

Elements of Microeconomics: Discussion Section 4

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Outline

This week will cover chapters 1 and 2 of the Mankiw textbook:

- ① Ten principles of economics
- ② Thinking like an economist

Essentially just a gentle introduction:

- What is economics?
- What do economists do?
- How do economists think?

Main takeaway from this week:

A little bit of intuition goes a long way.

There is usually a nice everyday analogy for questions in microeconomics.

How people make decisions

1. People face trade-offs.

There are finite and scarce resources.

2. The cost of something is what you give up to get it.

Everything is opportunity cost!

3. Rational people think at the margin

What will a small change in X do to Y?

4. People respond to incentives

How can we change behavior?

How people interact

This is the bread and butter of microeconomics!

5. Trade can make everyone better off.

Everyone can do what they do best.

6. Markets are usually a good way to organize economic activity.

Markets solve the information problem.

7. Governments can improve market outcomes.

What happens when individuals do not internalize their costs?

How the economy as a whole works

Microeconomics aggregates up to macroeconomics.

8. A country's standard of living depends on its ability to produce goods and services.

Why do we see such large differences between countries?

9. Prices rise when the government prints too much money.

Too much money chasing too few goods is one cause of inflation.

10. Short-run trade-off between inflation and unemployment.

The "Phillips Curve."

Trade-offs

You are trying to decide whether to go on a beach trip during your first spring break. What costs do you need to consider?

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You are trying to decide whether to go on a beach trip during your first spring break. What costs do you need to consider?

- ① Dollar cost of the vacation: transportation, food, renting a house . . .
- ② Money you could make if you worked your part-time job instead
- ③ Studying you could get done: preparation for finals, work on semester projects, etc.

The economist as scientist

Provocative!

How are economists like scientists? How are economists not like scientists?

“Imagine how much harder physics would be if electrons had feelings.”

- Richard Feynman, theoretical physicist

Economists work with models, which rest on assumptions. Let's look at a few.

Circular flow

model1.png

Production possibility frontier

model2.png

PPF of a firm

Let's start an Italian restaurant that makes pizzas and sandwiches.

- 1 What will our production possibility frontier look like?
- 2 Why will it take the shape that it has?
- 3 How can we read the opportunity cost? Does it matter which part of the PPF we look at?
- 4 Why might the shape change over time?

CPF of an individual

Now suppose we are *going* to the Italian restaurant with a group of friends, and we want to decide what to order. Pizzas are \$10, sandwiches are \$5, and we have \$100 to spend.

- 1 What will our consumption possibility frontier look like?
- 2 What is the opportunity cost of a pizza? Does it matter where on the CPF we are?
- 3 What will happen to the CPF if we have \$200 to spend?
- 4 What will happen to the CPF if the price of sandwiches increases to \$10?

Circular-flow diagram of the Italian restaurant economy

Suppose the entire economy consists of Italian restaurants: during half of the week we work in one, and during the other half we buy food from them.

- What does the circular-flow diagram look like?
- What is missing from our model?

Economists, economics, and economic reality

Economists are often asked to guide economic policy.

- What are positive and normative statements?
- Why might two economists make different suggestions?
- Why might politicians ignore economists' suggestions?