Chapter Four

Utility

Preferences - A Reminder

$x \succ y$: x is preferred strictly to y.

$x \sim y$: x and y are equally preferred.

$x \succsim y$: x is preferred at least as much as is y.

Preferences - A Reminder

Completeness: For any two bundles x and y it is always possible to state either that

$$x \succsim y$$

or that

$$y \succsim x.$$

Preferences - A Reminder

Reflexivity: Any bundle x is always at least as preferred as itself; *i.e.*

$$x \succsim x.$$

Preferences - A Reminder

Transitivity: If
x is at least as preferred as y, and
y is at least as preferred as z, then
x is at least as preferred as z; *i.e.*

$$x \succsim y \text{ and } y \succsim z \implies x \succsim z.$$

Utility Functions

A preference relation that is complete, reflexive, transitive and continuous **can be represented by a continuous utility function**.

Continuity means that small changes to a consumption bundle cause only small changes to the preference level.

Utility Functions

A utility function U(x) represents a preference relation $\succsim$ if and only if:

$$x' \succ x'' \quad \Longleftrightarrow \quad U(x') > U(x'')$$

$$x' \prec x'' \quad \Longleftrightarrow \quad U(x') < U(x'')$$

$$x' \sim x'' \quad \Longleftrightarrow \quad U(x') = U(x'').$$

Utility Functions

Utility is an ordinal (i.e. ordering) concept.

***E.g.* if U(x) = 6 and U(y) = 2 then bundle x is strictly preferred to bundle y. But x is not preferred three times as much as is y.**

Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

Consider the bundles (4,1), (2,3) and (2,2).

Suppose (2,3) $\succ$ (4,1) ~ (2,2).

Assign to these bundles any numbers that preserve the preference ordering;
e.g. U(2,3) = 6 > U(4,1) = U(2,2) = 4.

Call these numbers **utility levels**.

Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

An indifference curve contains equally preferred bundles.

Equal preference $\Rightarrow$ same utility level.

Therefore, all bundles in an indifference curve have the same utility level.

Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

So the bundles (4,1) and (2,2) are in the indiff. curve with utility level U $\equiv$ 4

But the bundle (2,3) is in the indiff. curve with utility level U $\equiv$ 6.

On an indifference curve diagram, this preference information looks as follows:

Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves
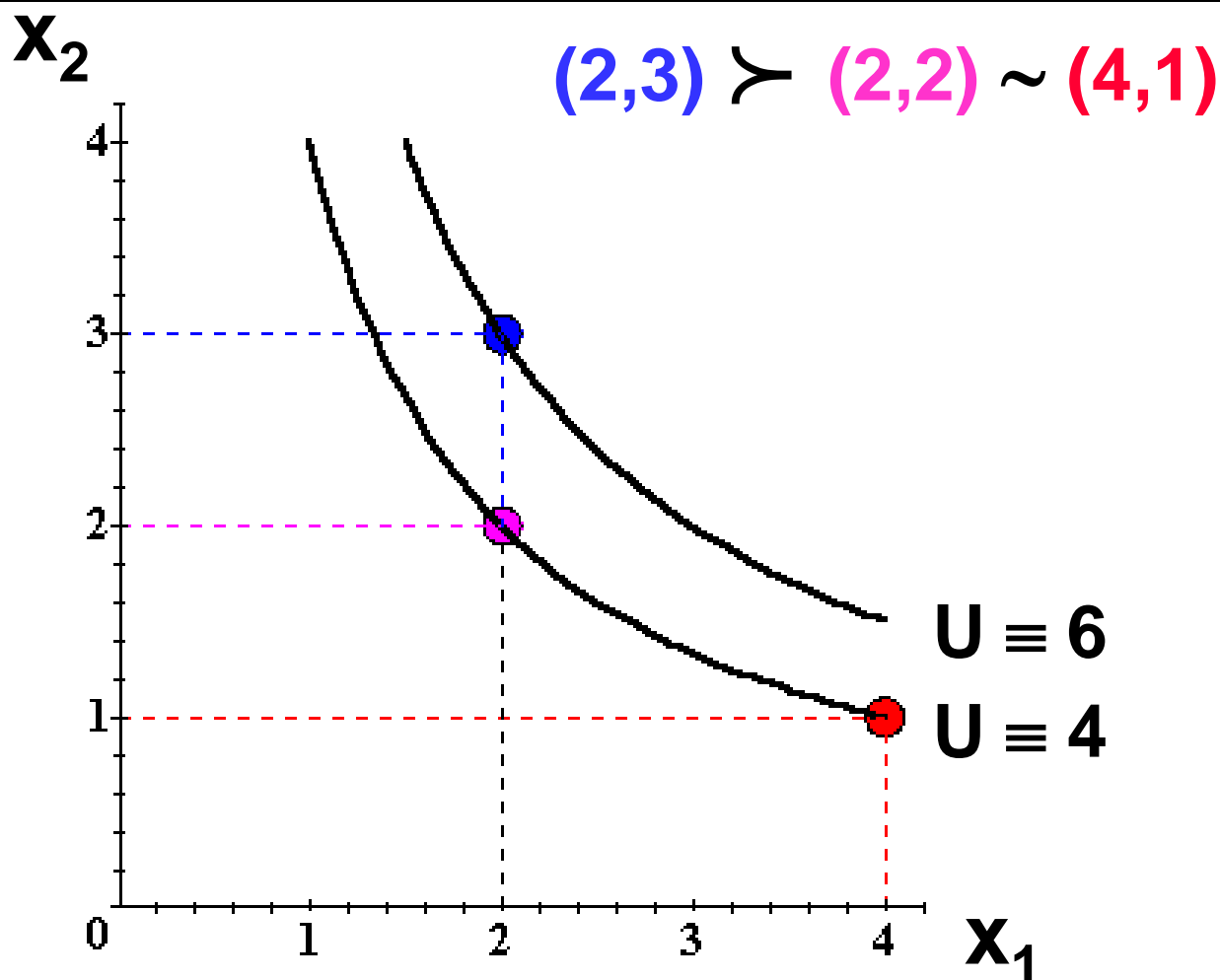
Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

Another way to visualize this same information is to plot the utility level on a vertical axis.
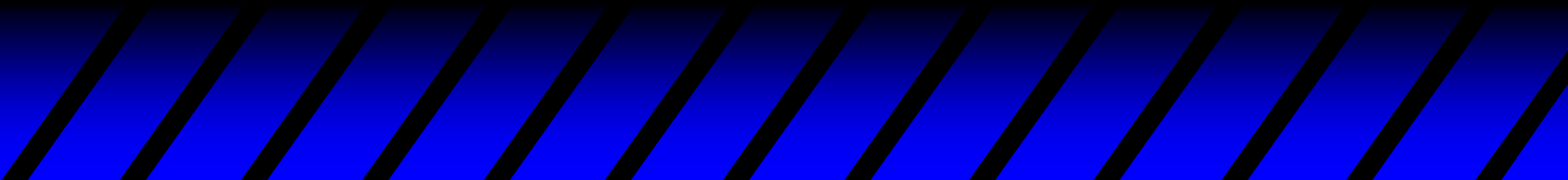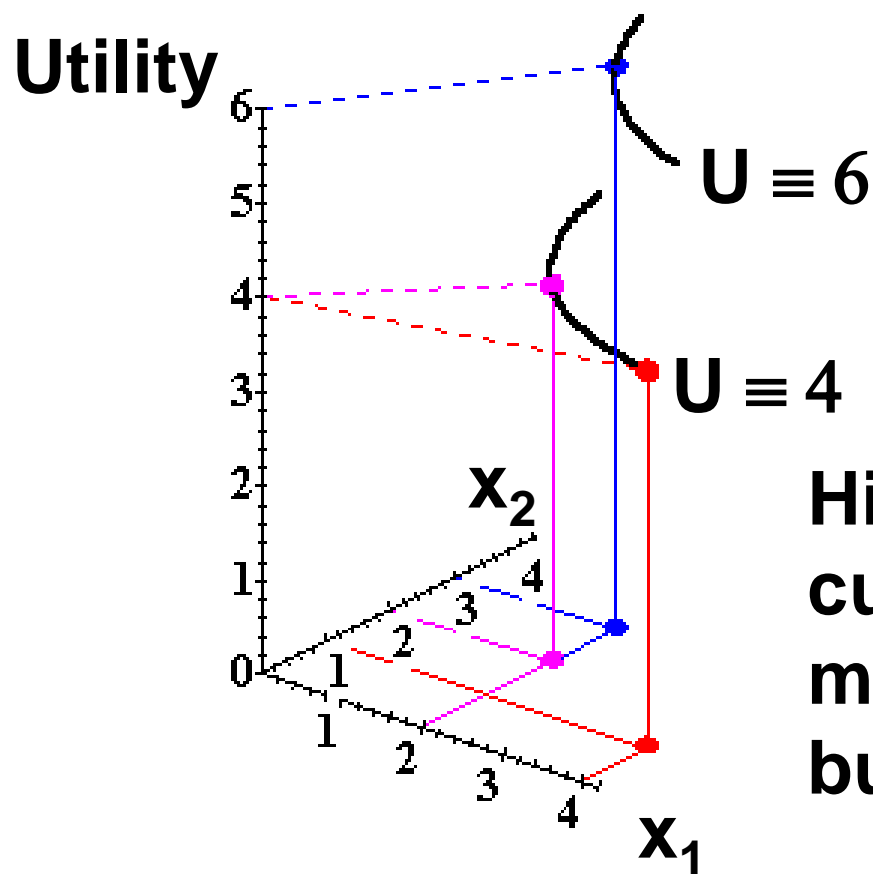
Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

