Briefing
Consequentialism and Utilitarianism

Consequentialism (teleology)
Teleology comes from the Greek word telos, meaning purpose or end. Teleology is now more commonly known as consequentialism. For consequentialists, whether an action is morally right or wrong depends on the action's consequences.

In any situation, the morally right thing to do is whatever will have the best consequences. However, the question arises as to what kind of consequences. Consequentialism, therefore, is not very informative unless it's combined with a theory about what the best consequences are.

Utilitarianism
Utilitarianism is a consequentialist theory. Utilitarians consider that actions are right if they maximise happiness/pleasure and minimise unhappiness/pain; or, that actions are right if they have the greatest utility. The basis of utilitarianism is to ask what has intrinsic value (value in itself) and then assess the consequences of an action in terms of intrinsically valuable things. Utilitarianism has had considerable influence upon legislation.

The 'Founders' of Utilitarianism were Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)

They founded utilitarianism on the premise that pleasure (happiness) is the supreme good. The goal of ethics is not only the pleasure (happiness) of the individual, but the greatest pleasure (happiness) for the greatest number. For Bentham, this broader goal is a consequence of individual self-interest, whereas for Mill, it is based upon the social instinct in mankind.

The ‘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)

Thus, an action is judged by the total amount of happiness and unhappiness it creates. (Note: this means the total happiness and unhappiness of everyone affected by the action).

Act versus Rule Utilitarianism
The greatest happiness principle is somewhat vague and it is not clear whether Mill means:

(i) an action is right if this sort of action tends to promote happiness, or
(ii) an action is right if this particular action will promote happiness.

The question is whether the principle of utility be applied to particular acts, or to rules:

• a rule utilitarian would believe in the former approach and an act utilitarian would believe in the latter approach.

Bentham is an act utilitarian and Mill is intermediate.

Bentham and Mill assumed as a matter of course that everyone by nature seeks pleasure and flees from pain.
But is that true?
What about altruism/people sacrificing themselves for others?

Is maximizing happiness always right?
What if the majority in a country would take great pleasure in the persecution of a minority?

The strength of consequentialism is that its practical, results-orientated approach makes it relatively clear how to make ethical judgments – simply reflect on the consequences.

Problems include the measurement of utility: the difficulty of calculating the pleasures and pains produced by an act. How can we know all the consequences of an action? How can we compare utility from person to person? Also, the conflict with justice: aggregate and maximizing considerations of utilitarianism may violate principles of fairness and justice. In theory, any
Rule & Act Utilitarianism

Scenario

A country’s much-loved leader has been rushed to the hospital, grievously wounded by an assassin’s bullet. He needs a heart and lung transplant immediately to survive. No suitable donors are available, but there is a homeless person in the intensive care who is being kept alive on a respirator, who probably has only a few days to live, and who is a perfect donor.

Without the transplant, the leader will die; the homeless person will die in a few days anyway. Security at the hospital is very tightly controlled. The transplant team could hasten the death of the homeless person and carry out the transplant without the public ever knowing that they killed the homeless person for his organs. What should they do?

For rule utilitarians, this is an easy choice. No one could approve a general rule that lets hospitals kill patients for their organs when they are going to die anyway. The consequences of adopting such a general rule would be highly negative and would certainly undermine public trust in the medical establishment.

For act utilitarians, the situation is more complex. If secrecy were guaranteed, the overall consequences might be such that in this particular instance greater utility is produced by hastening the death of the homeless person and using his organs for the transplant.

Terms
Consequentialism
Teleology
Utility
Utilitarianism
Rule utilitarianism
Act utilitarianism