

The Veil of Ignorance: Stage 1

This game simulates what it would be like to morally reason without knowing your position in society. Each of you will be handed a sealed envelope. The envelope contains a description of what your social position is like (e.g., your socio-economic status, your profession, and your gender). However, what position you occupy will not be unveiled till the end of the game. The game proceeds in four stages.

Stage 1: Full Veil of Ignorance (45 minutes)

In this first stage, you know nothing about your position in society. You will be randomly split up into groups. In those groups, you must negotiate a **social contract for distribution**. That is, you must agree on general philosophical principles by which your society should distribute resources, welfare, and other goods.

Some instructions for questions at this stage are at the back of this sheet. Your social contract should be clearly formulated and agreed upon by everyone. If you cannot agree at all, hold a simple majority vote.

Assume that the agreed-upon principles will be written into the constitution of your society, and be valid for all times. You should also assume that members of this society cannot escape it (they are born into it, and die in it), and that there are no other societies (so no immigration, etc.).

For the purposes of this simulation, imagine that you have already agreed on certain basic liberties and rights—e.g., freedom of conscience, religion, expression, association, rule of law, democracy—to be part of your social contract. So you do not need to worry about these aspects.

Stage 2: Medium Veil of Ignorance (45 minutes)

At this stage, I will provide you with (i) a more detailed description of the society of which you are a member, and (ii) a list of all the identities which exist in this simulation (although you do not yet know who you are). This is likely to introduce some further complications into the issue.

You will be given the opportunity to add to your social contract. However, you will not be allowed to modify existing parts of the social contract, and you are not allowed to add clauses to the contract which straight-out contradict it.

Stage 3: Comparison of Social Contracts (15 minutes)

At this stage, we will compare the results from the different groups. Each group will have to explain why they think their social contract is the most appealing.

Stage 4: No Veil of Ignorance (30 minutes)

In this stage, you are allowed to open the envelope with your social identity. Ask yourself the following questions: (i) Would you now accept the social contract offered by your group? (ii) What changes would you want in that contract? (iii) Would you prefer some other group's social contract? If so, why?

You will be given some time to reflect on these questions, and then we will discuss them together.

Details for Stage 1

There are two related questions you need to ask yourself:

1. What principle of distribution?

There are many distributional principles you could choose from:

1. *Sum-Ranking*. Maximise the sum of all benefits in society.
2. *Maximin*. Maximise the benefits given to the worst-off members of society.
3. *Priority*. Maximise the benefits in society, putting more weight on benefits given to the worse-off.
4. *Sufficiency*. Assure everyone a certain threshold of benefits to lead a sufficient life, but do not intervene above that level.
5. *Equality*. Provide everyone with the same level of benefits, as far as possible.

But there are also other principles from which you could choose:

6. *Laissez Faire*. There is no redistribution of benefits. How benefits are distributed is left up to markets. Government will only intervene to ensure that markets remain open to anyone. (Remember that people have general rights and liberties guaranteed to them.)
7. *Lump Sum Transfer*. Give every member of society, at their birth or when they reach adulthood, a considerable lump sum of benefits without any strings attached. There is no significant redistribution of resources afterwards.
8. *Limitarianism*. Allow nobody to have benefits above a certain threshold.

If you want to, you can formulate a compromise between/mixture of these principles, or formulate an entirely different principle. If so, it must be precise, you must all agree on it, and you must be ready to defend it to your classmates.

2. Which benefits?

In the formulation of the principles, it remains open what is meant by “benefit”. Several things could be meant by it, and it makes a difference to what the principles imply:

1. income/wealth
2. resources in general (e.g., land, access to education, healthcare, jobs)
3. well-being
4. capabilities (opportunities to achieve certain lives)
5. something else

In formulating your principles, be clear on what you mean by “benefits”. The word “benefit” should not appear in your social contract.

The Veil of Ignorance: Stage 2

Facts about Your Society

The society you live in is an industrialised country with a reasonably high GDP per capita, although it has only recently transitioned from being a developing country. Life is generally peaceful, and there are no serious concerns about social unrest. You can find a list of social positions on the back of this page.

There are three problems which demand your special attention.

First, there are two main ethnic groups in this society, the Blues and the Purples. The Blues form the majority, while the Purples are in the minority. There is a long history of discrimination and racism against Purples, as a result of which the Purples are generally worse-off than the Blues, enjoying lower income and general opportunities in life. Many of the Purples believe that these past injustices should be taken into account.

Second, you discover that there is an economic trade-off between taxation and economic efficiency. High taxation has a dampening effect on the economy, and has the possibility of lowering overall economic output. Furthermore, some of the top executives of the companies in your society are extremely motivated by self-interest. If they are not allowed to take home very high incomes, their incentives will change, and they will contribute less. Once again, this will lower GDP overall. (If you want, I will give you concrete numbers for the trade-off you are facing; but assume that it is a significant tradeoff.)

Third, assume for simplicity that there are two generations in your society which we can call “young” and “old”. Roughly half of the members of the society are old, and the other half are young. There are a number of policies which would lead to higher GDP growth now, but might lower it in the long run. For example, your society has access to natural resources which could be exploited now, but this would leave less for future generations. Furthermore, because your society has only recently industrialised, much of its infrastructure and educational system is still very weak. Strengthening it would require substantial investment now, but this is likely to take wealth and income away from current members of the society.

Positions in Society

The following is a list of positions available in your society. There are more positions than players: some of the positions might remain unoccupied.

The “income” column lists the salary which each person *would* earn on an *unregulated, free market*—i.e., before any redistribution or interference. These numbers are subject to change, depending on your social contract.

Furthermore, this is only an overview. There might be further features of each of the social identities you do not yet know.

| # | Profession | Income p.a. (€) | Generation | Ethnicity |
|----|--------------------------|--------------------|------------|-----------|
| 1 | Disabled | 0 | young | purple |
| 2 | High-School Student | 0 | young | blue |
| 3 | Homeless | 0 | old | purple |
| 4 | Imprisoned Criminal | 0 | young | blue |
| 5 | Stay-at-home parent | 0 | old | blue |
| 6 | Stay-at-home parent | 0 | young | purple |
| 7 | Unemployed (involuntary) | 0 | young | purple |
| 8 | Unemployed (involuntary) | 0 | old | blue |
| 9 | University Student | 0 | young | blue |
| 10 | Lazy Surfer | 5,000 | young | blue |
| 11 | Apprentice | 6,000 | young | purple |
| 12 | Poor Retiree | 10,000 | old | purple |
| 13 | Service Craft | 13,000 | young | purple |
| 14 | Part-Time Employee | 18,000 | old | blue |
| 15 | Employee | 20,000 | old | purple |
| 16 | Free artist | 25,000 | young | blue |
| 17 | Employee | 30,000 | old | purple |
| 18 | Start-up Founder | 35,000 | young | blue |
| 19 | Self-employed | 40,000 | old | blue |
| 20 | Employee | 50,000 | old | blue |
| 21 | Government worker | 50,000 | old | blue |
| 22 | Employee | 70,000 | old | blue |
| 23 | Rich Retiree | 80,000 | old | blue |
| 24 | Employee | 100,000 | old | blue |
| 25 | Small business owner | 350,000 | old | purple |
| 26 | Rich Inheritance | 1,000,000 | young | blue |
| 27 | Celebrity | 25,000,000 | young | blue |
| 28 | CEO | 75,000,000 | old | blue |