3D plot of consumption & utility levels for 3 bundles
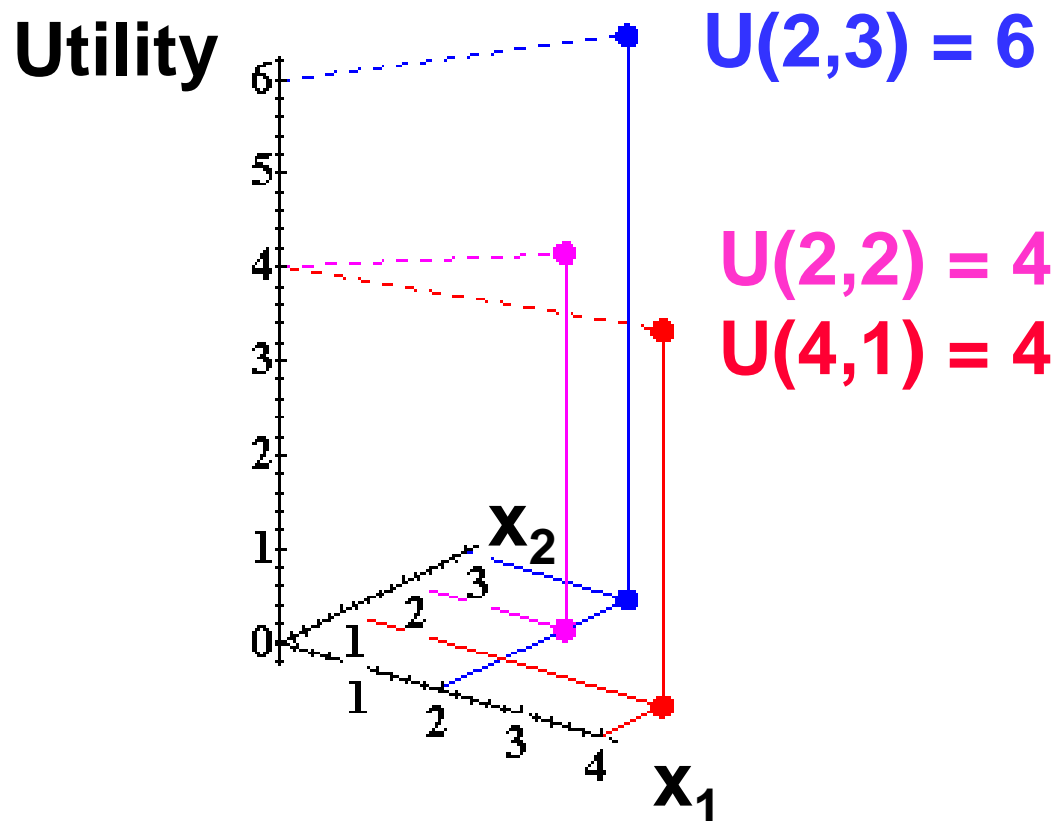
Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

This 3D visualization of preferences can be made more informative by adding into it the two indifference curves.
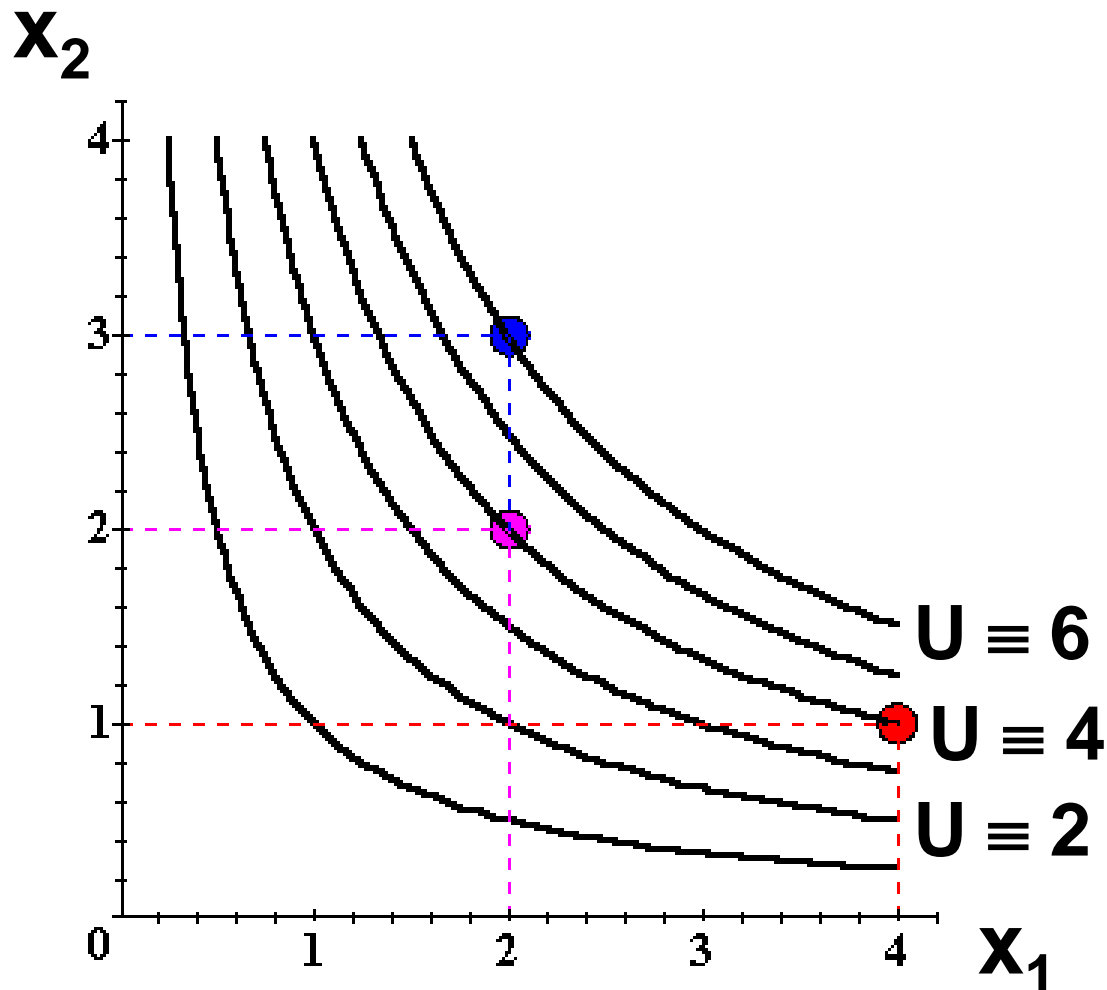
Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

Higher indifference curves contain more preferred bundles.

Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

Comparing more bundles will create a larger collection of all indifference curves and a better description of the consumer's preferences.
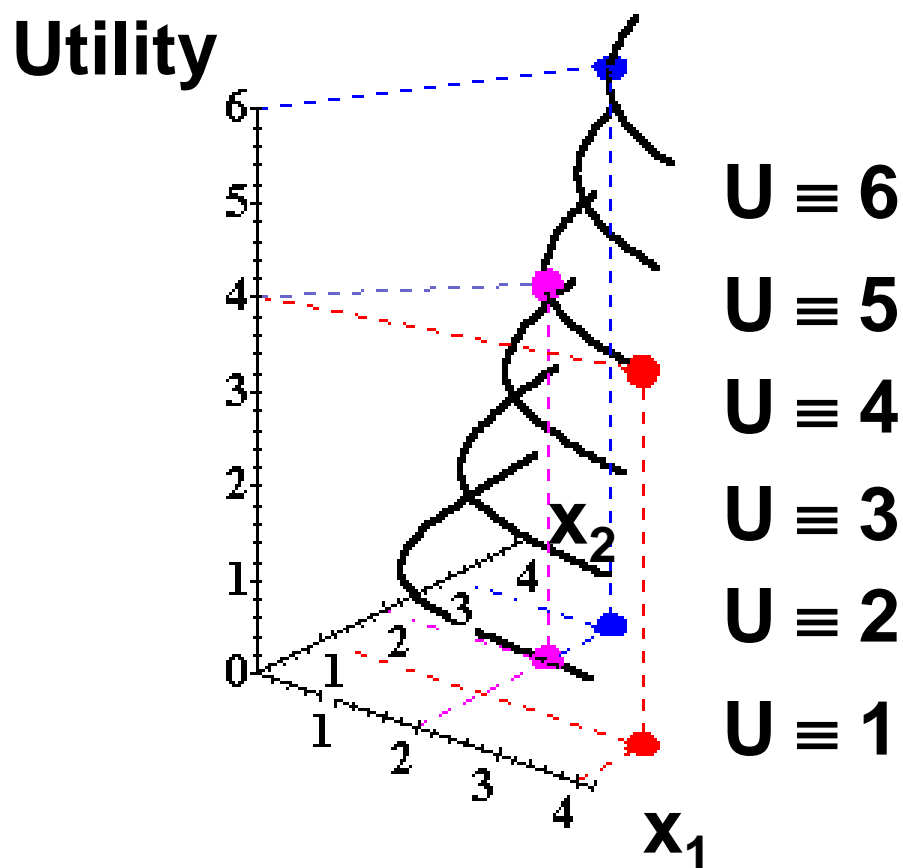
Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

As before, this can be visualized in 3D by plotting each indifference curve at the height of its utility index.
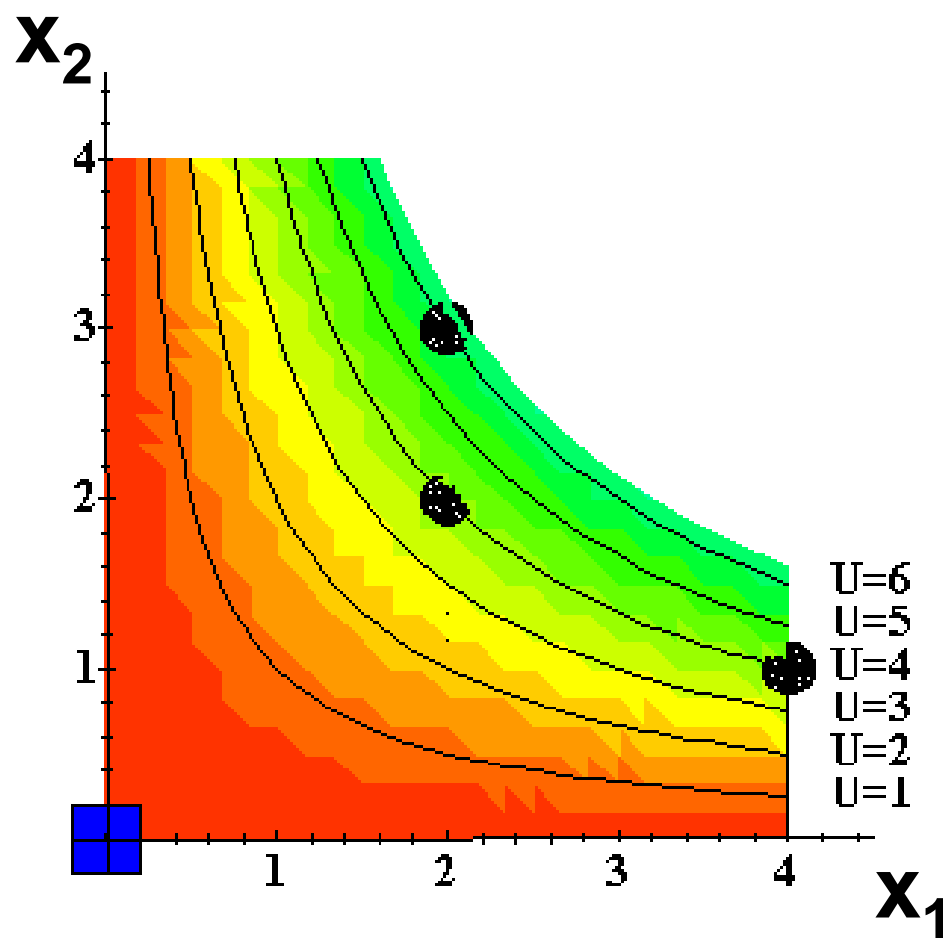
Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

