Review

What's the use? On the uses of use

Sara Ahmed

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In *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*, Sara Ahmed considers *use* as an activity of everyday life. In a mirror of this understanding, Ahmed's method in the book is ordinary language and object-oriented philosophy, or what Ahmed has previously called 'queer phenomenology.' Ahmed also diagnoses how *use* has been problematically used as a technique of subject formation in some evolutionary sciences and by the colonial-utilitarian British education system. The use of *use* as technique has contributed to structural racism, sexism, and ableism characterizing the current status of universities, which makes this book especially salient for contemporary discussions about how to transform unjust and cruel institutions. As an alternative to 'use as technique' and the subjectivities it shapes, Ahmed proposes 'queer use,' which she sometimes pairs with 'crip use.' This *use* belongs not to the fittest but to misfits.

What's the Use? completes the trilogy Ahmed started with *The Promise of Happiness* and continued in *Willful Subjects* and revives Ahmed's critique of the imperative to be happy. Unlike prior parts of the trilogy, which focus on words (happiness, will), this book, Ahmed points out, by following *use*, follows things: a path, an arm, Jeremy Bentham's desiccated body, the photographed smile of a brown professor, an empty tube of toothpaste, a mailbox where birds nest. Ahmed diagnoses how we speak of *use* in the first chapter of the book and, in later chapters, in a metatheoretical register, Ahmed investigates historical and philosophical uses of *use*, in their own right and also in the doubleness they portray—namely that we use *use* and are used by *use* at the same time. Employing the expression 'the uses of use' to indicate this doubleness, Ahmed exemplifies it through the metaphor of Silas's pot (from George Eliot's *Silas Marner*), which in being used, makes an impression on its user.

Ahmed's reconfiguration of *use* and its uses takes place over five chapters. The first chapter, 'Using Things,' presents and analyzes a plethora of ordinary uses of *use*, in language—out of use, used, used up, used to, unused, in use, useless, usable,

overused—and in the everyday appearance of things, in photography and literature. Chapter two, ‘The Biology of Use and Disuse,’ closely reads Lamarck and Darwin to, on the one hand, challenge the use of their ideas and discussions of *use*, selection, and change as neatly reinforcing eugenics, and, on the other hand, to bring to light how those ideas are nevertheless open to appropriation by use as technique.

Chapter three, ‘Use as Technique,’ is especially important to the overall argument of the book. This chapter traces how *use* was deployed against imperial subjects by British colonists in India, and then on nationals, back in Britain, by education innovators like Bentham, who linked their utilitarian approach to happiness. Imagining their schoolrooms as sites of ‘the transition from discipline and punish to discipline and care’ (p. 124), these educators sought to forge subjectivities for whom ‘not to be in use [was] to be deprived of any sense of purpose’ (p. 129). In the colonies, for example, the British severed Indian children from their kin and, treating them as orphans, whether literally or discursively, trained them to become useful for colonial companies, contrasting them with ‘vacant minds’ and ‘deserted children.’ The colonists characterized the children as ‘a waste’ to themselves and society, and promised that in becoming useful, the children would become happy. Ahmed shows how utilitarianism’s ideal of maximizing public utility in both India and Britain contained in it the idea of the usability of the poor, incarcerated, and unloved, who, in being most usable, also became the most disposable (p. 137). Offering stark evidence of how the uses of death under a utilitarian logic are not distributed evenly, Ahmed shows how Bentham’s ‘auto-icon’ (his desiccated body on exhibit at University College London (UCL), created to respect the philosopher’s wishes of not becoming ‘altogether useless after death’) obfuscates rather than exemplifies utilitarianism’s uses of death. When applied, utilitarianism uses *use* as technique to direct the life and death of those it determines to be less wanted, collectively and individually, so as to make them more useful to those who have more, materially and affectively—all in the name of happiness. Chapters two and three then lead Ahmed to the contemporary status of universities.

Prefaced by an exploration of the utilitarian history of UCL and its accommodation of eugenics ‘not only as housed by the university but as shaping how it is built’ (p. 144), in chapter four, ‘Use and the University,’ Ahmed argues that institutions are not merely well-defined walls that are built or torn down. Instead, previous uses set the stage for future uses, and invisible walls and well-trodden paths make changing structures challenging and exhausting. To make this point, Ahmed reuses a photo of a path, giving it different yet complementary captions with each appearance: ‘the more a path is used, the more a path is used’ (p. 40), ‘a longer neck’ (p. 74), ‘a stronger arm’ (p. 86), ‘more can refer to how many’ (p. 121), ‘an old policy’ (p. 153), ‘the more he is cited, the more he is cited’ (p. 167). Drawing on interviews with academics as well as her own experiences,

Ahmed speaks to how universities continue to protect sexual harassers, despite ‘diversity committees’ and formal complaint procedures. Against these, Ahmed proposes bypassing institutional channels and leaking complaints and warnings about harassment and abuse. As queer uses of the academy and its spaces—we might also think here of WikiLeaks—have the capacity to disrupt power structures safeguarded by invisible walls and well-trodden networks of protection and communication. Where leaks lead to an explosion (p. 215), queer uses can tear down walls.

In the book’s conclusion, Ahmed writes about the Stonewall uprising, using Sylvia Rivera’s words to queer the complex affect embedded in the title of the book: ‘What’s the use?’ Rivera says: ‘Everybody just like, Why the fuck are we doin’ this, all this for? ... Oh, it was exciting. It was like, Wow, we’re doing it. We’re doing it. We’re fucking their nerves’ (p. 228). For Ahmed, exhaustion, being used up, and rebellion meet in these words. That focus makes queer use, ‘interpreted as vandalism: the willful destruction of the venerable and the beautiful’ (p. 208), a reminder of the perverse workings of an ideology that uses the promise of happiness to oppress. ‘Queer vandalism,’ as Ahmed calls it, is about refusing to use things properly and destroying propriety, maybe property, to recover the potential for other uses embedded in materials.

Ahmed describes queer use as coming from the necessity to exist of those for whom living structures are not designed, and she describes it as a practice of survival and transformation (p. 189). She also writes that in *use* there is ‘always a potential because use cannot be properly proper’ (p. 208). Wherein lies this potential of queer use as opposed to other uses of *use*? Exhaustion, impropriety, and misuse (or misfit use) seem central to Ahmed’s conception, though what these entail is not entirely clear. Moreover, if we return to Rivera’s words, in her ‘Wow, we’re doing it. We’re doing it’ not only exhaustion and depletion appear but also excitement and beauty. Excitement and beauty appear, too, if only as traces, in Ahmed’s examples of queer use in ‘the doorway [that] becomes a meeting place,’ ‘the kitchen table [that] becomes a publishing house,’ and ‘the postbox [that] becomes a nest’ (p. 229). In the constellations of different *uses* and uses of *use* that Ahmed offers across this book I found myself wishing for more about queer use, and specifically about these aspects of queer use. If the downsides of a *use* governed by the utilitarian promise of happiness are well developed, the excitement and beauty in the ‘vandalization’ of that happiness are not. This is both a success and a shortcoming of Ahmed’s argument: it demonstrates how difficult it is to diverge from well-trodden paths.

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Tessy Schlosser
Cornell University, Ithaca, NY 14850, USA
es936@cornell.edu