

Willful Subjects
Sara Ahmed



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In *Willful Subjects* Sara Ahmed explores willfulness as a charge often made by some against others. One history of will is a history of attempts to eliminate willfulness from the will. Delving into philosophical and literary texts, Ahmed examines the relation between will and willfulness, ill will and good will, and the particular will and general will. Her reflections shed light on how will is embedded in a political and cultural landscape, how it is embodied, and how will and willfulness are socially mediated. Attentive to the wayward, the wandering, and the deviant, Ahmed considers how willfulness is taken up by those who have received its charge. Grounded in feminist, queer, and antiracist politics, her *sui generis* analysis of the willful subject, the figure who wills wrongly or wills too much, suggests that willfulness might be required to recover from the attempt at its elimination.

Willful Subjects Details

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Author : Sara Ahmed

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Duke Press says

"Willful Subjects is a rich, complex, wondrous archive of willfulness. The array of texts, voices, problems and approaches is both painstaking and playful, validating and challenging." — Heather Rakes *xcphilosophy* blog

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

"In Willful Subjects, cultural theorist Sara Ahmed provides a history of willfulness. Her study reveals some significant and fascinating aspects of this history, and points to areas of future scholarly enquiry. . . . The book offers a comprehensive and intellectually rigorous treatise on a topic that is more complex than it may initially appear. This text also provides further evidence of Ahmed's scholarly nous. " — Jay Daniel Thompson *M/C Reviews*

"Ahmed has produced an erudite archive of willfulness, tracing the ideas of the will and willfulness through Western thought since Augustine. Admonitory fairy tales and George Eliot's novels serve as articulations of philosophy. Ahmed engages in a queer reading of willfulness, a reading that does not presume that willfulness is negative. . . . Recommended. Graduate students, researchers, faculty." — J. L. Croissant *Choice*

"The book's language is sharp and clear; its arguments are creative and original, as well as thoroughly researched with copious footnotes. Ahmed's prose is virtuoso. An extended theoretical essay on the concept of the eponymous willful subject, this book is a mix of philosophy, political theory, and literary criticism. Ahmed's unique combination of theoretical questioning, politics, and poetics is both the work's subject matter and its writing style. Willful Subjects is a beautifully crafted book."

— Michelle Hartman *Society for Contemporary Thought and the Islamicate World Review*

"Ahmed effectively imitates the twisting together of thought, affect, memory, and insight, drawing connections between things that may appear disparate, and noticing disjunctions in what was previously knit together. . . . [B]y drawing widely and richly on works of philosophy, literature, film, and everydayness, Ahmed shows how in social life, one affect or action may be judged to be quite another. This allows us to attend not only to behaviors and orientations, but to how those are read by others, to why and in what ways certain actions and affects are felt and interpreted as problematic, as willful." — Anna Mudde *Hypatia*

"[Ahmed's] appeal to the reader to not let things go for the sake of social ease and the general happiness is compelling. It might be easier to smile politely when you are being patronized, or let racist, sexist, homophobic or transphobic remarks go unchallenged. But Ahmed's book reminds us how much the 'small' things matter when you are excluded from the 'we,' or when the joke is on you. As a kind of inversion of Kant's universalism of the will, her 'willfulness maxim' – 'don't get over it, if you are not over it!' – serves as an important affirmation of the courage and 'daily grind' entailed in micropolitical labour and the 'refusal to adjust to an unjust world.'" — Victoria Browne *Radical Philosophy*

"Willful Subjects is essential reading for those working in feminism, disability studies, queer theory, critical race studies, and/or phenomenology who reject the notion that a new world or a better one is simply tied to asserting the will to make it so. This is a book for those willing to slow down to queer the will and

contemplate what we have been up to, willingly or not.” — Tanya Titchkosky Contemporary Women's Writing

“Without being too idealistic, this book should be in the collection of every activist and organiser working to create a different world. The last chapter in particular offers much that can reinforce and reinvigorate the willful when feeling isolated and downbeat. Followers of Sara Ahmed’s work will not be disappointed with her latest offering.” — Lizzy Willmington Feminist Legal Studies