Comparing all possible consumption bundles gives the complete collection of the consumer's indifference curves, each with its assigned utility level.
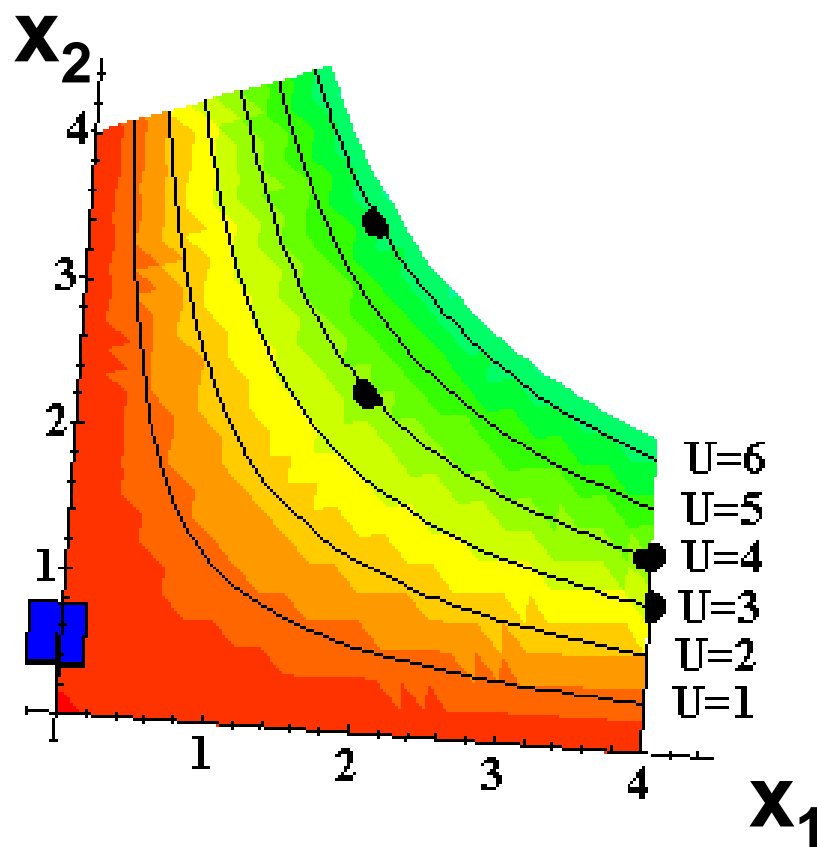
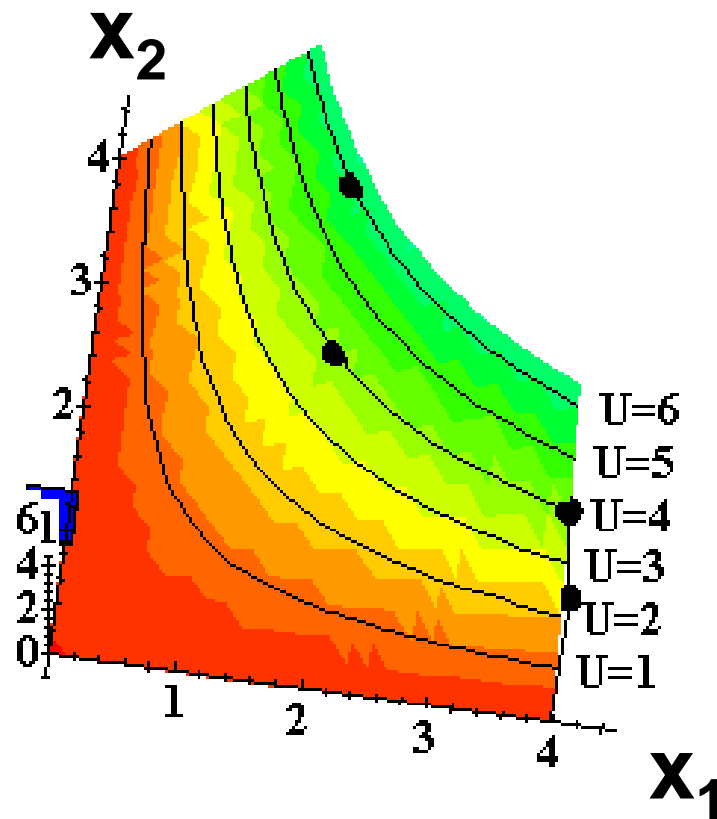This complete collection of indifference curves completely represents the consumer's preferences.
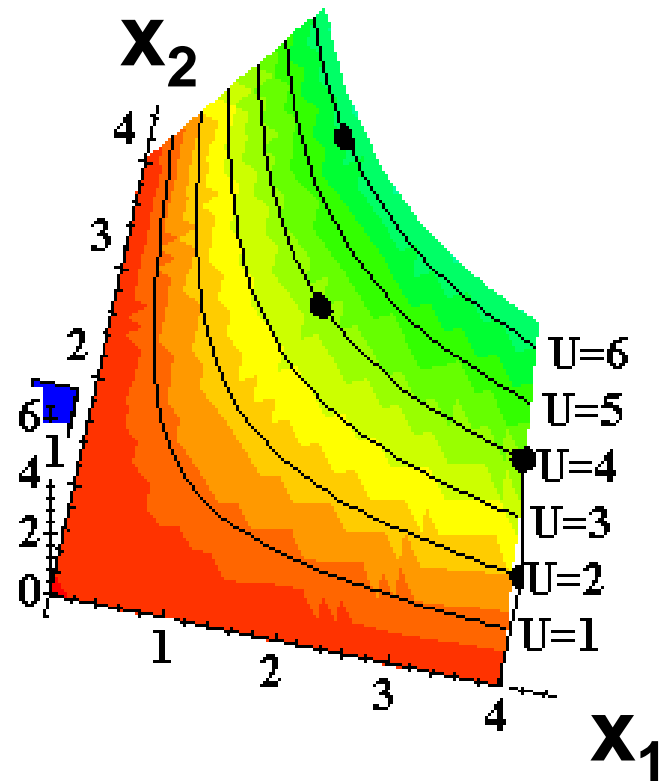
Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

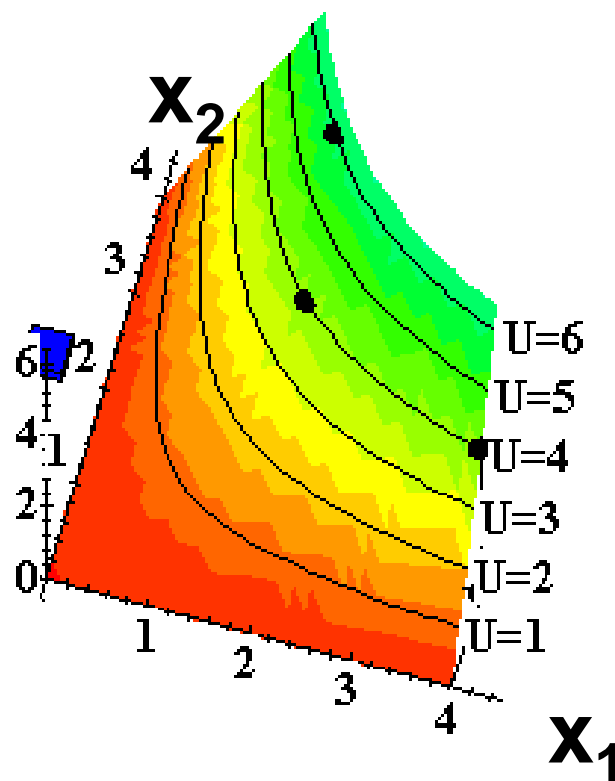# Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

