Extending the original position: Revisiting the Pattanaik critique of Vickrey/Harsanyi utilitarianism

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Abstract

Harsanyi’s original position treats personal identity, upon which each individual’s utility depends, as risky. Pattanaik’s critique is related to the problem of scaling “state-dependent” von Neumann-Morgenstern utility when determining subjective probabilities. But a unique social welfare functional, incorporating both level and unit interpersonal comparisons, emerges from contemplating an “extended” original position allowing the probability of becoming each person to be chosen. Moreover, the paper suggests the relevance of a “Harsanyi ethical type space”, with types as both causes and objects of preference.

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