeling and predicting behavior in many situations.
- Consumer theory can help managers to think *systematically* through their product decisions.

## Decision making under uncertainty

- Uncertainty is a fact of life so people's attitudes towards risk enter every realm of economic decision-making.
- We *must* study individual behavior with respect to choice involving uncertainty.
- Models of decision making under uncertainty play a key role in every field of economics.

## Risk (known probabilities) (PR 5.1)

Probability is the likelihood that a given outcome will occur. If there are two possible outcomes having payoffs  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  and the probabilities of these outcomes are  $\pi_1$  and  $\pi_2$ , then the *expected value* is

$$E(x) = \pi_1 x_1 + \pi_2 x_2$$

where  $\pi_1 + \pi_2 = 1$  (a probability distribution). More generally, when there are  $n$  outcomes the *expected value* is

$$E(x) = \pi_1 x_1 + \pi_2 x_2 + \cdots + \pi_n x_n$$

where  $\pi_1 + \pi_2 + \cdots + \pi_n = 1$ .

When there are two outcomes  $x_1$  and  $x_2$  occurring with probabilities  $\pi_1$  and  $\pi_2$  the *variance* is given by

$$\sigma^2 = \pi_1[x_1 - E(x)]^2 + \pi_2[x_2 - E(x)]^2,$$

and when there are  $n$  outcomes  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_n$  occurring with probabilities  $\pi_1, \pi_2, \dots, \pi_n$  the variance is given by

$$\sigma^2 = \pi_1[x_1 - E(x)]^2 + \pi_2[x_2 - E(x)]^2 + \dots + \pi_n[x_n - E(x)]^2.$$

The *standard deviation* is the square root of the variance  $\sigma$  and it is a standard measure of variability.

**An example (PR Tables 5.1-5.3)**

	Outcome 1		Outcome 2		$E(x)$
	$p_1$	$x_1$	$p_2$	$x_2$	
Job 1	.5	2000	.5	1000	1500
Job 2	.99	1510	.01	510	1500

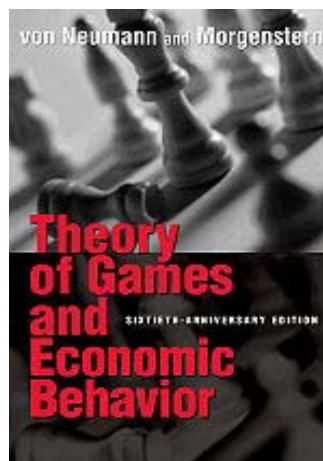
	Outcome 1		Outcome 2		$\sigma^2$
	$x_1$	$[x_1 - E(x)]^2$	$x_2$	$[x_2 - E(x)]^2$	
Job 1	2000	250,000	1000	250,000	500
Job 2	1510	100	510	9,900	99.5

**A modified example (PR Table 5.4)**

	Outcome 1		Outcome 2		$E(x)$
	$p_1$	$x_1$	$p_2$	$x_2$	
Job 1	.5	2100	.5	1100	1600
Job 2	.99	1510	.01	510	1500

	Outcome 1		Outcome 2		$\sigma^2$
	$x_1$	$[x_1 - E(x)]^2$	$x_2$	$[x_2 - E(x)]^2$	
Job 1	2000	250,000	1000	250,000	500
Job 2	1510	100	510	9,900	99.5

## The paternity of decision theory and game theory (1944)





## Preferences toward risk (PR 5.2)

The standard model of decisions under risk (known probabilities) is based on von Neumann and Morgenstern Expected Utility Theory.

Consider a set of *lotteries*, or gambles, (outcomes and probabilities). A fundamental axiom about preferences toward risk is *independence*:

For any lotteries  $x, y, z$  and  $0 < \alpha < 1$

$$x \succ y \text{ implies } \alpha x + (1 - \alpha)z \succ \alpha y + (1 - \alpha)z.$$

Expected Utility Theory has some very convenient properties for analyzing choice under uncertainty.

To clarify, we will consider the *utility* that a consumer gets from her or his income.

More precisely, from the consumption bundle that the consumer's income can buy.

Expected utility is the sum of utilities associated with all possible outcomes, weighted by the probability that each outcome will occur.