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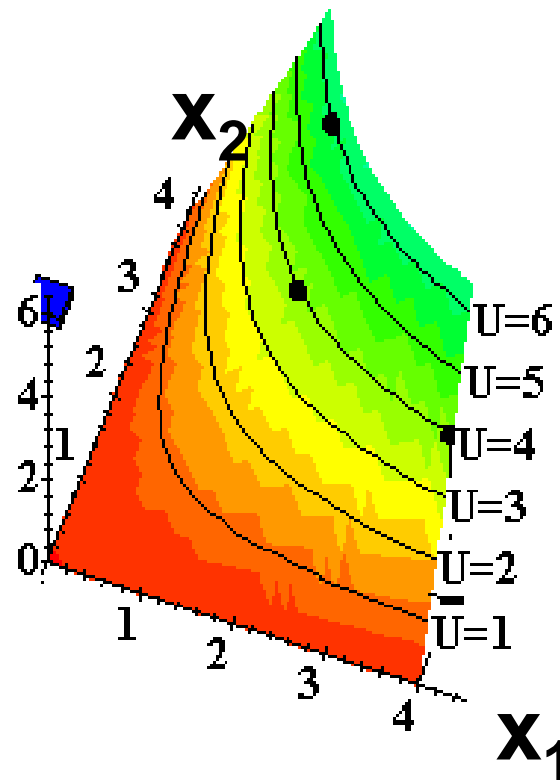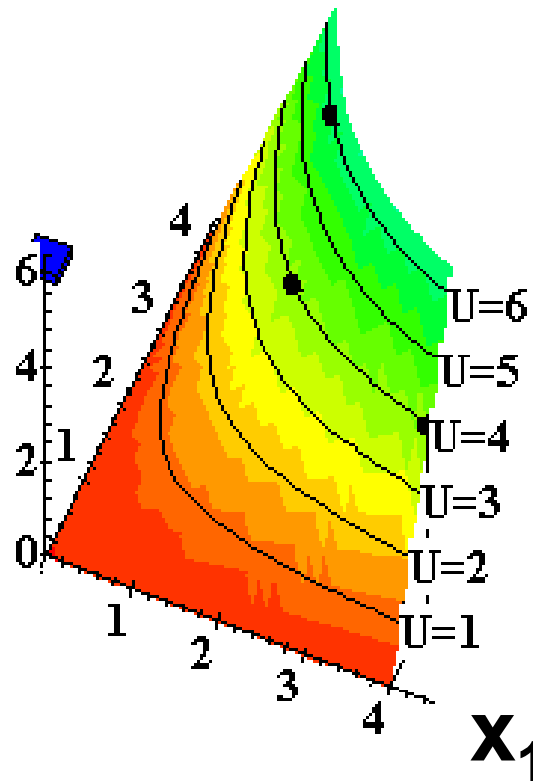
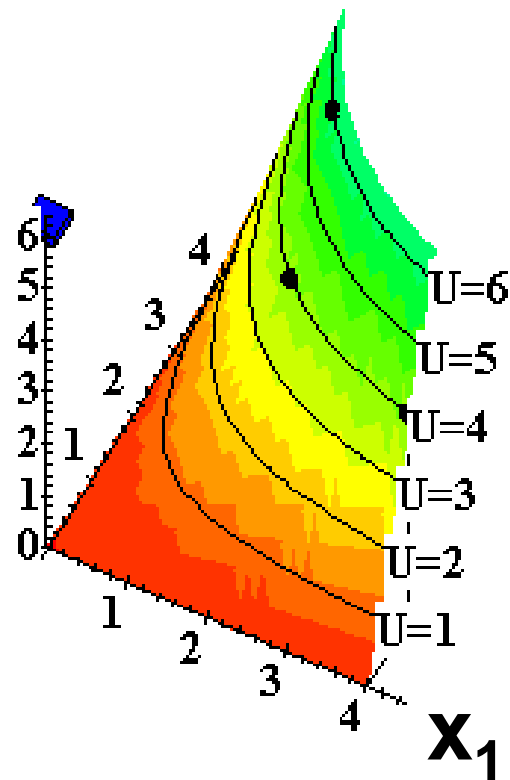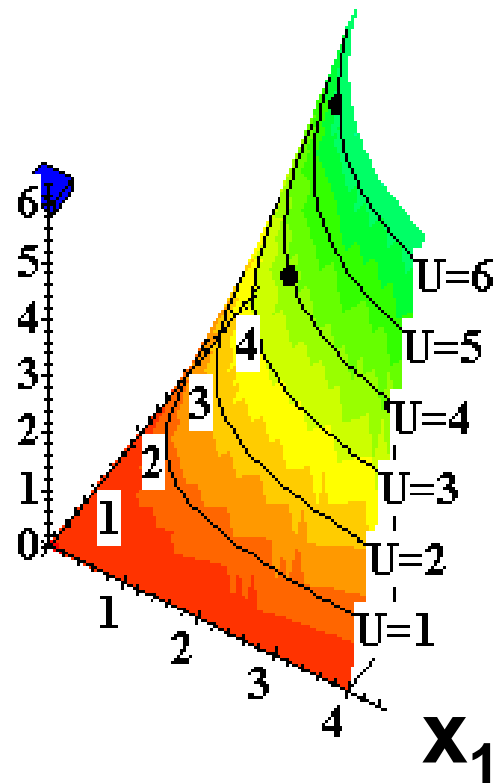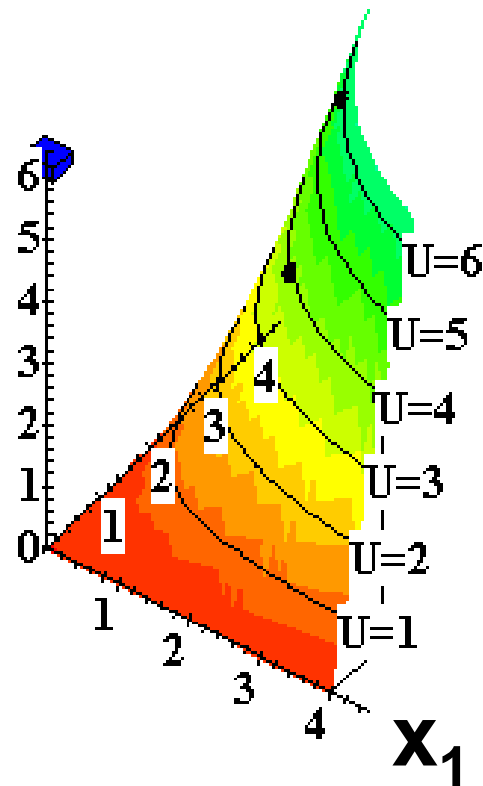# Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

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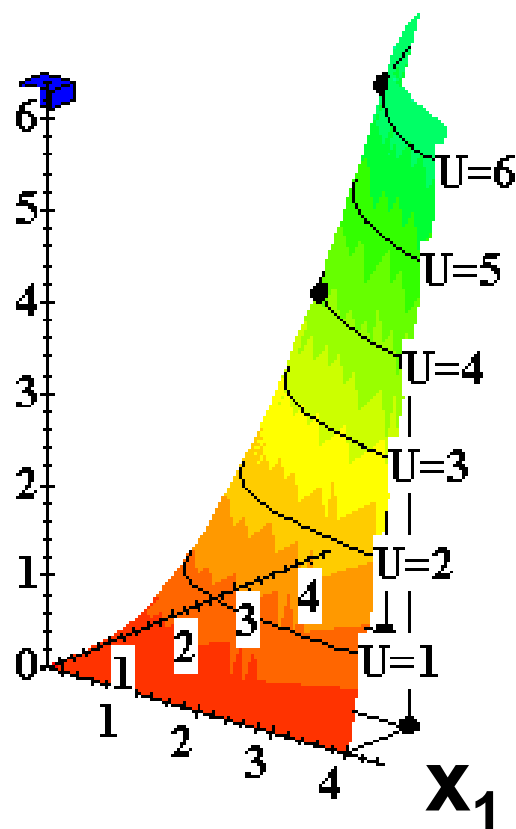
Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves
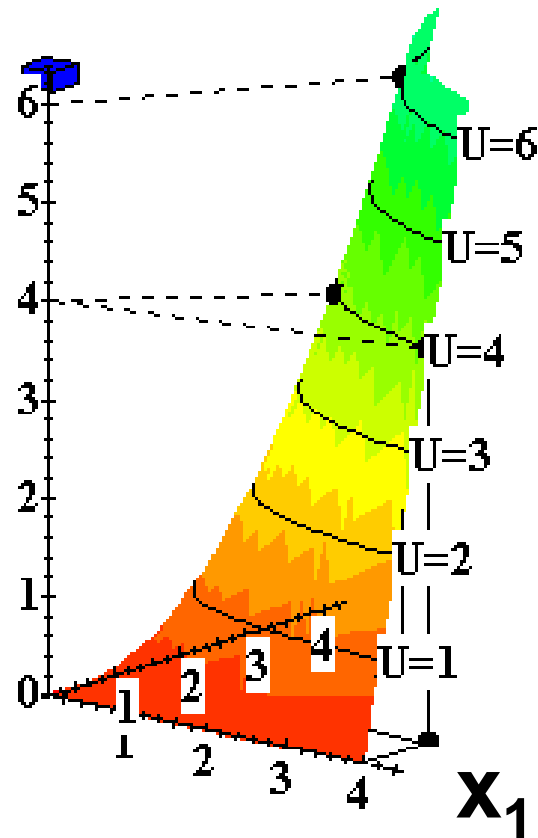
Utility Functions & Indiff. Curves

The collection of all indifference curves for a given preference relation is an **indifference map**.

An indifference map is equivalent to a utility function; each is the other.

Utility Functions

There is no unique utility function representation of a preference relation.

Suppose $U(x_1, x_2) = x_1 x_2$ represents a preference relation.

Again consider the bundles (4,1), (2,3) and (2,2).

Utility Functions

$U(x_1, x_2) = x_1 x_2$, so

$U(2,3) = 6 > U(4,1) = U(2,2) = 4;$

that is, $(2,3) \succ (4,1) \sim (2,2)$.

Utility Functions

$U(x_1,x_2) = x_1 x_2$ ➡ $(2,3) \succ (4,1) \sim (2,2)$.

Define $V = U^2$.

Utility Functions

$U(x_1,x_2) = x_1 x_2$ ➡ $(2,3) \succ (4,1) \sim (2,2)$.
Define $V = U^2$.

Then $V(x_1,x_2) = x_1^2 x_2^2$ and
$V(2,3) = 36 > V(4,1) = V(2,2) = 16$
so again
$(2,3) \succ (4,1) \sim (2,2)$.

V preserves the same order as U and so represents the same preferences.

Utility Functions

$U(x_1, x_2) = x_1 x_2 \Longrightarrow (2,3) \succ (4,1) \sim (2,2).$

Define $W = 2U + 10.$

Utility Functions

$U(x_1,x_2) = x_1x_2$ ➡ $(2,3) \succ (4,1) \sim (2,2)$.

Define W = 2U + 10.

Then $W(x_1,x_2) = 2x_1x_2+10$ so
W(2,3) = 22 > W(4,1) = W(2,2) = 18.
Again,
$(2,3) \succ (4,1) \sim (2,2)$.

W preserves the same order as U and V and so represents the same preferences.

Utility Functions

If

– **U is a utility function that represents a preference relation $\succsim$ and**

– **f is a strictly increasing function,**

then V = f(U) is also a utility function representing $\succsim$.

Goods, Bads and Neutrals

A good is a commodity **unit** which increases utility (gives a more preferred bundle).

A bad is a commodity **unit** which decreases utility (gives a less preferred bundle).

A neutral is a commodity **unit** which does not change utility (gives an equally preferred bundle).

