

What's the Use?



**On the
Uses
of Use**

Sara Ahmed

Praise for Sara Ahmed

Praise for *Living a Feminist Life*

“From the moment I received Sara Ahmed’s new work, *Living a Feminist Life*, I couldn’t put it down. It’s such a brilliant, witty, visionary new way to think about feminist theory. Everyone should read this book. It offers amazing new ways of knowing and talking about feminist theory and practice. And, it is also delightful, funny, and as the song says, ‘your love has lifted me higher.’ Ahmed lifts us higher.”
—bell hooks

“Beautifully written and persuasively argued, *Living a Feminist Life* is not just an instant classic, but an essential read for intersectional feminists.”—Ann A. Hamilton, *Bitch*

“Anyone at odds with this world—and we all ought to be—owes it to themselves, and to the goal of a better tomorrow, to read this book.”
—Mariam Rahmani, *Los Angeles Review of Books*

“*Living a Feminist Life* is perhaps the most accessible and important of Ahmed’s works to date. . . . [A] quite dazzlingly lively, angry and urgent call to arms . . . In short, everybody should read Ahmed’s book precisely because not everybody will.”—Emma Rees, *Times Higher Education*

“Fans of bell hooks and Audre Lorde will find Ahmed’s frequent homages and references familiar and assuring in a work that goes far beyond Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, capturing the intersection so critical in modern feminism.”—Abby Hargreaves, *Library Journal*

“*Living a Feminist Life* offers something halfway between the immediacy and punch of the blog and the multi-layered considerations of a scholarly essay; the result is one of the most politically engaged, complex and personal books on gender politics we have seen in a while.”
—Bidisha, *Times Literary Supplement*

"*Living a Feminist Life* hopes we can survive doing feminist theory, and energizes us to do so."—Clare Croft, *Feminist Theory*

"Undeniably, Ahmed's book is a highly crafted work, both scholarly and lyrically, that builds upon itself and delivers concrete, adaptable conclusions; it is a gorgeous argument, crackling with kind wit and an invitation to the community of feminist killjoys."—Theodosia Henney, *Lambda Literary Review*

"Ahmed gifts us words that we may have difficulty finding for ourselves. . . . [R]eading her book provides a tentative vision for a feminist ethics for radical politics that is applicable far beyond what is traditionally considered the domain of feminism."—Mahvish Ahmad, *The New Inquiry*

Praise for *On Being Included*

"Just when you think everything that could possibly be said about diversity in higher education has been said, Sara Ahmed comes along with this startlingly original, deeply engaging ethnography of diversity work. *On Being Included* is an insightful, smart reflection on the embodied, profoundly political phenomenology of doing and performing diversity in predominantly white institutions. As Ahmed queers even the most mundane formulations of diversity, she creates one eureka moment after another. I could not put this book down. It is a must-read for everyone committed to antiracist, feminist work as key to institutional transformation in higher education."—Chandra Talpade Mohanty, author of *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity*

"This book offers a grounded and open exploration of what it means to 'do' diversity, to 'be' diverse. It challenges the reader, both in style and in content, to reconsider relations of power that stick to the multiple practices, meanings, and understandings of diversity, and to reconsider how we engage, reproduce, and disrupt these relations."

—Juliane Collard and Carolyn Prouse, *Gender, Place, and Culture*

Praise for *Willful Subjects*

"Like her other works known for their originality, sharpness, and reach, Ahmed offers here a vibrant, surprising, and philosophically rich analysis of cultural politics, drawing on feminist, queer and anti-racist uses of willing and willfulness to explain forms of sustained and adamant social disagreement as a constitutive part of any radical ethics and politics worth its name."—Judith Butler, Maxine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature, University of California, Berkeley

"Ahmed's insights, as always, are both intellectually fertile and provocative; *Willful Subjects* will not disappoint."—Margrit Shildrick, *Signs*

"There is no one else writing in contemporary cultural theory who is able to take hold of a single concept with such a firm and sure grasp and follow it along an idiosyncratic path in such surprising and illuminating ways."—Gayle Salamon, author of *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*

Praise for *The Promise of Happiness*

"Ahmed's language is a joy, and her work on each case study is filled with insight and rigor as she doggedly traces the social networks of dominance concealed and congealed around happiness. . . . *The Promise of Happiness* is an important intervention in affect studies that crucially approaches one of the major assumptions guiding social life: the assumption that we need to be happy."—Sean Grattan, *Social Text*

