

Book Review | What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use, by Sara Ahmed (Duke University Press, 2019)

Jack R Leff

Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

leffjr@vt.edu

Sara Ahmed's latest work, *What's the Use?: On the Uses of Use*, is as useful as it is use full. Completing a trilogy that includes *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014), *What's the Use?* explores the ways use makes itself felt. Ahmed beautifully combines genealogy and phenomenology to explore how using, not using, or being put to use shapes our encounters with the world.

This book, like much of Ahmed's work, is fundamentally interdisciplinary in nature. To try and run through the different fields she engages would mean reaching my word count here. At its core, Ahmed's project is about critically interrogating the various "straightening devices," to borrow an older term of hers (Ahmed, 2006, p. 107), that makes certain people, things, and outcomes seem natural while excluding others. Immediately, feminist scholars of science and technology studies (STS) ought to hear this description and feel a sense of familiarity, especially in the arena of naturalization. Yet, despite the powerful and interdisciplinary work Ahmed has produced over the last twenty-five years, her uptake in the field of STS, even feminist STS, has been rather limited. In this review, I want to focus on how this book in particular marks an opportunity for STS to begin incorporating Ahmed's scholarship in a serious way. Ahmed's examination of the history of biology and the uses of technology creates a path for feminist STS scholars to incorporate her ideas, and hopefully one that leads to other rich concepts that she has developed over her career.

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Where the introduction sets up Ahmed's archive and begins her exploration of the uses of use, Chapter 1 brings us immediately to a discussion of use and technologies. Drawing from disability and trans studies, Ahmed examines how the selective uses of the bathroom door (among other everyday technologies) shapes who can use spaces. As she writes, "Doors are not just physical things that swing on hinges; *they are mechanisms that enable an opening and a closing*" (p. 60). The way a door is used and is made useful delimits who can use it to enter or leave a given space. Two examples are discussed here. The first is how the design of a door can prevent disabled people from accessing a space. Its heft, the way it swings, the surrounding architecture, and the presence (or absence) of an automatic opening mechanism changes how doors can be used and by whom. Second, the sign on bathroom doors signifying gender becomes a technology that uses social norms to transform bathroom doors into gates. Either you comply with the gender norm and can pass unhindered, or the gate shuts and the door becomes a wall. Despite functionally being usable, the door is unusable. These everyday encounters with useful technologies, like doors, are a site of key feminist analyses for Ahmed. How we come to understand these technologies can be understood through their *relative* uses and in asking who is unable to use them. By examining "use" closely, Ahmed gives feminist STS a language that captures the interplay between the social construction of technological function *and* how the usefulness of a technological artifact shapes social spaces.

The second chapter in *What's the Use?* sees Ahmed reading together the work of biologists Jean-Baptiste Lamarck and Charles Darwin. While Lamarck and Darwin are traditionally taught as polar opposites, Ahmed finds that "[e]ven if Lamarck and Darwin explain variation differently, both understand use as a *mode of directionality*" (p. 79). In this way, both theories of evolution put a high value on use even if the ways use is used vary. The emblematic example here is that of the blacksmith's arm, which is often used to distinguish how Darwin and Lamarck understand the development and inheritance of traits.¹ Where Darwin might say that the strength in a blacksmith's arm is an inherited trait that is used advantageously by a lineage of blacksmiths, Lamarckian thinkers would argue that the arm's strength is a result of blacksmiths using their arm more and more over generations. In either case, use is center stage. More than this, the example of how a blacksmith's arm inherits strength through various accounts of usefulness is also, for Ahmed, the story of how the blacksmith inherits work. Moving from a contrast of Darwin's and Lamarck's debates to Marx and eventually to contemporary society, Ahmed demonstrates a powerful linkage between biology, technology, and society. The politicization of biology here will not be a surprising move for feminist scholars of STS, but how Ahmed speaks on