Goods, Bads and Neutrals
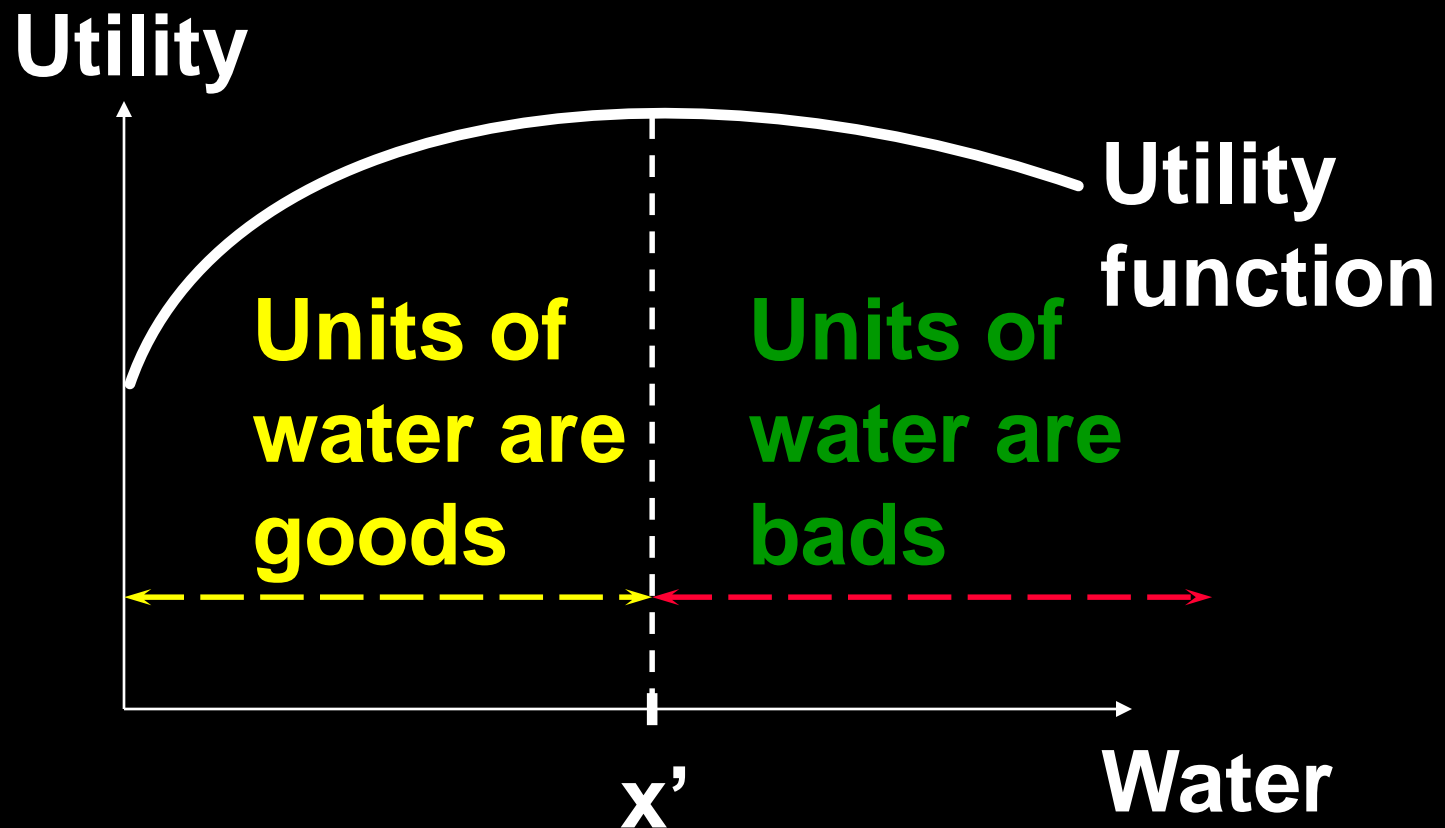
Around x' units, a little extra water is a neutral.

Some Other Utility Functions and Their Indifference Curves

Instead of $U(x_1, x_2) = x_1 x_2$ consider

$$V(x_1, x_2) = x_1 + x_2.$$

What do the indifference curves for this "perfect substitution" utility function look like?

Perfect Substitution Indifference Curves

Perfect Substitution Indifference Curves

$x_1 + x_2 = 5$

$x_1 + x_2 = 9$

$x_1 + x_2 = 13$
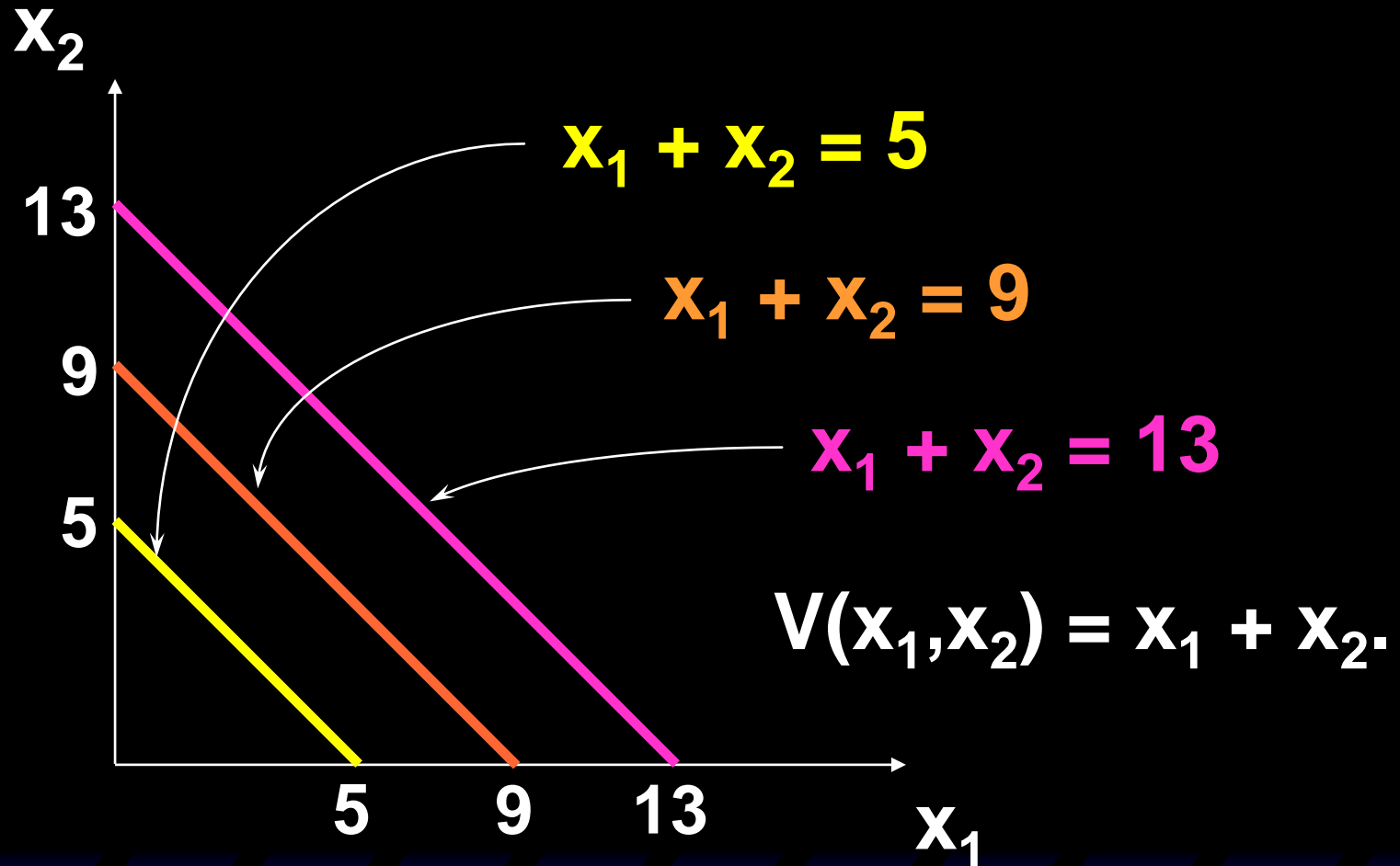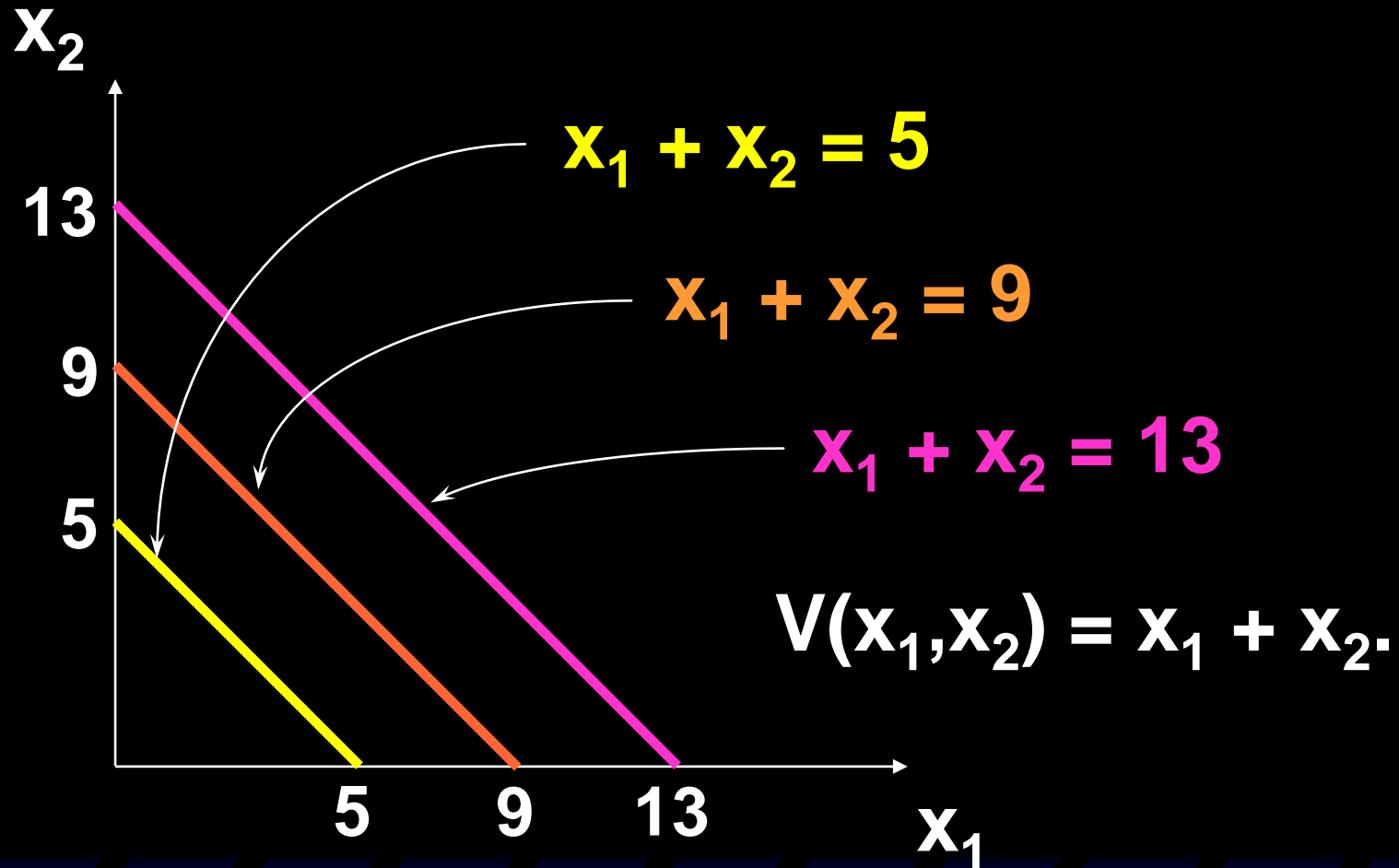
$V(x_1, x_2) = x_1 + x_2.$

