

## Book Review

### What's the Use? On the Uses of Use

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**Published:** March 5, 2021

**Book's Author:** Sara Ahmed

**Publication Date:** 2019

**Publisher:** Duke University Press

**Price:** \$26.95

**Number of Pages:** 296 pp.

**ISBN:** 978-1-4780-0650-3 (paper), 978-1-4780-0584-1 (cloth)

Sara Ahmed is a practical feminist. This is not to say that she's not a serious, creative, or challenging feminist. She's all those things. But, like bell hooks, Brittany Cooper, and others, Ahmed takes often abstruse feminist theory and makes it accessible to non-academic readers. Her work offers a thinking person's guide to living a feminist life. She understands that creating social change means getting transformative ideas to the widest audience possible.

As well as writing for a broad audience, Ahmed is a prominent voice in efforts to reform British educational institutions. Most recently, frustrated by the University of London's inaction on issues of sexual harassment and sexual misconduct, she resigned in protest from a secure academic position at Goldsmiths College (a constituent college of the University of London) – a high profile resignation that dramatically drew attention to a seemingly insoluble problem. Her most recent book, *What's the Use: On the uses of use* (2019) elegantly attempts to understand the intractability of the university to become safer and more diverse.

Ahmed's accessibility and activism come together in *What's the Use*. With *What's the Use?* Ahmed completes a trilogy that began with *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and continued with *Willful Subjects* (2014). As in the first two books, Ahmed's method is to 'follow words around.' Use, of course, is more grounded, less abstract than happiness or will and comes with a long literary and philosophical history. One of the delights of *What's the Use* comes from following the word use on a journey that ranges from Lucretius to Virginia Woolf, from John Locke to George Eliot, then takes a deep dive into utilitarian thinkers like Henry Sidgwick, John Stuart Mill, and Jeremy Bentham (a founder of the University of London). While Audre Lorde famously cautioned us that the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house, Ahmed gracefully uses Western philosophical thought to help build her case for diversity in the university and the queerness of use.

Another, more fanciful part of Ahmed's method is her use of metaphors. Take, for example, the traditional bright red British post box – an object whose use could not be clearer. But, when nesting birds take up residence in a box and a sign appears on the box, 'Birds nesting. Please do not use this box. Many thanks,' the box has been re-purposed. Its use is in no way less essential than its original purpose but could hardly have been anticipated by the builders of the box. Similarly, in an example drawn from literature, George Eliot's character Silas Marner values his brown earthenware pot for its many uses, some of which he and the pot's maker hardly anticipated.

Not surprisingly, along with methodology, utilitarian thought, the ideas of Bentham in particular, centres Ahmed's book. She pays particular attention to utilitarian educational projects such as nineteenth-century monitorial schools, as well as the links of utilitarianism with the modern university. For Ahmed, utilitarianism is a

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prelude to contemporary thinking about use. Disability studies, for example, draws our attention to the use of common objects like doors. On the face of it the use of a door seems clear. But doors are made on a 'normative template' for the able bodied – as Ahmed points out, '[U]sability can thus be reframed as a question of accessibility' (59).

After building the framework for her argument in the first part of the book, Ahmed moves from historical and philosophical ideas about use to the practical in the third chapter of the book. Diversity is well established as a desirable goal for universities in the UK and USA. Most universities have either government mandated or voluntary programs aimed at diversifying their faculties, staff, and student bodies. Do they work? Do the programmes of boards, complaints, and designated diversity officers redress actually function? Ahmed cites examples we are all sadly all familiar with. 'Diversity hires' are welcomed into a university department, only to experience the sexism, racism, and/or homophobia that is 'business as usual'. A graduate student (or junior academic) brings a complaint against a supervisor, a senior colleague. She is cautioned that going ahead with the complaint could jeopardise her career, her future chances – no one will hire you. Evidence is 'she said, he said' or a complaint is filed, goes through channels, then – nothing. It seems to disappear into a Kafka-esque bottomless filing cabinet. In this chapter, Ahmed builds on her earlier work published as *On Being Included: On racism and diversity in institutional work* (2012), in which she described the frustrating task of the diversity worker – hired by universities, only to realise that hiring you *was* the institutional solution.

I read this chapter with especial sadness. More than forty years ago when we began to throw up the scaffolding of what became Women's Studies, we never anticipated how it would evolve into queer studies, sexuality studies, intersectionality – all aimed at transforming the university into a more inclusive, indeed a more useful place. We hardly anticipated how resistant this institution would be to change. Forty years ago, there was no recourse for sexual harassment, discrimination, and sexual misconduct. The attitudes—that's the way things are—boys will be boys—there are no minority scholars to recruit—prevailed. While these attitudes may have dissipated – at least publicly – and multiple avenues through which to register a complaint exist – the outcome, as Ahmed demonstrates, is often the same. The university remains the purview of normative white heteronormativity. But the 'usefulness' of the university, the social function so clearly established by utilitarian thinkers, that Ahmed has conclusively established can only function when all members feel protected and respected.

'Queer use' the theme of Ahmed's final chapter, she defines 'as when you use something for a purpose that is 'very different' from that which was 'originally intended' (p. 199) or 'how those who identify as queer make use of spaces' (p. 200). This chapter echoes her earlier work, *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), and shows Ahmed at her most provocative. Take, for example, her discussion of citational practice. Unlike in the prior book within which she cited no white males, Ahmed found it necessary here to cite many, given that she was writing about the history of utilitarianism. In other words, she makes a case for the *usefulness* of citations rather than simply following common practice. As she writes, 'Queer use offers another way of talking about diversity work: the work you have to do to open institutions to those for whom they were not intended' (p. 212-3).

My one reservation about the book – potentially because I am an American reader or perhaps just missing something – was that it seemed at points to conflate racial/ethnic discrimination and sexual harassment. Although these are different sides of the same coin, they *are* different. For me, this difference was not made sufficiently clear. While the root cause of both problems is resistance to change in patriarchal institutions, in the USA at least the laws and offices to deal with each problem are distinct.

Reading *What's the Use*, it's almost irresistible to ask what's its use? Feminist academics, graduate students, and advanced undergraduates would benefit from exposure to Ahmed's ideas and methods. In a utopian feminist future, I would most like to see diversity workers and university administrators reading, learning from, and implementing the suggestions in Ahmed's book. The outcome would be a more useful institution for all.

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**Citation:** Schofield, A. (2021). [Review of the book *What's the Use? On the Uses of Use*, by Sara Ahmed]. *Feminist Encounters: A Journal of Critical Studies in Culture and Politics*, 5(1), 17. <https://doi.org/10.20897/femenc/9754>

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