"*The Promise of Happiness* bridges philosophy and cultural studies, phenomenology and feminist thought—providing a fresh and incisive approach to some of the most urgent contemporary feminist issues. Ahmed navigates this bridge with a voice both clear and warm to convey ideas that are as complex as they are intimate and accessible. Her treatment of affect as a phenomenological project provides feminist theorists a way out of mind-body divides without reverting to essentialisms, enabling Ahmed to attend to intersectional and global power relations with acuity and originality."—Aimee Carrillo Rowe, *Signs*

Praise for *Queer Phenomenology*

"Ahmed's most valuable contribution in *Queer Phenomenology* is her reorienting of the language of queer theory. The phenomenological understanding of orientation and its attendant geometric metaphors usefully reframes queer discourse, showing disorientation as a moment not of desperation but of radical possibility, of getting it twisted in a productive and revolutionary way."—Zachary Lamm, *GLQ*

"In this dazzling new book, Sara Ahmed has begun a much needed dialogue between queer studies and phenomenology. Focusing on the directionality, spatiality, and inclination of desires in time and space, Ahmed explains the straightness of heterosexuality and the digressions made by those queer desires that incline away from the norm, and, in her chapter on racialization, she puts the orient back into orientation. Ahmed's book has no telos, no moral purpose for queer life, but what it brings to the table instead is an original and inspiring meditation on the necessarily disorienting, disconcerting, and disjointed experience of queerness."—Jack Halberstam, author of *Female Masculinity*

**What's
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On the Uses of Use

Sara Ahmed

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Cover art: Photo by Sara Ahmed

**This book is for my queer family,
Sarah and Poppy.**

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Introduction

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A Useful Archive

The title of this book is a use expression, one that seems to point to the pointlessness of doing something. This expression often has an intonation of exasperation. What's the use, what's the point? Said in this way, "what's the use?" operates as a rhetorical question. We might ask "what's the use?" when we have reached a conclusion that there is no use. I imagine hands flung in the air expressing the withdrawal of a commitment to some difficult task. I hear a drawn-out sigh, the sound of giving up on something that had previously been pursued. We might be more likely to say "what's the use?" when the uselessness of something had not been apparent right from the beginning, when we have given up on something that we had expected to be useful such that to become exasperated can point not only to *what*, that which is now deemed pointless, but also to *who*, those who had assumed something had a point. It seems appropriate to ask about use, what it means to use something or to find a use for something, with such a moment of exasperation—a moment when we lose it rather than use it.

"What's the use, what's the point of saying that?" This is the question asked by the character Peggy in the last segment of Virginia Woolf's novel *The Years*, first published in 1937. Peggy is having what we might call a feminist killjoy moment; she is interrupting a family gathering with this question, posed sharply, pointedly. Her aunt Eleanor has already

suggested to Peggy that she should enjoy herself: “‘But we’re enjoying ourselves’ said Eleanor, ‘Come and enjoy yourself too’” ([1937] 2012, 264). Peggy does not obey her command. She seems alienated from happiness by making happiness into a question: “What does she mean by ‘happiness,’ by ‘freedom’? Peggy asked herself, lapsing against the wall again” (265). Happiness for Peggy seems unjust: “How can one be ‘happy’? she asked herself, in a world bursting with misery” (266). She is listening to scraps of conversation, to laughter bubbling away at the surface. Perhaps she can hear what is being said because she does not find happiness convincing. It is then that she asks the question, “What’s the use, what’s the point of saying that?” Once she asks this question, which she addresses to her brother (the discussion is about him), she is overwhelmed by bad feeling: “She looked at her brother. A feeling of animosity possessed her. He was still smiling, but his smile smoothed itself out as she looked at him. ‘What’s the use?’ she said, facing him. ‘You’ll marry. You’ll have children. What’ll you do then? Write little books to make money’” (268). Peggy flounders, describing her own words as “wrong,” as “personal” when “she had meant to say something impersonal” (268). The question of use becomes a personal question, a question about how a person lives their life. Once Peggy has started on this path, she has to keep going: “‘You’ll write one book, then another little book,’ she said viciously, ‘instead of living . . . living differently, differently’” (268).