embodied usefulness gives us important tools for considering biology's role in embedding usefulness in bodies as a way for capitalism to extract value. Chapter 3 moves us into different terrain. Here, Ahmed wants to understand use not simply as a function of technology, but as a technique in itself. Ahmed accomplishes this by examining how utilitarianism makes use of use and how the utilitarian Jeremy Bentham uses use-as-technique as a governing principle in his monitorial schools and panoptic prisons. Of particular note for policy inclined feminist STS is Ahmed's critique of utilitarianism as an organizational principle. Here, her argument serves as a warning against those who make policy arguments based purely on the usefulness of any given outcome. Given how utilitarian, cost-benefit analyses are often the moral lynchpin in policy discourse, this chapter reminds us of how utilitarian binaries of usefulness/uselessness conceal the ways institutional violence can manifest.

The critique of the uses of use in Bentham's monitorial schools leads Ahmed to Chapter 4, where she dissects use in the contemporary university. Building on her activist work against sexual violence and white supremacy at Goldsmiths, this chapter offers powerful organizing tools as well as a preview for Ahmed's next book on feminist complaint. In the academy, usefulness becomes a way of maintaining institutional inertia or, to borrow her metaphor, a wall that keeps marginalized people isolated. For instance, she describes how the overuse of the term *diversity* in academic settings can simultaneously make it *useless* for creating actual diversity while also making it exceedingly *useful* for those who never wanted diversity in the first place (p. 148). This oscillation between making something useless to make other things useful is elaborated on in the case of complaints, where complaints are made useless so that the institution does not have to change. Drawing from experience, Ahmed discusses how institutions, as environments, can be structured to disallow complaints at every turn in order to exhaust the diversity worker registering the complaint. At every step of the complaint process, paths are "funneled" so that the diversity worker sees no end in sight or, worse yet, the end is being blacklisted from their profession (p. 185). This chapter, disheartening though the wall may be, offers crucial strategies to feminist activists and feminist STS for making our own marks on the wall and guides us to recognizing the marks left by others.

Like most of Ahmed's books, the conclusion takes a moment to reflect on how we can resist the ways use forecloses queer horizons and employ queer use to scratch at the walls of hegemony. Why take the effort to queer use? As she writes, "Misfitting can be understood as generative precisely given it involves friction; when bodies do not fit seamlessly into space, things happen" (p. 224) or, in other

words, queering use generates otherwise possibilities in a world hostile to those who don't fit. However, we should avoid seeing queer use in simply how it can be useful to us; rather, "Queer use can be offered as an ethics of finitude, an appreciation of the wrinkle or the scratch, expressions of time on the surfaces of bodies and things, loving what does not, and will not, last" (p. 226). The lesson being that queer use is not capturable in a dialectic of useful and useless, as utilitarianism might propose, but instead creates opportunities to recognize people as not disposable. If, as Ahmed suggests, capitalism and white supremacist cisheteropatriarchy rely on extracting use from bodies, then queer use's declaration that people are not disposable resists the extractionist tendencies of institutions.²

I have, by necessity, excluded many of the uses of use that Ahmed works through across this book. This book is a must-read for any feminist scholars of STS and hopefully represents an opportunity for STS more broadly to engage the work of one of the most generative scholars. The tools and language Sara Ahmed details here are invaluable for discussing the social impacts of technologies and for creating worlds in which usefulness is not a prerequisite for existence.

Notes

¹ This is despite the fact that Lamarck himself never really used the example.

² Of particular note to feminist STS are the tendencies of the academy to chew people (especially marginalized people) up. This includes the increasing reliance on precarious adjunct labor, publish or perish, how university's excoriate complainers, the unwillingness of administration to be transparent, administrative unwillingness to listen to students, and a host of other everyday violence that the institution inflicts upon those who work for it.

References

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Author Bio

Jack R Leff is a Ph.D. student in Science, Technology, and Society (STS) at Virginia Tech whose work focuses on the politics of breath, breathing, and atmosphere.