

LECTURE 25: PIGOU & COASE

- I. Internalization
 - a. Externalities are undesirable because the acting agent isn't considering the full costs or benefits of his/her actions.
 - b. But it's hard to know what exactly to do because there are so many ways to adjust and different people/firms/groups will have different costs and benefits.
 - c. If we *internalize* the externality (somehow force the agent to consider the full costs or benefits), we can solve the market failure using the informational advantages the market mechanism allows.
- II. Pigou
 - a. One way to solve this problem is with a Pigouvian tax or subsidy:
 - i. Tax the behavior until MC_p equals MC_s .
 - ii. Subsidize the behavior until MB_p equals MB_s .
 - b. Recall from earlier how subsidies and taxes created deadweight loss. Now they *reduce* deadweight loss by correcting an externality.
 - c. Pigouvian corrections are great correcting problems since they don't require a specific action and allow people to adapt as they'd like. This is particularly important from a national policy perspective since making a rule for many millions will likely not be the best choice for a significant number of individuals.
 - i. For example by taxing gasoline instead requiring everyone to carpool, some people will carpool in a response to the change in price but for others, where carpooling's not a good option, they are free to adapt in other ways.
 - ii. Remember, prices solve problems.
 - d. The problem with Pigou is the difficulty of calculation. These curves are nearly impossible to determine so how do we know how big the tax or subsidy should be? What happens when the curves shift? What if they are shifting all the time?
 - i. One solution is to low-ball the correction to make sure you don't make a bad situation worse and since something is better than nothing, you can still reduce deadweight loss.
- III. The Coase Theorem.
 - a. Ronald Coase offered his own theory of how to deal with externalities—specifically negative externalities—in 1960.

- b. Suppose there are two neighbors and one (**A**) of them is externalizing a cost (say, noise) onto the other (**B**) through some activity.
 - i. Also suppose **A** values the externalizing activity at \$30 and **B** would pay \$50 to avoid the externalized costs.
- c. In Coase's world, the two could go to a judge who would assign whom has the right to what—does **A** have a right to do what he wants in his own place or does **B** have a right to not be disturbed?
- d. The judge can conclude in two ways:
 - i. *If **A** has the right*, then **B** would be willing to pay **A** something between \$30 and \$50 to make him stop.
 - ii. *If **B** has the right*, then **A** would not be willing to pay **B** to allow the noise to continue so it remains quiet.
- e. *The Coase Theorem* dictates that if transaction costs are low and property rights are clearly defined (in this case, by a judge), externalities don't create market failures. Even with externalities, the market result will be efficient.
- f. The weak point with the Theorem is that it assumes low *transaction costs*, or the costs associated with participating in the market place. There are costs, such as time to negotiate and difficulty to coordinate, required for buyers and sellers to agree.
 - i. If **A** is a polluting factory and **B** is a community of people, how does one negotiate between them all? Suddenly, it really does matter who is assigned the right to what because it will determine which party bears the transaction costs, and that can change the outcome.
 - ii. In his paper, Coase realized this weakness and offered a solution. The person who changes their behavior should be the one who's the "least cost avoider." What's cheaper: for **A** to stop polluting or for **B** to deal the pollution (or just move)?