Her utterance is too sharp; she regrets it. This wrinkle in the smile of the occasion is passed over; the conversation is smoothed out again, which means Peggy’s question is passed over, just as she is. The question “what’s the use?” is often articulated by Woolf’s characters at the moment they seem to be losing it. It is a question posed by sisters, such as Peggy, who are interrupting the flow of a conversation about the lives of men. Or it is a question posed by wives, such as when Mrs. Flushing asks Wilfrid in *The Voyage Out*, “What’s the use of talking? What’s the use—?” ([1915] 2001, 418). The word talking is replaced by a dash; we might think of the dash as *anything*. The next sentence, “She ceased,” implies not only that she stops talking but that she stops being. The wife becomes the one who ceases, for whom the questioning of use is a questioning of being. One thinks here also of Mrs. Dalloway, who also watches herself disappear in becoming wife, becoming mother (Woolf [1925] 1953, 14). Mrs. Thornbury follows Mrs. Flushing by also asking a question to Wilfrid, not to his wife, “because it was useless to speak to his wife” (Woolf [1915] 2001, 418). To become useless: not to be addressed. Perhaps to be

defined in relation to men, as sisters, as wives, is to be deemed useful to them but not to others.

When you question the point of something, the point seems to be how quickly you can be removed from the conversation. Maybe she removes herself. The question “what’s the use?” allows Woolf to throw life up as a question, to ask about the point of *anything* by asking about the point of *something*. It is a question Woolf poses to herself, a question she poses about her own writing. In a letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Woolf writes, “My dear Margaret what’s the use of my writing novels” (cited in Q. Bell 1972, 29). The question of use matters to a woman writer as a question of confidence, a question of whether the books she sends out can enable a way of “living differently,” to borrow Peggy’s terms. It implies that some things we do, things we are used to, things we are asked to get used to, are in the way of a feminist project of living differently. The woman writer is trying to craft an existence, to write, to make something, in a world in which she is usually cast as sister or wife. It is not surprising that when the world is not used to you, when you appear as unusual, use becomes what you question.

From Words to Things

My task in this introduction is to explain how I arrived at the question of use; how use became, as it were, my task; what I have been *working out* as well as *working on*; as well as to reflect on how my own work has been redirected by taking up that task. In this book, in asking about *use*, I have been following *use* around. *What’s the Use?* is the third in a series of books concerned with following words, the first being *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and the second *Willful Subjects* (2014).¹ In these books, I follow words around, in and out of their intellectual histories.² To follow a word is to ask not only how it acquires the status of a concept in philosophy but how that word is exercised, rather like a muscle, in everyday life. Even to reference the exercising of a muscle is to point in the direction of use. To exercise means to put into active use. Use could thus be understood as central to how I have developed my method across all these books even though I have not always described my projects in these terms: in other words, I have been exploring the *uses of happiness*, the *uses of will*, and the *uses of use*. Thinking about the use of words is to ask about *where* they go, *how* they acquire associations, and in *what* or *whom* they are found.

It is a rather daunting task to follow the word *use*; use is a much-used word, a small word with a lot of work to do. It would be impossible to follow use wherever use is used. By thinking about the use of words, I am asking how they are put to work or called upon to do certain kinds of work. And by suggesting words are put to work, I am implying that it is not always clear from the words themselves what they are doing. In *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014), I became intrigued by how the languages of happiness and will are exercised in speech acts such as “I am happy if you are happy” or “I am willing if you are.” These speech acts often work by creating conditions: one person’s happiness or will is made conditional upon another’s. These conditions might seem to be about reciprocity and care. But they also teach us how happiness and will can become obligatory and even coercive: if someone says they will be happy if you are happy, then you might have to be willing to be happy in order to ensure that person’s happiness. And then, if some people come first, their happiness comes first. My exploration showed how happiness and the will, even when they are written in the language of freedom (as free will, as freedom to be happy), can be experienced as the requirement to live your life in a certain way.

Duty can disappear under the guise of freedom. There is often a gap between what words say and what they do. I also find the languages of use intriguing. We could think, for example, of the expression “use it or lose it.” This expression itself travels across domains; it is used in personal training as a kind of motivational phrasing as well as in self-help books, especially those concerned with the effects of aging. The expression also appears in academic literatures such as neuroscience. An obituary for the neuroscientist, Marian Diamond, notes that a healthy brain requires “good diet, exercise, challenges and novelty.”³ It summarizes Diamond’s contributions to theories of neuroplasticity thus: “After more than six decades of studying the human brain, Marion Diamond boiled her findings down to this advice: ‘use it or lose it.’” The expression might indeed boil down an even longer history, condensing an idea that has circulated widely: that use keeps something (and something can include one’s own body or mind) alive such that not to use something is to lose something, to let it wither away and die. Use it or lose it has also been applied to the example of minority languages. One article notes: “The phrase ‘use it or lose it’ applies to few things more forcefully than to obscure languages. A tongue that is not

