

Consequential Ethics (CE): An action is right iff it promotes the best consequences. The best consequences are those in which “happiness” is maximized. Central question: what actions will generate the best consequences? This family of outcome based approaches are varied but two, in particular, heed our attention, namely, the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) & John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) & egoism or objectivism of Ayn Rand (1905-1982). Consequential ethics is also referred to as teleological ethics hence, Greek word *teleos*, meaning “*having reached one’s end*” or “*goal directed.*” This summary centers on utilitarianism.

Utilitarianism: two central features: (1) Consequentialist principle: an act is right or wrong according to the value of its consequences. Thus, the ends justify the means & every act is judged by its results, not by its intrinsic value. (2) Utility Principle: What are we aiming for? Happiness? Pleasure? For Bentham it was maximize pleasure & minimize suffering. Thus, an act that is right if it either brings more pleasure than pain or prevents pain whereas an act is wrong if it generates more pain than pleasure or prevents pleasure. Mill championed the Greatest Happiness Pleasure: “Acts are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness (intended pleasure), wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” (pain & privation of pleasure). But Mill offers a qualitative account for pleasure. Cultural, intellectual, & spiritual pleasures are of greater value than mere physical pleasure, because the former would be valued more highly by competent judges than the latter. A competent judge is anyone who has experienced both the lower pleasures & higher pleasures. These pleasures differ from each other qualitatively & quantitatively with a higher pleasure more intrinsically better than a lower pleasure. “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” While Bentham treats all forms of happiness as equal, “a pushpin is as good as opera,” Mill contends that some desires are primitive whereas others are the results of experience, self-discipline, special associations, & training.

Historical roots of utilitarianism: Sophocles’ Antigone (circa 440 BC) when King Creon sacrificed his niece, Antigone, who violated the law for performing funeral rites over her brother, Polynices. King Creon determined that her sacrifice was necessary in order to restrain the possibilities of dissension, lawlessness, & rebellion. John Stuart Mill even contends that Jesus Christ’s death/atonement for the salvation of others (John 3:16) is an example of the needs of the many outweighed by the needs of the one. But as a modern moral approach, it finds its initial development in the Scottish philosophers Frances Hutcheson (1694-1746), David Hume (1711-1776), & Adam Smith (1723-1790), classical stage in the writings of the English social reformers Bentham and Mill, and contemporary stage in scholarship of thinkers like Peter Singer

What about Consequences?

1. **Consequentialism** = whether an act is morally right depends only on consequences (not circumstances, the intrinsic nature of the act, or anything that happens before the act).
2. **Actual Consequentialism** = whether an act is morally right depends only on the actual consequences (not foreseen, foreseeable, intended, or likely consequences).
3. **Direct Consequentialism** = whether an act is morally right depends only on the consequences of that act itself (not consequences of the agent’s motive, of a rule or practice that covers other acts of the same kind, and so on).
4. **Evaluative Consequentialism** = moral rightness depends only on the value of the consequences (as opposed to other features of the consequences).
5. **Hedonism** = the value of the consequences depends only on the pleasures and pains in the consequences (as opposed to other goods, such as freedom, knowledge, life, and so on).
6. **Maximizing Consequentialism** = moral rightness depends only on which consequences are best (as opposed to satisfactory or an improvement over the status quo).
7. **Aggregative Consequentialism** = which consequences are best is some function of the values of parts of those consequences (as opposed to rankings of whole worlds or sets of consequences).
- 8 **Total Consequentialism** = moral rightness depends only on the total net good in the consequences (as opposed to the average net good per person).
9. **Universal Consequentialism** = moral rightness depends on the consequences for all people or sentient beings (as opposed to only the individual agent, present people, or any other limited group).
10. **Equal Consideration** = in determining moral rightness, benefits to one person matter just as much as similar benefits to any other person (= all who count count equally).

Significant Types of Utilitarianism:

Utilitarianism: The right action is what brings about the greatest good to the greatest number in the long run. Here are different types of utilitarianism:

1. **Hedonistic Utilitarianism:** maximize Pleasure & minimize pain.
2. **Act Utilitarianism:** an act should be judged by its results.
3. **Rule Utilitarianism:** an act is right iff it follows the rules that promotes the best consequences. Ethical rules are chosen in view of the anticipated results flowing from keeping those rules.
4. **Priority Utilitarianism:** maximize the achievement of people’s priorities-it is for each person to decide what constitutes personal happiness (R.M. Hare & J.C.C. Smart).
5. **Negative Utilitarianism:** promote the least amount of evil or harm or try to prevent the greatest amount of harm for the greatest number (K. Popper).
6. **Motive Utilitarianism:** inculcate motives within ourselves that will be generally useful across the spectrum of the situations we are likely to encounter (Robert Adams).
7. **Preference Utilitarianism:** defines the good to be maximized as the fulfillment of a person’s preferences.
8. **Ideal Utilitarianism:** goodness can only be discovered through intuitionism; the rightness or wrongness of acts are determined by their actual consequences. Our duty is produce the best possible consequences even though we can’t always predict what the consequences our actions will be.
9. **2-Level Utilitarianism:** the integration of act utilitarianism (critical upper level) & rule utilitarianism (intuitive lower level) into a 2 level system. **Intuitive level:** follow general rules for living life. **Critical level:** follow act utilitarianism when *prima facie* principles conflict, unusual cases, etc (R. M. Hare).

Advantages: (1) Banishes mystery from the realm of ethics; (2) offers a clear practical method of resolving ethical dilemmas; (3) promotes altruism as a way of life, improving lives of others; (4) it offers a non-complicated single system that is widely applicable (simple action-guiding principle for all ethical issues); (5) morality is made for humans (not rule-worship), enriching lives, & ameliorating suffering.

Disadvantages: (1) Lacks any moral component; (2) can’t determine full range of consequences; (3) how much good outweighs evil: quantification problem; (3) outrageous & horrific acts could be justified; (4) taking responsibility for far-reaching problems; (5) unable to explain what is wrong with a wrong action; (6) obliging stranger who cooks himself in an oven; (7) people naturally choose a Kantian type principle over consequential systems; (8) psychologically false (pleasure machine experiment); (9) fails to acknowledge any individual rights that can’t be violated; (10) utilitarians are divided about the calculus; (11) people are subject to the greater good of statistics; (12) the need for an absolute standard; (13) utilitarian acts have no intrinsic value; (14) consequences of our actions may be unpredictable; (15) pain & pleasure are not exact opposites; (16) the “end” is an ambiguous term; how long is long?