

Utilitarianism and the original position

1 Why the parties might choose average utilitarianism

	Possible outcome 1 <i>probability × value</i> = <i>expected value</i>	Possible outcome 2 <i>probability × value</i> = <i>expected value</i>	Expected utility <i>sum</i> <i>of expected values</i>
Option 1	$\frac{3}{4} \times 100 = 75$	$\frac{1}{4} \times 80 = 20$	95
Option 2	$\frac{1}{3} \times 90 = 30$	$\frac{2}{3} \times 120 = 80$	110

Table 1 Illustration of the rule to maximize expected utility

	A	B	C	D	E	Total	Average
Principles 1	10	45	40	70	50	215	$215 \div 5 = 43$
Principles 2	60	25	30	20	65	200	$200 \div 5 = 40$

Table 2 Average utility

	A	B	C	D	E	Expected Utility
Principles 1	$10 \div 5 = 2$	$45 \div 5 = 9$	$40 \div 5 = 8$	$70 \div 5 = 14$	$50 \div 5 = 10$	sum = 43
Principles 2	$60 \div 5 = 12$	$25 \div 5 = 5$	$30 \div 5 = 6$	$20 \div 5 = 4$	$65 \div 5 = 13$	sum = 40

Table 3 Expected utility assuming equal probabilities

2 What probabilities do they not know?

2.1 The probability of being any particular person?

“The first difficulty with the average principle I have already mentioned in discussing the maximin rule as a heuristic device for arranging the arguments favoring the two principles. It concerns the way that a rational individual is to estimate probabilities. This question arises because there seem to be no objective grounds in the initial situation for assuming that one has an equal chance of turning out to be anybody.”¹

2.2 The probability of being in any particular position?

“Since the maximin rule takes no account of probabilities, that is, of how likely it is that the circumstances obtain for their respective worst outcomes to be realized, the first condition [under which it makes sense to use the maximin rule] is that the parties have no reliable basis for estimating the probabilities of the possible social circumstances that affect the fundamental interests of the persons they represent.”²

¹ John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, (Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 168. This is on p. 145 of the revised edition.

² John Rawls, *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, (Harvard University Press, 2001), p. 98.