spoken will shrivel into extinction. If it is lucky, it may be preserved in a specialist lexicographer's dictionary in the way that a dried specimen of a vanished butterfly lingers in a museum cabinet. If it is unlucky, it will disappear for ever into the memory hole that is unwritten history."⁴ Not using a language, not exercising a spoken tongue, can mean to participate in its extinction. The moral stakes of use are high. A miserable fate follows falling out of use, becoming an item in a museum display, disappearing into "the memory hole that is unwritten history." We can note how quickly use can turn from being a description of an activity to a prescription: in positive terms, use becomes an obligation to keep something alive; or, in more negative terms, use becomes necessary in order to avoid something being lost. Use comes to acquire an association with life, disuse with death. *What's the Use?* tracks the history and significance of these associations.

Following happiness, the will and use does not mean going in the same direction. Happiness and the will seem to reference a subject, one who is happy or not, willing or not, although we can complicate that apparent referencing: things can be happy objects, anticipated to cause happiness; anything can be attributed as willful if it gets in the way of a will. Use seems to point more to objects than subjects or at least to activities in which subjects are occupied in tasks that require they have a hold of things. We might, however, make use of the language of use to describe ourselves: we might feel used, wish to be of use or useful, and so on. These uses of use seem to borrow their point from objects: the word *used* especially, when used to describe ourselves, tends to imply the injustice of being treated as an object, or as a means to someone else's ends. I will return to the implications of *used* in due course.

To follow words is to go where they go: that is the point. By following *use* I ended up following things. In her introduction to a special issue of *New Literary History* on use, Rita Felski attends to the word *use* itself: "The very word is stubby, plain, workmanlike, its monosyllabic bluntness as bare and unadorned as the thing that it names. It radiates overtones of sturdy practicality, bringing to mind images of shapeless overalls and sensible shoes. We tend to equate the useful with what is plodding, rational, and charmless, to oppose the useful to the dance of the imagination, the play of fantasy, the rhythms and rollings of desire" (2013, v). The word *use* radiates with potential even if we tend to associate the useful with the charmless and unadorned.

Use brings *things to mind*. Perhaps the word *use* is workmanlike, with its “monosyllabic bluntness,” because of *how* it evokes everyday life. When we think of use, we might think of things that are shaped in order to be useful: those practical sturdy shoes that enable us to walk further or faster; those baggy overalls that allow us to move around comfortably so we can throw ourselves into the task at hand. The bluntness of the word seems to convey an attitude that can be adopted in life. We might organize ourselves and our worlds around the need to accomplish certain tasks the best we can: use as practical; use as efficiency. Being blunt is, of course, not the only point of use. Those overalls are not in fact shapeless: they have a shape that is loose enough to accommodate different shapes. To be practical can also mean to be versatile. And those sensible shoes might be filled by an idea of comfort; they might catch our imagination and desire, longed for at the end of a hard day. As Felski concludes, use is “a more complex and capacious term than we have often held it to be” (2013, vi). The magical and mundane can belong in the same horizon; use can be plodding and capacious at the same time.

To follow something it first needs to catch your attention. Use caught my attention because of a description of an object I found in a text I was reading because I was writing about the will. That text was George Eliot’s *Silas Marner* and the object was Silas Marner’s brown earthenware pot. The pot is Silas’s companion. And the pot has become my writing companion.⁵ I consider the following quote as one of my starting points in my journey to and through use.

It was one of his [Silas’s] daily tasks to fetch his water from a well a couple of fields off, and for this purpose, ever since he came to Raveloe, he had had a brown earthenware pot, which he held as his most precious utensil, among the very few conveniences he had granted himself. It has been his companion for twelve years, always standing on the same spot, always lending its handle to him in the early morning, so that its form had an expression for him of willing helpfulness, and the impress of its handle on his palm gave a satisfaction mingled with that of having fresh clear water. (Eliot [1861] 1994, 17)

A relation of use could be thought of as an instrumental relation; the pot is described as a utensil, a precious utensil. Something is a utensil when it is used in order to do something. Silas is certainly using his pot to do something: to get the water from the well to the house. Use is also represented here as companionship; the pot is reliable, kind even,

standing there, ready for him. A relation of use can be one of affection. In this book, I take up *for*ness as key to why use matters, *for*ness as not only the point of an action (I know what a pot *is* by what it is *for*; the pot is a pot because I can use it for carrying) but also as an affecting or an affection. To be *for* something is to endow it with positive value. The pot thus acquires an expression: willing helpfulness. If Silas and the pot are in agreement with each other, the form of the pot gives expression to that agreement. To be in a relation of use is to acquire an expression. Use also leaves an impression: Silas feels the handle of the pot as an “impress” on his hand. I will return to the warmth of such impressions in chapter 1.

