SOME CONSEQUENTIALIST THEORIES AND PRINCIPLES

There are many consequentialist theories and principles. They all have one thing in common though: according to consequentialist theories/principles, the consequences of an act make it ethically right or wrong. Different consequentialists theories or principles focus on different consequences when they ethically evaluate actions.

Utilitarianism
Utilitarianism is the most well-known consequentialist ethical theory. Utilitarians ethically evaluate acts by using the utilitarian principle. There are many versions of the utilitarian principle. All of them link the rightness and wrongness of acts to the balance of good consequences (positive utility) over bad consequences (negative utility).

Classical Hedonistic Utilitarianism
One version of the utilitarian principle, formulated by John Stuart Mill in the 19th century, is known as the “Greatest Happiness Principle”:

Greatest Happiness Principle
“Actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness, wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness.”

Mill equated happiness with pleasure, and unhappiness with pain. So his principle tells us that the ethical rightness or wrongness of an act depends on the pleasure and/or pain it produces. The right act in a given situation, on Mill’s view, will be the one that, of the available alternatives, produces the greatest balance of pleasure over pain – not just for the person performing the act, but overall (taking into account the pleasure and pain produced for everyone affected by the act, both short and long term). It is important to note that the consequences produced for a given person are just as important as the consequences produced for any other person: consequences are to be weighed impartially.

Mill’s version of utilitarianism, in which the Greatest Happiness Principle is used to determine which acts are right and which acts are wrong, is known as “Classical Hedonistic Utilitarianism.” It is “classical” because Mill, along with Bentham, was one of the original proponents of utilitarianism. The term “hedonistic” refers to the underlying theory of value, endorsed by Mill (as well as Bentham), that pleasure (and perhaps the absence of pain) is the only thing that has intrinsic value (i.e., has value in itself, regardless of what it might lead to or be a means or instrument for obtaining). That theory of value is known as “hedonism.” Since Mill believed that pleasure is the only thing that has value in itself, and equated pleasure with happiness, the only kind of good consequence his version of the utilitarian principle takes into account is happiness (pleasure), and the only kind of bad consequence it takes into account is unhappiness (pain).
**Pluralistic Utilitarianism**

Many critics of Mill’s view argue that hedonism is an incorrect theory of value – in other words, pleasure is not the only thing that has intrinsic value. While various alternative theories of value have been proposed, one of the more common theories is “pluralism”: the theory that many things have intrinsic value. Pluralistic utilitarians believe that since many kinds of things have intrinsic value, many kinds of consequences (not just pleasure and pain) may be good or bad, and relevant to the rightness or wrongness of actions. They may therefore adopt something like the following version of the utilitarian principle, rather than Mill’s Greatest Happiness Principle.

**A Pluralistic Version of the Utilitarian Principle**

The right act in a given situation is the one which, of the available alternatives, produces the best balance of benefits or good consequences (positive utility) over harms or bad consequences (negative utility).

As with Mill’s version of utilitarianism, the consequences of the act in question for everyone affected, short and long term, are to be taken into account; and they are to be weighed impartially, with the consequences for every person counting neither more nor less than the consequences for anyone else. The key difference between the pluralistic utilitarian principle and Mill’s is that Mill’s principle focuses only on pleasure and pain, while the pluralistic principle focuses on benefits and harms, allowing that many kinds of things may be considered benefits or harms.

**Application of the utilitarian principle(s)**

In order to ethically evaluate an act from a utilitarian perspective, use the following guidelines (focusing only on pleasure and pain as consequences when applying Mill’s version of the utilitarian principle, and taking into account a broader range of benefits and harms when analyzing consequences on the basis of the pluralistic principle):

1) **Identify the consequences of the act**, taking into account: a) the consequences for everyone affected by the act; b) both positive and negative consequences; and c) both short and long term consequences
2) **Compare the consequences of the act to the consequences of alternative acts** the person in question could perform in the given situation
3) **Make a judgment about the ethical rightness/wrongness of the act** based on 1) and 2) above. The act is right if it is the one (given the available alternatives) that produces the best balance of positive over negative consequences for everyone affected (in other words, it is right if it "maximizes utility" or produces the best overall consequences).

**The Best Interests Principle**

This principle is often used when it is considered appropriate to give special emphasis to the consequences of an act (its benefits and harms) for a particular individual (e.g., a patient, a client, a daughter or son) – often because that individual will be more directly
and significantly affected by the act than others will, or because the person performing the act has a special relationship (sometimes contractual and professional) to that person.

A Version of the Best Interests Principle: The right act in a given situation is the one that is in the best interests of the individual in question; in other words, the one which, of the available alternatives, produces the best balance of benefits over harms for the individual in question.

Note that the best interests principle is very similar to the utilitarian principle, except that while the utilitarian principle focuses on the consequences of the act for everyone affected, the best interests principle focuses only on the consequences of an act for a particular individual.

Application of the Best Interests Principle
In order to ethically evaluate an act using the best interests principle, follow the same three steps outlined above for applying the utilitarian principle, but focus only on the consequences of the act for the individual in question, not the consequences for everyone affected.

Ethical Egoism
This theory is very similar to the Best Interests Principle, except that the particular individual whose consequences determine the rightness or wrongness of an act is specified as the agent (the person who performs the act).

A Version of Ethical Egoism
The right act in a given situation is the one that produces the best balance of benefits over harms for the agent.

Note that ethical egoism is not identical to psychological egoism. Psychological egoism is the view that human beings always, as a matter of fact, act from self-interested motives (in other words, they always try to look out for #1). Unlike ethical egoism, it does not make any claims about how we ought to act, or the right or wrong way to act. In other words, psychological egoism is a descriptive view, while ethical egoism is a normative view.

Application of Ethical Egoism
To ethically evaluate an act from the standpoint of ethical egoism, follow the same three steps outlined above for applying the utilitarian principle, but focus only on the consequences of the act for the agent, not the consequences for everyone affected.