Preferences, utility and decision making

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Goals of this lecture

Utility

- Understand the concept of preferences.
- See how utility can be used to formalize preferences.
- Show how we can combine utility and probability to deal with decision making under uncertainty.

The decision-theoretic foundations of artificial intelligence.

- Probability: how likely things are?
- Utility: which things do we want?

Interpretations of probability

- Objective: inherent randomness.
- Frequentist: long-term averages.
- Algorithmic: program complexity.
- Subjective: uncertainty.

Interpretations of utility

- Monetary.
- Psychological.
- "true" value of things?

Rewards

- We are going to receive a reward r from a set $\mathcal{R}$ of possible rewards.
- We prefer some rewards to others.

Example 1 (Possible sets of rewards $\mathcal{R}$)

- $\mathcal{R}$ is a set of tickets to different musical events.
- $\mathcal{R}$ is a set of financial commodities.

Preferences

Example 2 (Musical event tickets)

- Case 1: $\mathcal{R}$ are tickets to different music events at the same time, at equally good halls with equally good seats and the same price. Here preferences simply coincide with the preferences for a certain type of music or an artist.
- Case 2: $\mathcal{R}$ are tickets to different events at different times, at different quality halls with different quality seats and different prices. Here, preferences may depend on all the factors.

Example 3 (Route selection)

- $\mathcal{R}$ contains two routes, one short and one long, of the same quality.
- $\mathcal{R}$ contains two routes, one short and one long, but the long route is more scenic.

Preferences among rewards

Preferences

Let $a, b \in R$.

- Do you prefer a to b? Write $a \succ^* b$.
- Do you like a less than b? Write $a \prec^* b$.
- Do you like a as much as b? Write $a \eqsim^* b$.

We also use $\succsim^*$ and $\precsim^*$ for I like at least as much as and for I don't like any more than

Properties of the preference relations.

(i) For any $a, b \in R$, one of the following holds: $a \succ^* b$, $a \prec^* b$, $a \eqsim^* b$.

(ii) If $a, b, c \in R$ are such that $a \precsim^* b$ and $b \precsim^* c$, then $a \precsim^* c$.

Is transitivity a reasonable assumption?

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Consider $r = (a, b)$, such that:

- $r \succ^* r'$ if $a > a'$ and $|b - b'| < \epsilon$
- $r \succ^* r'$ if $b >> b'$.

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Example 4 (Route selection)

- Each reward $r \in R$ is the time it takes to travel from A to B.
- We prefer shorter times.
- There are two routes, P_1, P_2.
- Route P_1 takes 10 minutes when the road is clear, but 30 minutes when the traffic is heavy. The probability of heavy traffic on P_1 is q_1.
- Route P_2 takes 15 minutes when the road is clear, but 25 minutes when the traffic is heavy. The probability of heavy traffic on P_2 is q_2.

Exercise 1

Say $q_1 = q_2 = 0.5$. *Which route would you prefer?*

Preferences among probability distributions

Preferences

Let P_1, P_2 be two distributions on $(R, \mathcal{F}_R)$.

- Do prefer P_1 to P_2? Write $P_1 \succ^* P_2$.
- Do you like P_1 less than P_2? Write $P_1 \prec^* P_2$.
- Do you like P_1 as much as P_2? Write $P_1 \eqsim^* P_2$.

We also use $\succsim^*$ and $\precsim^*$ in the usual sense.

Utility

In order to assign preferences to probability distributions, we use the concept of utility.

Utility

Definition 5 (Utility)

The utility is a function $U : R \to \mathbb{R}$, such that for all $a, b \in R$

$$a \succsim^* b \quad \text{iff} \quad U(a) \geq U(b), \tag{2.1}$$

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$$\mathbb{E}_P(U) = \sum_{r \in R} U(r) P(r) \tag{2.2}$$

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Assumption 1 (The expected utility hypothesis)

The utility of P is equal to the expected utility of the reward under P. Consequently,

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Example 7

r	U(r)	P	Q
did not enter	0	1	0
paid 1 CU and lost	−1	0	0.99
paid 1 CU and won 10	9	0	0.01

Table : A simple gambling problem

	P	Q
$\mathbb{E}(U \mid \cdot)$	0	−0.9

Table : Expected utility for the gambling problem

Monetary rewards

Example 8

Choose between the following two gambles:

A The reward is 500,000 with certainty.

B The reward is 2,500,000 with probability 0.10. It is 500,000 with probability 0.89, and 0 with probability 0.01.

