

Utilitarianism as the Ethics of Colonialism

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Abstract

This article critically examines the role of utilitarian philosophy in legitimizing colonialism, a multifaceted historical phenomenon often justified through ideological and philosophical frameworks. While utilitarianism does not inherently entail colonialism, historical interpretations of utilitarianism—marked by simplistic understandings and paternalistic, ethnocentric assumptions by its proponents—have facilitated moral justifications for colonial domination. Concepts such as "collective happiness" and "civilizational progress" within utilitarian thought were co-opted to rationalize imperial rule. Rather than conflicting with utilitarianism, colonialism was reframed within the "principle of utility" as a means to maximize overall benefit. Highlighting the gap between utilitarianism's abstract potential and its historical application, this study identifies reductive interpretations of the "principle of utility" and ethnocentric biases as key factors in aligning utilitarianism with colonial practices. Through a critical-analytical lens, the article explores the historical convergence of classical utilitarianism and colonialism, urging reflection on the ethical responsibilities tied to power and domination.

Keywords

Moral utilitarianism, colonialism, utilitarianism and colonialism, Jeremy Bentham, John Stuart Mill.

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