Silas’s pot has become, for me, a pedagogic tool. It teaches me how affection and instrumentality can be different threads woven together in the same story about use. And the story is a useful tool because of how it complicates the relation of use. It might seem like a simple albeit meaningful relation, a body and a pot—a one-to-one connection, even. But there is much more, many more, involved in the story. To be in a relation of use is to be in an environment with other things: the fresh, clear water; the well from which Silas draws the water; a well that would have been built by hands and tools; the path taken in carrying the pot from the well to the house. Use is thus an intimate as well as a social sphere. Use is *distributed* between persons and things. From this short description of a relation between a person and a pot in a fictional text, we can begin to complicate our understanding of use. Who gets to use what? How does something become available to use? Can something be available as a public facility—like a well from which we can draw water—without it being usable by everyone? One use question leads to others.

In following leads, we can value how we arrive somewhere. It is important that it was an object that brought me to use. My interest in the word came from an interest in a thing. I realized very quickly that if use brings things to mind, use provides another way of telling stories about things. In the first chapter of the book, I assemble things in accordance with what I call simply their *use status*, including a well-used and unused path, a used book and a used bag, a used-up tube of toothpaste, an out-of-use postbox, an overused exclamation point, and usable and unusable doors. I began to think of use biographically, as traveling through things. My useful archive thus includes many things, old and worn things, for which I acquired so much affection.

A History of an Idea

If following use led me to travel through things, how have I followed use as an idea? I understand this book to be an exploration of *the uses of use*. By using *use* twice, first in the plural and second in the singular, I am making a commitment: there are different uses of use, and these differences matter. In some instances, then, by “uses of use,” I am referring to how scholars have made use of use in developing their arguments. In reading for use, we are making connections that might not otherwise have been made across domains that might otherwise have remained distinct, such as biology, psychology, architecture, and design, which all make use of use to explain the acquisition of form. In some of these domains, we might expect use to be central; in others, perhaps less so.⁶ What has been striking to me is just how central use has been to many scholarly traditions, that is, how often use has been given the status of an organizing concept; use is used to explain different kinds of phenomena from the number of tines in a fork to the long neck of a giraffe.

It is always possible, however, to overlook what is central. I think the centrality of use has not always been clear. Scholars from the past who have made use of use as a concept have not always been understood as having done so. An example from political science would be John Locke’s *Second Treatise*, which is generally interpreted and taught as providing a labor theory of property. Locke did, in fact, make significant use of the categories of used and unused by defining the proper use of the land as agriculture. This is significant given how the category of “unused” was used to justify the colonial appropriation of land (see chapter 1). An example from biology would be Jean-Baptiste Lamarck, whose primary law is articulated as a law of use and disuse. Many contemporary discussions of Lamarck focus not so much on his use of use to explain how characteristics are acquired but rather on the thesis of the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Reading Lamarck on use, habit, and habitat has had a lasting impression on my own thinking. I was particularly struck by the implied relation between the acquisition of form and the lessening of effort (see chapter 2). Tracking the movement between biological and social models of use allowed me to make connections I had not made before, and I do not think I would have otherwise made, between inheritance, fitting, and the lessening of effort (see chapter 4). Pulling use out as a thread is to pull together different kinds of intellectual work.⁷ We learn from the connections.

There is one school of thought that has been defined in relation to its use of use: utilitarianism. Utility is a use word albeit one that is given a narrow philosophical pedigree.⁸ Utilitarianism has tended to be understood primarily as a branch of moral philosophy or normative ethics with a distinct canon founded upon the work of Henry Sidgwick, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill, who are usually described as *classical utilitarians*. Mill defines utilitarianism as “the creed which accepts as the foundation of morals ‘utility’ or ‘the greatest happiness principle’ holds that actions are right in proportion as they tend to promote happiness; wrong as they tend to produce the reverse of happiness” (Mill [1863] 2001, 7).⁹ Utilitarianism focuses on consequences; something is right to the extent that it promotes happiness and wrong to the extent that it does not.