All are linear and parallel.

Some Other Utility Functions and Their Indifference Curves

Instead of $U(x_1,x_2) = x_1 x_2$ or $V(x_1,x_2) = x_1 + x_2$, consider

$$W(x_1,x_2) = \min\{x_1,x_2\}.$$

What do the indifference curves for this "perfect complementarity" utility function look like?

Perfect Complementarity Indifference Curves

Perfect Complementarity Indifference Curves

x_2

45°

$W(x_1, x_2) = \min\{x_1, x_2\}$

$\min\{x_1, x_2\} = 8$

$\min\{x_1, x_2\} = 5$

$\min\{x_1, x_2\} = 3$

8

5

3

3 5 8

x_1
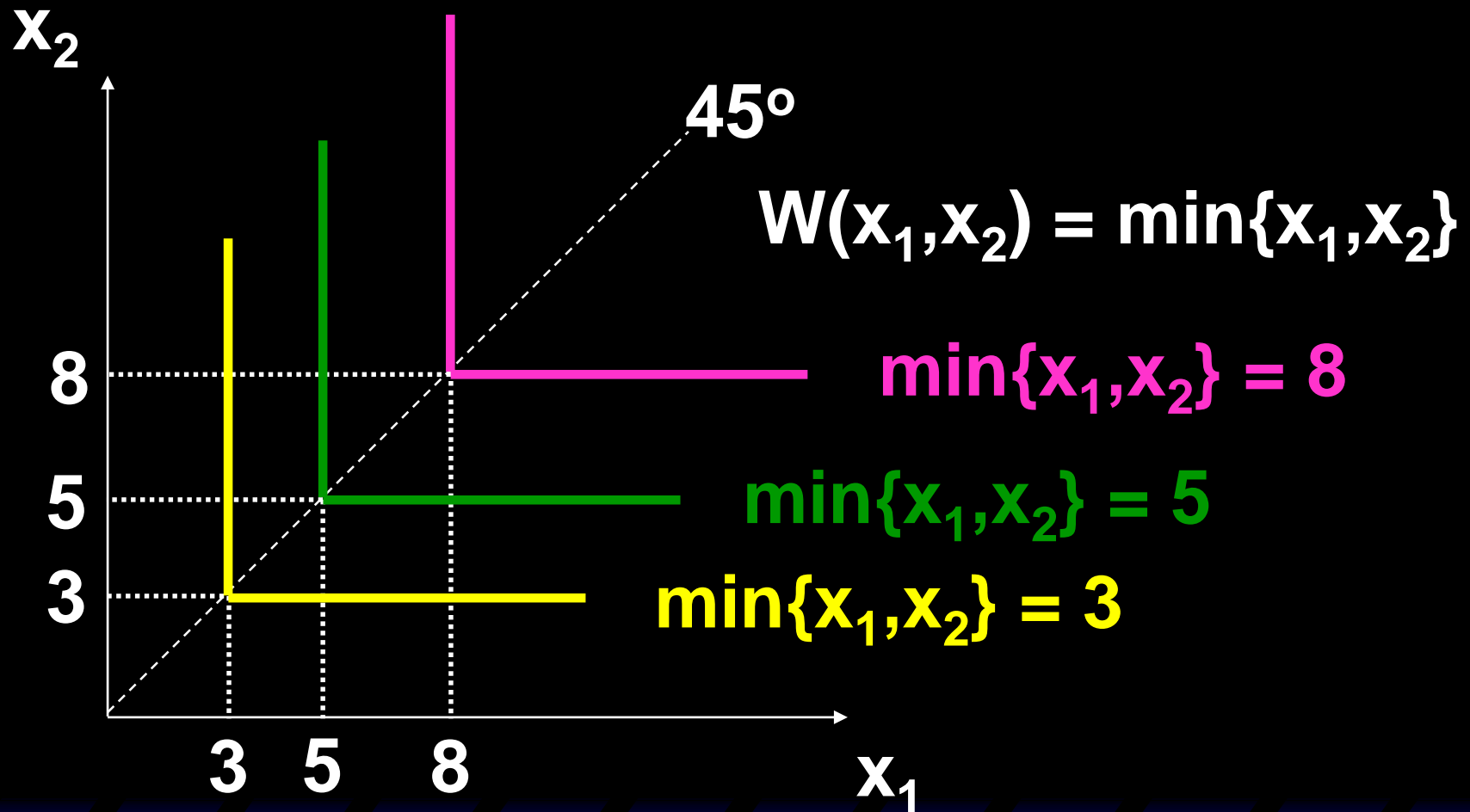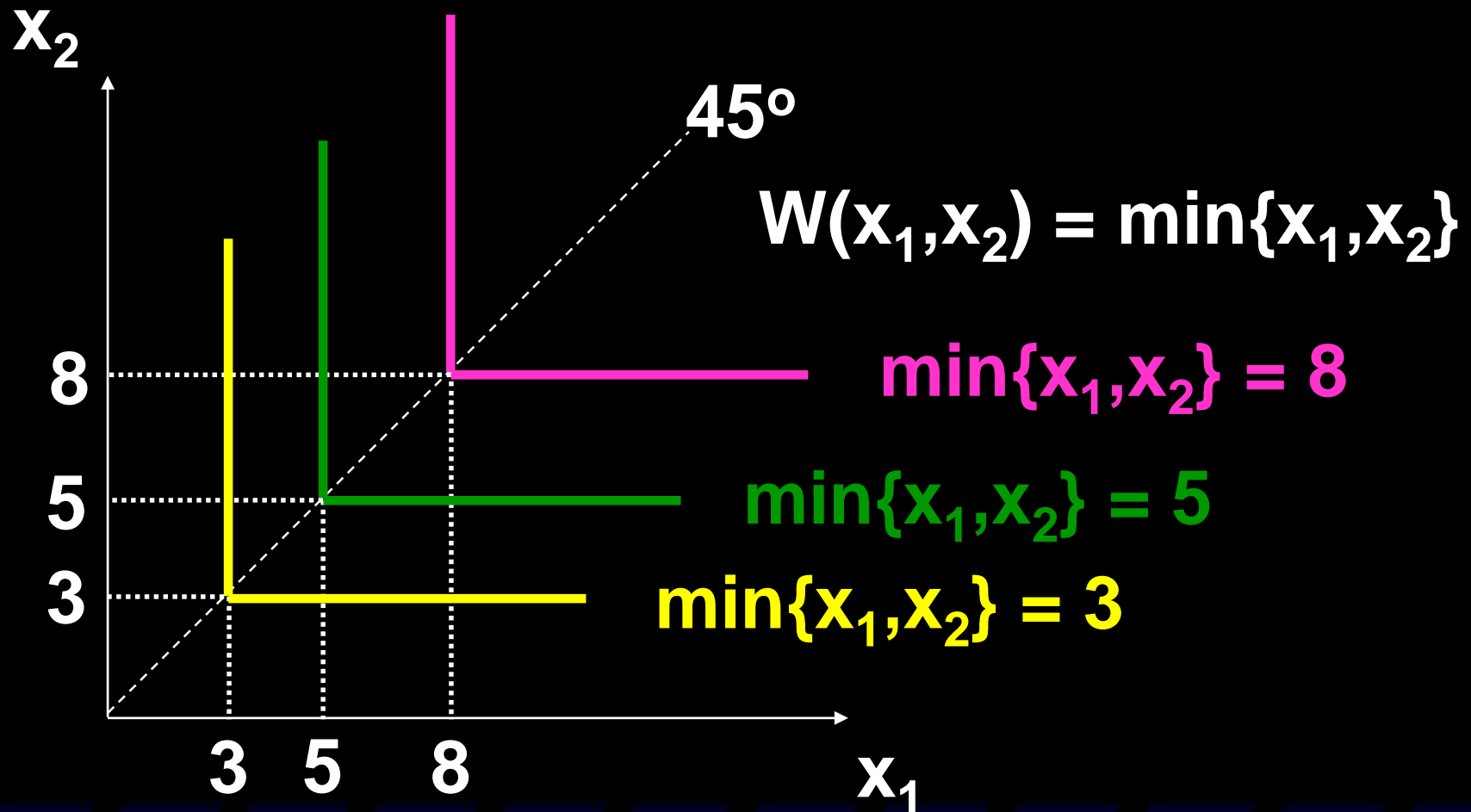
All are right-angled with vertices on a ray from the origin.

Some Other Utility Functions and Their Indifference Curves

A utility function of the form

$$U(x_1,x_2) = f(x_1) + x_2$$

is linear in just x_2 and is called **quasi-linear**.

E.g. $U(x_1,x_2) = 2x_1^{1/2} + x_2$.

