Supplemental Notes for Consequentialist Ethics. You will find a general summary of these ethical theories on the sheet Ethical Theory Review Sheet.

I) Ethical Egoism (a brief supplement to what is on the Ethical Theory Review Sheet)

Personal Ethical Egoism is a view according to which an individual claims that he/she ought to do what is in his/her long term self-interests but cannot tell others what they should do. This sort of egoism fails as a basic requirement of a moral theory – namely, that it should be generalizable or apply across the board. We expect that a theory about something applies to all individuals or beings that are the same or similar in relevant ways. That is, if the Personal Ethical Egoist believes that only consequences for self interest are the basis for deciding what he/she should do, such a person has to set forth the relevant differences between him/herself and others such that consequences for self-interest aren’t the only morally relevant factor for them as well. It’s hard to see what the relevant differences are among human beings that would allow a PEE to claim that ethical egoism applies only to him but not to others. After all, humans are the same sort of beings (we have the same nature).

Universal or Impersonal Ethical Egoism requires that each person act in his or her own self-interest regardless of the interests of others (unless it so benefits him/her). This does not prevent people cooperating with each other even when there are different self-interests.

Jones and Smith have differing self-interests:
A) what is in Jones’s s-i is not in Smith’s s-i. Jones needs digitalis for a heart condition; but digitalis will kill Smith if Smith doesn’t have a heart condition. There need be no conflict here since Jones’s pursuing the digitalis need not harm or interfere with Smith’s pursuit of her s-i.

B) Conflict arises between UEE’s when, e.g., in pursuing Jones’s s-i, Jones will act in a way to harm Smith’s s-i. In this case, since each person is morally obligated to pursue his/her own s-i without regard to others except insofar as other people benefits one’s own s-i, this sort of situation leads to conflict. The ethical egoist can cooperate with people by basically negotiating to constrain pursuing certain things in his/her s-i that conflict with others’ s-i, if they will do the same for themselves. In this way, cooperation among egoists can minimize conflict, allow people to live in some sort of peace, which is generally in people’s s-i. That is, one trades certain things in one’s self-interest for other things.

Cooperation among people is permissible for UEEs but only provided that the consequences of the cooperation are beneficial to the individual.

However, if cooperation is not possible, then a serious problem arises in regard to UEE. Suppose that both Jones and Smith need digitalis in the sense that each will die without it. Suppose also that there is only enough digitalis for one person. Jones, a UEE, and Smith plan to go after the digitalis. However, Smith asks Jones for moral advice. Since Jones holds UEE as a theory, Jones should tell Smith that she should do what is in her own self-interest regardless of his s-i. But doing so will directly lead Smith to a course of action that will harm Jones. That is, Jones will violate UEE and do something immoral. However, if he either lies to Smith about what she
should do or says he doesn’t know what moral principles she should follow, then he has
abandoned UEE as a moral theory and, thus, undermined his own moral justification for
obtaining the digitalis without regard to Smith’s interests. These sorts of situations raise serious,
and many believe, fatal problems with UEE as a moral theory — that is, a view which should
hold for all people.

II) Utilitarianism (supplemental notes)

1) Objection: Utilitarian’s can’t necessarily give reliable moral advice prior to an action. Since
only the consequences of an action make it good or bad, one can’t really know whether an action
is good or bad until one knows the ACTUAL consequences of the action. If actions will likely
have long term consequences, then knowing whether one acted correctly can be delayed well
into the future. The utilitarian can simply say that the desires for moral guarantees prior to action
is not possible given that consequences are morally relevant. In addition, the Utilitarian can look
to the past to see the consequences of various practices: truth telling, lying, taking human life etc.
When we do so, we can make a good determination about the good and bad consequences of
actions and use that as the basis for deciding what to do in the present. This procedure is part of
rule-utilitarianism — making moral judgments for a practice rather than just an individual action.
But these rules are always just guidelines since if in a particular situation the action brings about
good and bad consequences that differ from the same action in the past, then one would have to
make, or one should have made, an exception to the rule. Recourse to past actions won’t work in
cases where actions are being contemplated for which there is no past precedent. This sort of
situation can easily arise in our age because of technological and other changes.

2) Objection: Utilitarian’s may have to morally support the wrongful punishment of an innocent
person if it benefits the majority. Case: A white woman has been viciously murdered by a black
man in a town that has a great deal of racial hostility and tension. There is a serious danger of
riots and of white vigilante groups killing black people. The police apprehend a black man who
was near the scene of the crime, has a past history of violence but whom the police know to be
innocent of the crime. They have no idea of the identity of the real murderer. However, to
prevent riots and violence for the town, they frame the black man. He is convicted and sent to
prison. Since such an action promoted the advantage of the vast majority of the citizens in the
town, the objection is that the utilitarian must give moral approval to the actions of the police.
A common Utilitarian reply is that if such practices were widespread, they would become known
and would undermine the rule of law, thus leading to far worse consequences for people in
general than the riots that were prevented. The objection continues: even if this is correct and
even if one could show, apart from this consideration, that the false conviction would have lead
to more negative than good consequences, it doesn’t seem that the consequences of an action are
morally relevant here. It is simply unjust to punish an innocent person for a crime he/she did not
commit. Justice commonly requires treating people according to what they deserve. It’s wrong to
punish innocent people because they don’t deserve to be punished, not because not punishing
them promotes general welfare. Similarly, one would object to the severe punishment of an
individual for a minor infraction in order to deter others (a possible utilitarian justification for
deterrence theories of punishment) since the punishment is utterly disproportionate to the offence
and, hence, unjust and underserved. The thrust of the objection is that notions of justice and
desert (what people deserve) are not founded on moral utility.

Act and Rule Utilitarianism:

The distinction between these two versions of utilitarianism is to what extent can we form moral
rules. The act utilitarian claim that everyone should perform that action which will bring about
the greatest good over bad for everyone affected by the act. Act utilitarianism requires that we
consider each action on a case by case basis. It is only the actual consequences of an action that
are relevant for determining whether or not it is moral. Those consequences can only be
determined by considering actions in the particular situations in which they occur. The act
utilitarian rejects the idea of absolute moral rules since that assumes that actions always have the
same consequences regardless of the situations in which they occur. You can review the
selection on act utilitarianism in the read to see some of the problems and limitations with this
approach.

The rule utilitarian claims that everyone should follow those rules that bring about the greatest
good over bad for everyone affected by the act. The rule utilitarian basically argues that there is
enough similarity in human situations that moral rules can be formulated and followed. You can
review the selection on rule utilitarianism to see some of the problems and limitations with this
approach. Note, however, that the rule utilitarian can not hold to absolute moral rules: rules that
would universally mandate or prohibit a certain kind of action. Remember that for utilitarians no
actions are intrinsically right or wrong. Hence, rule utilitarians have to allow that there might be
exceptions to rules in particular situations. The reason is that the rule utilitarian cannot guarantee
in advance that the consequences of an action in a particular situation may not be different that
they have been in other situations. Hence, it is possible that we might follow a moral rule prior to
acting only to find out afterwards that it the action was wrong if the bad consequences of the
action outweighed the good ones.

The critic of rule utilitarianism argues that moral rules are useful only if we can formulate all of
the exceptions to the rule. If we can’t we run the risk of following the rule in circumstances
where we shouldn’t follow it (namely, where there are exceptions). But either we can’t know all
of the exceptions in advance, or we have to specify so many exceptions that the rule is
effectively eliminated by all of the qualifications. (The reading on this gives a good discussion of
this matter).