The tendency to approach utilitarianism purely as a branch of moral philosophy has had consequences for the history of ideas. Utility and use have been treated as rather distinct paths. So, for example, when scholars have discussed Charles Darwin’s relation to utilitarianism, they have tended to do so with reference to Darwin’s own (rather limited) discussion of moral philosophy (Richards 1989, 234–51). But Darwin makes use of use in discussing the principles of natural selection, as well as in his use of the laws of use and disuse articulated by Lamarck (see chapter 2). We can consider how natural selection might itself be treated as a utilitarian method: what is selected is what is useful to an organism in the struggle for survival. What is of use changes in time, although organisms do not necessarily change at the same time, which means parts of an organism that are no longer of use may still exist (however dwindled). In this book, I explore the intimacy of use and selection as a way of reflecting on what I think of as *the strange temporalities of use*.

One of my specific aims is to put use back into utilitarianism. Even when maximizing utility is treated as the proper end of government, it remains dependent on the activity of use. In chapter 3, I show how Bentham defines idleness, unemployment, and nonuse as the cause of degeneracy, unhappiness, and even death.¹⁰ It is not simply that Bentham emphasized use as an activity. He also developed plans for a Chrestomathic School, which was to be organized under the rubric of “useful knowledge.” Although Bentham’s plan for a school did not come to fruition (rather like his more famous plan for a prison), it has much to teach us about how useful knowledge was predicated on use as an activity.

Many utilitarian thinkers were in fact involved in educational projects in the early nineteenth century. The middle part of this book focuses on

this specific period of time. The book could thus be described as more grounded than my earlier two books that are part of the same trilogy and had more wandering archives.¹¹ This groundedness might be a result of following use, which has kept me closer to the ground. It is the grounded nature of use that explains why historical materialism provides us with a useful archive: as Karl Marx noted, “Usefulness does not dangle in mid-air” ([1867] 1990, 126). I will return to this quote in chapter 1. The work also became more grounded because of my interest in the emergence of useful knowledge as a project, which meant attending to the labor of those involved in that project. I became especially interested in the history of monitorial schools (see chapter 3) as well as the role of utilitarianism in shaping the modern university (see chapter 4). Monitorial schools were introduced in poor and working-class areas of England and also throughout many British colonies. The schools provided me with a way of considering how utilitarianism traveled throughout empire not only as a body of ideas or as a way of justifying colonialism as increasing happiness, as I explored in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010), but also as a set of practices aimed at creating “a useful class.”¹²

This book explores the development of educational techniques for directing subjects toward useful ends. I thus consider how usefulness became a requirement. I understand my work as participating in wider critiques of utilitarianism as an educational framework. Some of these critiques have taken the form of valuing “useless knowledge,” that is, knowledge that is not deemed useful in accordance with existing (often narrow) criteria. Nuccio Ordine, for instance, affirms the usefulness of the useless: “I wished to place at the center of my reflections the idea of the usefulness of those forms of knowledge whose essential value is wholly free of any utilitarian end” (2017, 1).¹³ Ordine also describes “utilitarian ends” as “the dominant usefulness,” which is about “exclusively economic interest” (4). In such a “universe of utilitarianism,” he adds, “a hammer is worth more than a symphony, a knife more than a poem, a monkey wrench more than a painting” (4).

It is always worthwhile to ask *where* worth is located. My task is to think from *where*. We can ask not only where usefulness is found but also how the requirement to be useful is distributed. My consideration of the general will in *Willful Subjects* (2014) had already led me to consider how the requirement to be useful, while often presented as general or even universal, tends to fall upon some more than others. I consider the fol-

lowing passage from Pascal's *Pensées*, along with the quote from Eliot I shared earlier, starting points in my journey along the path of use.

Let us imagine a body full of thinking members. . . . If the foot and the hands had a will of their own, they could only be in their order in submitting their particular will to the primary will which governs the whole body. Apart from that, they are in disorder and mischief; but in willing only the good of the body, they accomplish their own good. . . . If the foot had always been ignorant that it belonged to the body, and that there was a body on which it depended, if it had only the knowledge and the love of self, what regret, what shame for its past life, for having been useless to the body that inspired its life . . . ! What prayers for its preservation in it! For every member must be quite willing to perish for the body, for which alone the whole is. (Pascal [1669] 2003, 132)