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Choose between the following two gambles:

A The reward is 500,000 with probability 0.11, or 0 with probability 0.89.

B The reward is: 2,500,000 with probability 0.1, or 0 with probability 0.9.

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Exercise 2 (Is the following statement true or false?)

For any finite U, if gamble A is preferred in the first example, gamble A must also be preferred in the second example.

The St. Petersburg Paradox

A simple game [Bernoulli, 1713]

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How much are you willing to pay, to play this game once?

A 0

B 1-2

C Between 2 and 10?

D Between 10 and 1000?

E More than 1000?

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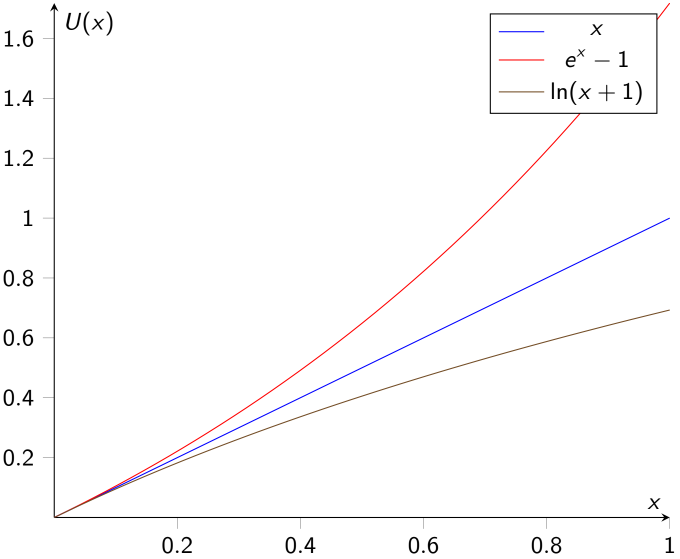
- If your utility function were linear you'd be willing to pay any amount to play.

Concave versus convex functions



Convex functions

Definition 10

A function g is convex on A if, for any points $x, y \in A$, and any $\alpha \in [0, 1]$:

$$\alpha g(x) + (1 - \alpha)g(y) \geq g[\alpha x + (1 - \alpha)y]$$

Theorem 11 (Jensen's inequality)

If g is convex on $\mathcal{S}$ and $x \in \mathcal{S}$ with measure $P(A) = 1$ and $\mathbb{E}(x)$ and $\mathbb{E}[g(x)]$ exist, then:

$$\mathbb{E}[g(x)] \geq g[\mathbb{E}(x)]. \tag{2.4}$$

Example 12

If the utility function is convex, then we choose a gamble giving a random gain x rather than one giving a fixed gain $\mathbb{E}(x)$. Thus, a convex utility function implies risk-taking.

Concave functions

Definition 13

A function g is concave on $\mathcal{S}$ if, for any points $x, y \in \mathcal{S}$, and any $\alpha \in [0, 1]$:

$$\alpha g(x) + (1 - \alpha) g(y) \leq g[\alpha x + (1 - \alpha) y]$$

Example 14

If the utility function is concave, then we choose a gamble giving a fixed gain $\mathbb{E}[X]$ rather than one giving a random gain X. Consequently, a concave utility function implies risk aversion.

Example 15 (Insurance)

The act of buying insurance can be related to concavity of our utility function.
Let d be the insurance cost, h our insurance cover and ϵ the probability of needing the cover.

Exercise 3

Assume that $U(x) = \ln(C + x)$. C can be seen as the amount of credit that we can sustain before becoming ruined.

- *If $\epsilon > 0$, $h > C$, how high a premium d are we willing to pay?*
- *What if $h = (1 - p)C$, with $p \in (0, 1)$?*

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The company has a linear utility, and fixes the premium d high enough for

$$d > \epsilon h. \tag{2.6}$$

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Summary

- We can subjectively indicate which events we think are more likely.
- Using relative likelihoods, we can define a subjective probability P for all events.
- Similarly, we can subjectively indicate preferences for rewards.
- We can determine a utility function for all rewards.
- Hypothesis: we prefer the probability distribution (over rewards) with the highest expected utility.
- Concave utility functions imply risk aversion (and convex, risk-taking).

[1] Morris H. DeGroot. *Optimal Statistical Decisions*. John Wiley & Sons, 1970.

[2] Milton Friedman and Leonard J. Savage. The expected-utility hypothesis and the measurability of utility. *The Journal of Political Economy*, 60(6):463, 1952.

[3] Leonard J. Savage. *The Foundations of Statistics*. Dover Publications, 1972.