In the job example above the expected utility from job 1 is given by

$$E(u) = .5u(\$2000) + .5u(\$1000),$$

and the expected utility from job 1 is given by

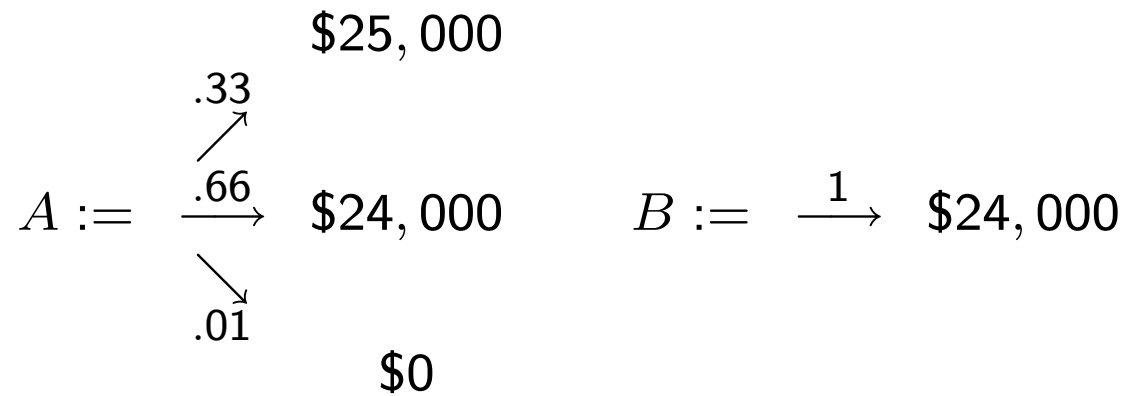
$$E(u) = .5u(\$1510) + .5u(\$510).$$

– PR Figures 5.3-5.4 here –

## Behavioral economics (PR 5.5)

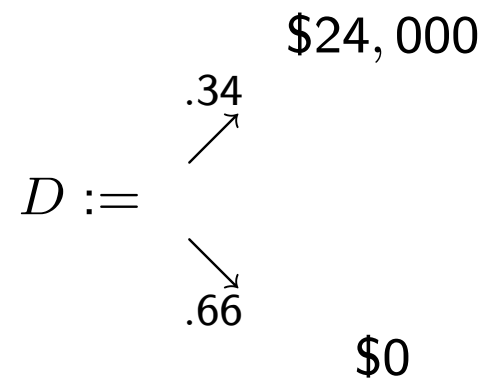
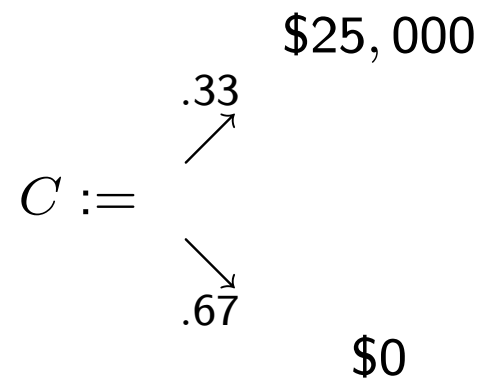
### Allais (1953) I

- Choose between the two gambles:



## Allais (1953) II

– Choose between the two gambles:



## Ambiguity (unknown probabilities)

### Ellsberg (1961)

An urn contains 300 marbles; 100 of the marbles are red, and 200 are some mixture of blue and green. We will reach into this urn and select a marble at random:

- You receive \$25,000 if the marble selected is of a specified color. Would you rather the color be red or blue?
- You receive \$25,000 if the marble selected is *not* of a specified color. Would you rather the color be red or blue?

## Prospect Theory (Kahneman and Tversky, 1979)

Explains several key expected utility violations, including the classical paradox of Allais (1953).

Prospect theory has two ingredients:

- Reference point The point from which the agent makes a decision.
- Loss aversion The aggravation from losing is greater than the pleasure from gaining.

⇒ The *endowment effect* – the tendency to value an asset more when you own it...

## Takeaways

- Consumers and managers frequently make decisions with uncertain consequences.
- Facing uncertain choices, Expected Utility consumers maximize the average expected utility associated with each outcome.
- Individual behavior is often contrary to the assumptions of Expected Utility Theory (an important frontier of choice theory).



## **Problem set I**

- PR 3 – exercises 2, 4, 5, 13 and 15 (pages 107-8).
- PR 5 – exercises 1-5 and 8 (pages 191-3).