Here a foot is evoked, a foot as part of a body. If the foot was to have a will of its own, it would or should be like Silas's pot, willingly helpful, which means it should be willing to submit its particular will to the will of the whole. A foot has a use, and in having a use, the foot acquires a duty; we might call this will a duty—it should be willing to be used. If a willingly helpful pot allowed a body to carry something, a willingly helpful foot would allow a body to stand. We can note how an instrumental relation can be predicated on sympathy: to be in sympathy with the whole body is to be useful to that body. An instrument can also thus be understood as the loss of externality: *becoming useful as becoming part*. Pascal suggests that usefulness is a form of memory: to be useful is to remember what you are for. Not to be useful is to forget you are part of the body, to forget what you are for. For Pascal the foot refers to human beings, who must remember they are part of God's kingdom. It implies we are all parts and that as parts we must be willing to be of use or of service to the whole. But as I explored in *Willful Subjects* (2014), some individuals come to be treated as the limbs of a social body, as being for others to use (or more simply as *being for*). If the workers become arms, the arms of the factory owner are freed. If some are shaped by the requirement to be useful, others are released from that requirement.

My exploration of use as an idea is thus also an exploration of how use became a technique that differentiates between subjects without necessarily appearing to do so. In considering use as a technique, I build upon Michel Foucault's discussions in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), as well as

work by Anne Brunon-Ernst (2012b), who offers an important series of reflections on the relationship between utilitarianism and biopolitics. I explore use as a technique for shaping worlds as well as bodies. I noted earlier that by the expression *uses of use* I am sometimes referring to how use is used in scholarly works. At other times I am pointing to the shaping effects of use. And given that to use something is to shape something, use can be a technique. What do I mean by this? When we hear the expression “use it or lose it,” we might imagine a relatively organic process of something flourishing or withering away, or we might imagine that the fate of something, whether or not it is lost, is determined simply by our own actions. My book considers how things are sustained or lost as an effect of decisions that are not always consciously made or policies that do not necessarily take the form of explicit injunctions or prohibitions. Simply put, some things can be strengthened or kept alive by easing their use; other things can be slowed down or stopped by being made harder to use. In chapter 4, I explore how institutions are shaped by such uses of use.

When mechanisms work to enable or to ease a passage, they become harder to notice, especially for those whose passage is eased. Use can be how worlds are built for some, becoming available or ready for them. In the chapters that make up this book, I thus approach use as *having a history* insofar as use tends to become part of the background—use as how things are working. In *Queer Phenomenology* (2006), I suggested that “background” is one way we can combine genealogical and phenomenological methods. Drawing on phenomenology, we can understand the background as spatial, as what is around an object that appears distinct insofar as what is around it is “dimly perceived” (Husserl 1969, 102). We can also understand the background as temporal—as what is behind something or how it arrives. If to attend to use is to bring use to the front, we are fronting up to a history.

An Archive of Use

Research can be “hapfull”; we can be redirected by what happens along the way. I began the research for this book in 2013. But I took time away from the project after becoming involved in a series of inquiries into sexual harassment and sexual misconduct between 2013 and 2016. During this period, I wrote *Living a Feminist Life* (2017) and began a blog that took up the figure of the feminist killjoy. Feminist killjoys have already appeared in this book; they turned up as soon as I asked, what’s the use?¹⁴ I came

back to my project on the uses of use after I resigned from my academic post. It did feel rather like picking up some shattered pieces! I wrote the first draft of *What's the Use?* in 2016, at the same time that I began a new empirical research project into complaint. I draw on some of this data from my research into complaint in chapter 4, alongside some of the data I collected from my earlier research into diversity.¹⁵

I did not at first expect that my research on complaint would connect so strongly with my project on the uses of use. Maybe I should have: as researchers we are the connection between our projects. Even so, the connections between our projects can still surprise us. And these two projects connected in part through the objects that I had already gathered: the doors, the paths, the postboxes, the signs of various kinds. I was not intending these objects to travel with me across the chapters, but that is what they ended up doing. Indeed, these objects helped me make sense of experiences I had during the writing of the book: that postbox became a filing cabinet, the well-used path a way of repicturing citational practices. I learned from the objects and their mutations. They certainly helped me thicken my account of use as an everyday activity. And they also became communication devices, enabling me to show how different parts of a system *work* together; in chapter 4, I describe this work as *institutional mechanics*. My book, which starts small, with the use of a thing, points to these larger histories: how spaces are occupied, how bricks form walls, and how barriers become physical.