Quasi-linear Indifference Curves

Each curve is a vertically shifted copy of the others.
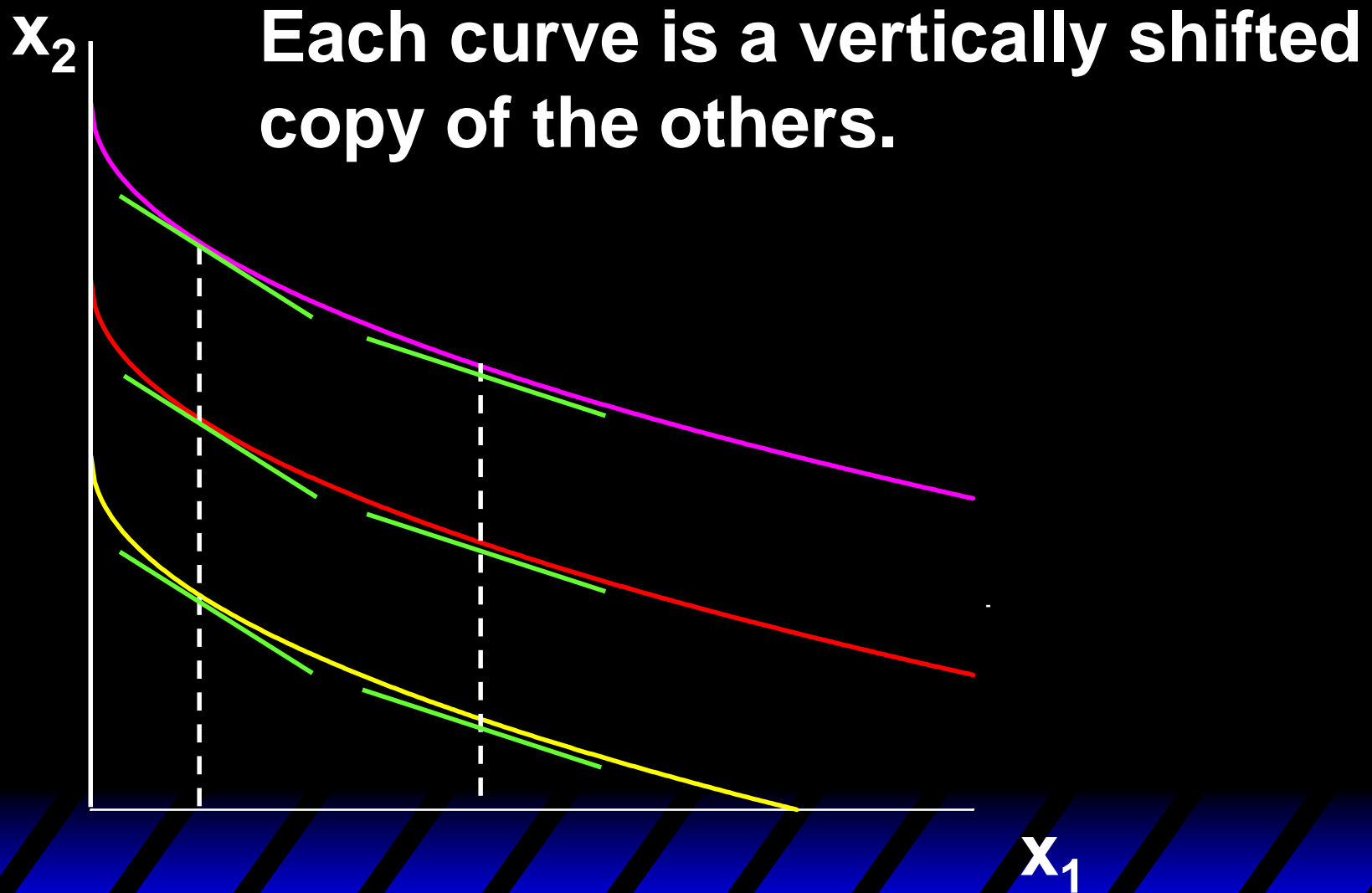
Some Other Utility Functions and Their Indifference Curves

Any utility function of the form

$$U(x_1, x_2) = x_1^a x_2^b$$

with a > 0 and b > 0 is called a Cobb-Douglas utility function.

E.g. $\quad U(x_1, x_2) = x_1^{1/2} x_2^{1/2}$ (a = b = 1/2)
$\quad\quad\quad V(x_1, x_2) = x_1 x_2^3$ (a = 1, b = 3)

Cobb-Douglas Indifference Curves

x_2

x_1
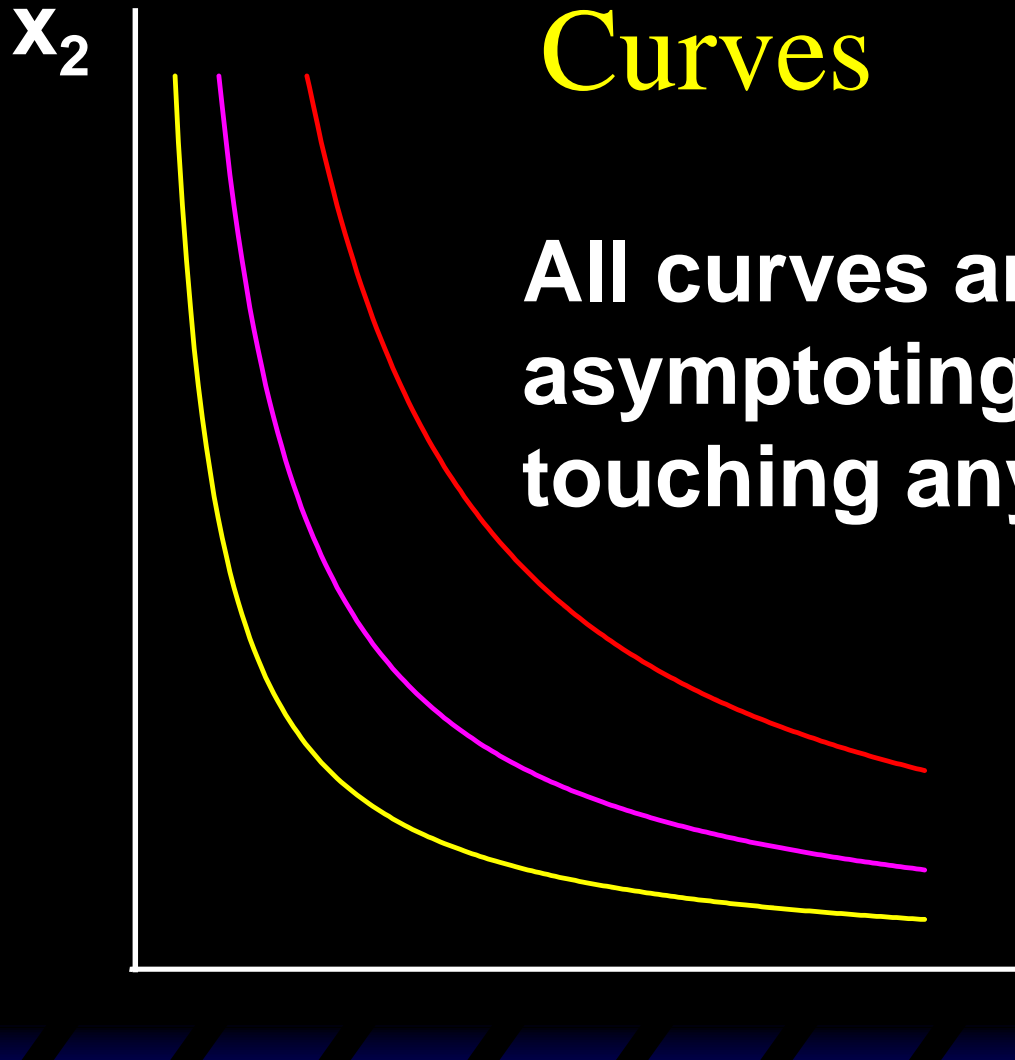
All curves are hyperbolic, asymptoting to, but never touching any axis.

Marginal Utilities

Marginal means "incremental".

The marginal utility of commodity i is the rate-of-change of total utility as the quantity of commodity i consumed changes; *i.e.*

$$MU_i = \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_i}$$

Marginal Utilities

E.g. if $U(x_1,x_2) = x_1^{1/2} x_2^2$ then

$$MU_1 = \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_1} = \frac{1}{2}x_1^{-1/2}x_2^2$$

Marginal Utilities

E.g. if $U(x_1, x_2) = x_1^{1/2} x_2^2$ then

$$MU_1 = \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_1} = \frac{1}{2} x_1^{-1/2} x_2^2$$

Marginal Utilities

E.g. if $U(x_1, x_2) = x_1^{1/2} x_2^2$ then

$$MU_2 = \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_2} = 2x_1^{1/2} x_2$$

Marginal Utilities

E.g. if $U(x_1, x_2) = x_1^{1/2} x_2^2$ then

$$MU_2 = \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_2} = 2x_1^{1/2} x_2$$

Marginal Utilities

So, if $U(x_1,x_2) = x_1^{1/2} x_2^2$ then

$$MU_1 = \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_1} = \frac{1}{2}x_1^{-1/2}x_2^2$$

$$MU_2 = \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_2} = 2x_1^{1/2}x_2$$

Marginal Utilities and Marginal Rates-of-Substitution

The general equation for an indifference curve is

$$U(x_1, x_2) \equiv k, \text{ a constant.}$$

Totally differentiating this identity gives

$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial x_1} dx_1 + \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_2} dx_2 = 0$$

Marginal Utilities and Marginal Rates-of-Substitution

$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial x_1} dx_1 + \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_2} dx_2 = 0$$

rearranged is

$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial x_2} dx_2 = -\frac{\partial U}{\partial x_1} dx_1$$

Marginal Utilities and Marginal Rates-of-Substitution

And
$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial x_2} dx_2 = -\frac{\partial U}{\partial x_1} dx_1$$

rearranged is
$$\frac{dx_2}{dx_1} = -\frac{\partial U / \partial x_1}{\partial U / \partial x_2}.$$

This is the MRS.