And so, along the way the material came to matter in a different way. I noted earlier that when I arrived at the question of use, I thought I would be using the same method I employed in *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and *Willful Subjects* (2014), of following words around *in and out* of their intellectual histories. Working on use redirected my work or perhaps helped me understand the inadequacy of this description for what I have been trying to do. Perhaps the problem is my use of “in and out,” which implies a distinction between intellectual histories and other kinds of histories. The artificiality of any such distinction has been brought home to me by working on use. If I have followed use by following things, those same things often appear in academic writing to exemplify the effects of use. If things move between domains we might assume to be distinct, such as biology and architecture or design, *they carry use with them*.

Use also helped me appreciate the significance of how intellectual histories are themselves made up of used books that have a life insofar as they circulate or are passed around. Rather than following the word *in*

and out of its intellectual history, I now think of use as *around and about*. All the materials I bring together in this work can be understood as used. I began deliberately choosing used books. I learned from the traces of past readers. Once these books became part of my archive, I began to relate to them differently; they became not only source materials insofar as they were *about* use but recording devices, recording histories I was trying to address. And I began to think more explicitly about how these works “worked” not just by housing ideas but by being made, being put together from different materials. In chapter 2, for instance, I explore how examples in academic writing have their own biographies of use, rather like the objects I gather in my opening chapter. My particular interest was in the rather striking figure of the blacksmith’s strong arm, which has been used to exemplify Lamarck’s laws of use and disuse.

I became interested not only in what was being argued—in how use became associated with specific values—but how use was put into circulation, becoming a conversation about the value of things. For the first I visited archives and museums as part of my research, including the archives of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge (SDUK), which are currently held at the National Archives (though they belong to the University College London [UCL]); the British and Foreign School Society (BFSS), held at Brunel University; the records of early correspondence that led to the formation of London University, held at UCL; as well as the British School Museum at Hitchin, which has the only remaining monitorial schoolroom left in the UK.

These visits made such a difference to my understanding of how use matters as a way of making and shaping things. I began to think of a useful archive not only as something we assembled *around* use but as an archive *in* use. Kent Anderson, in his article “The Useful Archive” (2002), talks about the restriction of usability as part of the philosophy of stewardship. He wrote: “The philosophy of stewardship made the future itself a sort of metaphysical customer, and the archive was kept from current users by both its centralization and by specialist caretaking and storage requirements. This is the archive model that is most familiar—a few well-organized and redundant stockpiles maintained and protected from loss, so that unseen future generations may use them for research, literature, and historical perspective” (2002, 85). Already in archives are a philosophy of use or a philosopher of the user. A present use might be made harder because the user becomes the future. And yet archives become useful when they are being used. It is certainly, as Carolyn Steedman has noted,

that in being used, an archive comes to life. She explains that “it [stuff] just sits there until it is read, and used and narrativised” (2001, 68).¹⁶ When we take stuff out of folders, it comes to life. Archives can be more or less user friendly; they can be more or less open and closed. Before I left my job as an academic, I remember thinking that I better join the National Archives, assuming that having a professional status might make it easier to access. Access matters to using archives not only in the sense that you have to go through a process before you can use them but also because you have to learn the rules of use. At the National Archives, you are required to watch a video before you can join, which is basically an instruction manual on how to use the archive. Archives hold materials that are deemed worthy of being preserved; and yet, as I discuss in chapter 1, use can compromise the preservation of materials. An archive in use is an archive that could disappear if care is not taken in using the archive.

When I visited the archives of the British and Foreign School Society held by Brunel University, I had my own table, but I was placed in a shared office. I was looking through the minute books of the organization. They contained mostly what you would expect from books written to record the activities of an organization; they provided an administrative history. I remember feeling rather bogged down by the detail; it was slow, heavy.¹⁷ As I was reading through details of financial transactions, meticulously recorded, I overheard a conversation. One archivist said to another, “We have more records about who would pay for the tea and biscuits than more important legal matters.” So much of the paperwork that is necessary can feel like a distraction from what is necessary. I was reading about paperwork. So much of use is about paperwork. A history can be around us, when we shuffle through papers, overheard as conversation, as well as what is being recorded and preserved in papers.

On my first visit to the National Archives to look at the correspondence for the SDUK, I was overwhelmed. I remember walking up to that big, shiny building; it was a cold, frosty morning, and ducks were playing on the frozen water of the pond. It was cold and the building was warm. I saw there was a restaurant, busy and humming with life; I sensed that this space was organized around users, to make their visits comfortable and pleasant. I remember sitting down by myself in a room with large windows, with the three boxes I was allowed in front of me. I had the room all to myself—it was a room used just for the UCL archives, which were temporarily being housed at the National Archives. There were no signs of dust in these archives. Everything was clean and tidy, even shiny.