Marg. Utilities & Marg. Rates-of-Substitution; An example

Suppose U(x_1,x_2) = $x_1 x_2$. Then

$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial x_1} = (1)(x_2) = x_2$$

$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial x_2} = (x_1)(1) = x_1$$

so $$MRS = \frac{d x_2}{d x_1} = -\frac{\partial U / \partial x_1}{\partial U / \partial x_2} = -\frac{x_2}{x_1}.$$

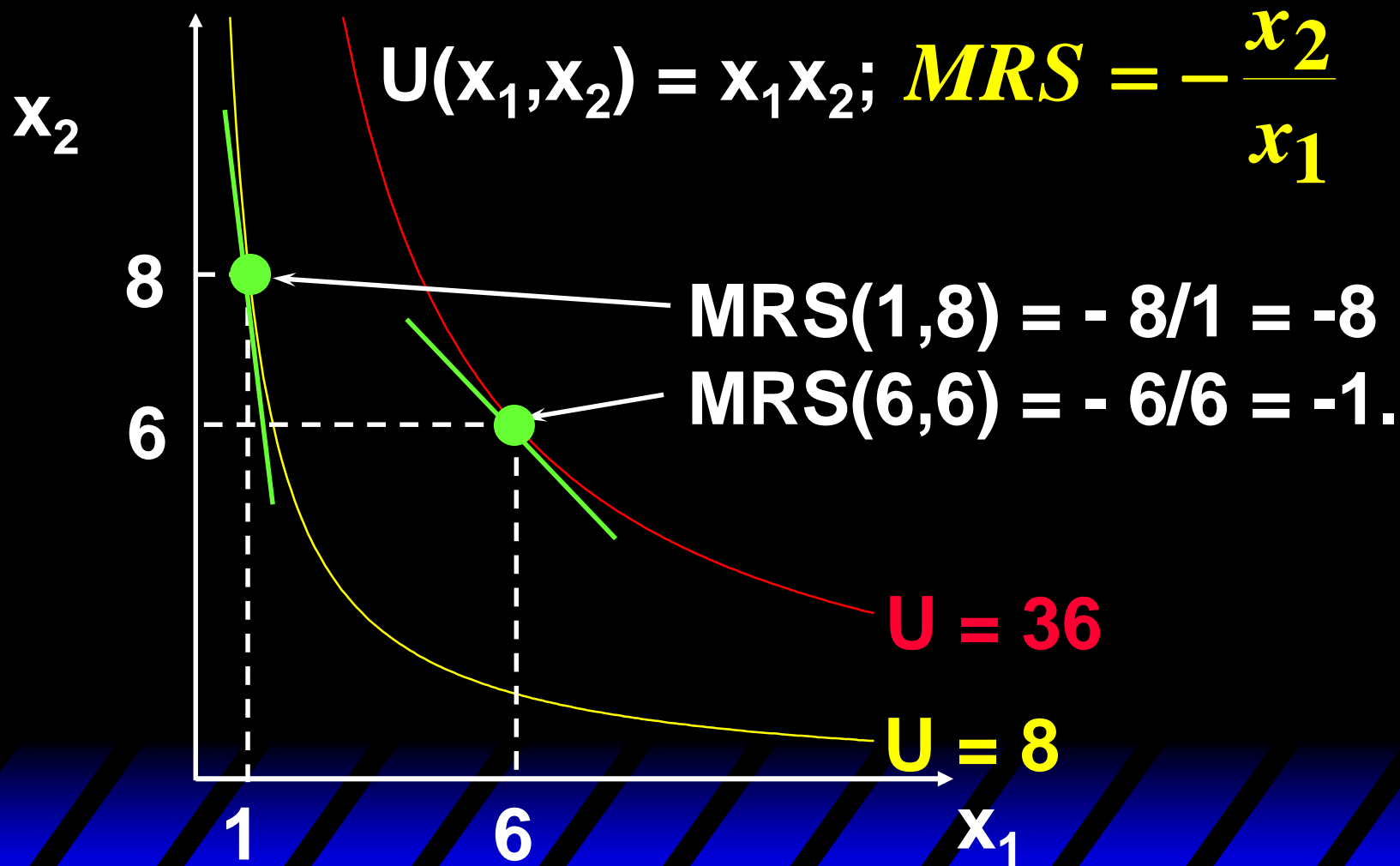# Marg. Utilities & Marg. Rates-of-Substitution; An example

$U(x_1,x_2) = x_1x_2;$ $MRS = -\dfrac{x_2}{x_1}$

MRS(1,8) = - 8/1 = -8
MRS(6,6) = - 6/6 = -1.

U = 36

U = 8

Marg. Rates-of-Substitution for Quasi-linear Utility Functions

A quasi-linear utility function is of the form $U(x_1,x_2) = f(x_1) + x_2$.
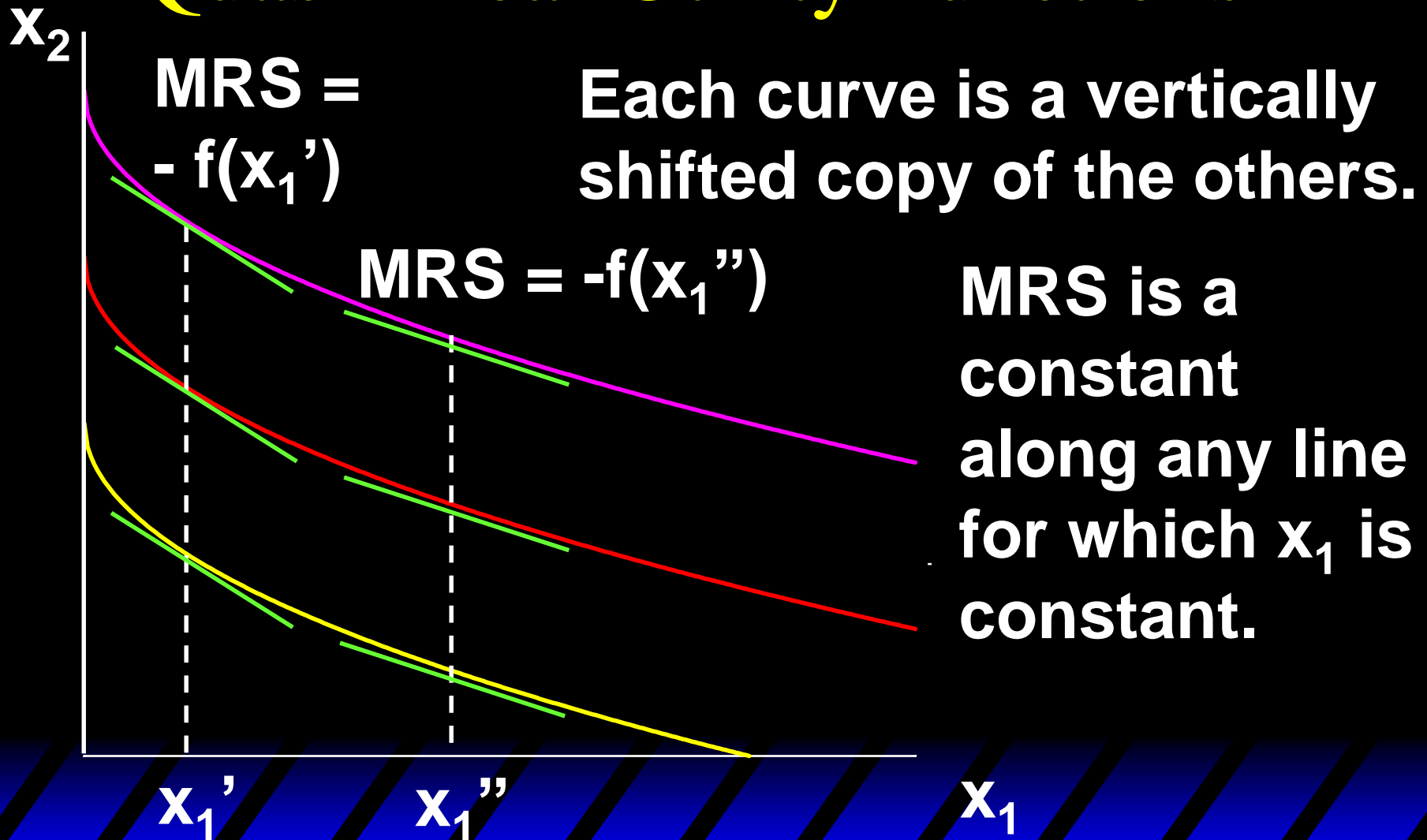
$$\frac{\partial U}{\partial x_1} = f'(x_1) \qquad\qquad \frac{\partial U}{\partial x_2} = 1$$

so $MRS = \dfrac{d\,x_2}{d\,x_1} = -\dfrac{\partial U \,/\, \partial x_1}{\partial U \,/\, \partial x_2} = -f'(x_1).$

Marg. Rates-of-Substitution for Quasi-linear Utility Functions

MRS = - f′(x₁) does not depend upon x_2 so the slope of indifference curves for a quasi-linear utility function is constant along any line for which x_1 is constant. What does that make the indifference map for a quasi-linear utility function look like?

Marg. Rates-of-Substitution for Quasi-linear Utility Functions

x_2

MRS = $-f(x_1')$

MRS = $-f(x_1'')$

Each curve is a vertically shifted copy of the others.

MRS is a constant along any line for which x_1 is constant.

x_1'　x_1''　x_1

Monotonic Transformations & Marginal Rates-of-Substitution

Applying a monotonic transformation to a utility function representing a preference relation simply creates another utility function representing the same preference relation.

What happens to marginal rates-of-substitution when a monotonic transformation is applied?

Monotonic Transformations & Marginal Rates-of-Substitution

For $U(x_1, x_2) = x_1 x_2$ the MRS = $- x_2/x_1$.

Create $V = U^2$; *i.e.* $V(x_1, x_2) = x_1^2 x_2^2$.
What is the MRS for V?

$$MRS = -\frac{\partial V / \partial x_1}{\partial V / \partial x_2} = -\frac{2x_1 x_2^2}{2x_1^2 x_2} = -\frac{x_2}{x_1}$$

which is the same as the MRS for U.

Monotonic Transformations & Marginal Rates-of-Substitution

More generally, if V = f(U) where f is a strictly increasing function, then

$$MRS = -\frac{\partial V / \partial x_1}{\partial V / \partial x_2} = -\frac{f'(U) \times \partial U / \partial x_1}{f'(U) \times \partial U / \partial x_2}$$

$$= -\frac{\partial U / \partial x_1}{\partial U / \partial x_2}.$$

So MRS is unchanged by a positive monotonic transformation.