“Ahmed’s book has powerful potential for scholars invested in challenging the white, androcentric, heteronormative boundaries historically constructed around western philosophy specifically, and around ‘the subject,’ more generally. Willful Subjects also provides fruitful new avenues for exploring contemporary feminist debates about women’s agency, particularly with respect to the ‘gatekeeping’ tendencies observable in much mainstream, western liberal feminist discourse. I would argue that scholars interested in rethinking the relationship between philosophy and literature would also benefit from Ahmed’s work, as would those whose research focuses on the history of emotions.” — Samantha A. Langsdale Wagadu

“Ahmed’s writing is well weaved and always compelling, but her determination to maintain the complexity of the issue creates a state of suspended incompleteness that demonstrates Ahmed’s own willfulness (the will to leave the topic unresolved), as well as an expectation that there can and must be future applications for this willfulness archive. Ahmed’s arm the willful entity that is her subject is one that reaches instead of carries; it signifies instead of embodies. Read Willful Subjects, then, not to see what the arm has accomplished in reaching out of the dirt but to see the very disturbances in the dirt itself and to imagine where toward what futures the many willful arms on the book’s final page also reach.” — Krista Quesenberry Critical Policy Studies

Kari Barclay says

A powerful call to arms to be feminist killjoys and, in our stubbornness, to refuse to be willing participants in patriarchy. <3

This is my new favorite text on acting that never talks about acting.

Samaa Ahmed says

I wanted to love this, but it really didn't move me. I would have been fine with a bullet point summary of the key ideas which - although very interesting - are described in such tedious and repetitive detail that I don't even think I want to see the word 'will' again.

Navid Ebrahimzadeh says

Disclaimer: I've read Ahmed's Cultural Politics of Emotion, found it superbly written and analytically illuminating.

Absolutely shocked at the positive reviews here -- was expecting universal panning. Ahmed, a respected

scholar with a wide array of contributions across disciplines, here employs an unbearably repetitive, didactic, and unilluminating prose. Five to six full pages will be spent communicating incredibly simple, even commonsensical, concepts, e.g. a part must be a part of a whole and is defined relationally to it. Dozens of philosophers will be quoted making identical or nearly identical points, but each is presented as a new facet or development of the argument, which stagnates for unbearably long periods of time.

Here are some excerpts:

"If the problem of willfulness cannot be separated from the problem of will, then willfulness returns us to the will. We will need to ask: what does it mean to write a history of will?"

"The philosophical project of this book could even be described as not philosophy. What do I mean by this? To be doing not philosophy is a way of framing one's relation to philosophy albeit in apparently negative terms. Not philosophy is practiced by those who are not philosophers and aims to create room within philosophy for others who are not philosophers... By not philosophy I am not, however, only referring to the philosophy produced by those who are not philosophers. Not philosophy also attends to 'the not,' making 'the not' an object of thought. Not philosophy is also a philosophy of the not."

In these and unfortunately hundreds of other passages, Ahmed's aesthetic is reminiscent of the cubist prose-poetry of Gertrude Stein -- the key difference being that Stein utilized repetition to drain the signifier of its semantic content for experimental purposes; since Ahmed's purpose is academic and didactic, such mental numbing is counterproductive.

In composition, clarity and repetition are in a tenuous relationship. To impart clarity on the reader, the writer must rephrase concepts in distinct manners, and never assume that the first arrangement makes its mark. Unfortunately, dedicating one's self too thoroughly to clarity risks an incredibly redundant, painful, and uninformative style. To my particularly inept writing students, I say: "More than half of this can be cut without loss of information." To Ahmed, unfortunately, I say the same.

Bridget Nicholls says

Once again, Ahmed has used her writing and brought me into a warm embrace! Ahmed intends to be philosophical, but she isn't straightforward philosophical. Instead she refers to it as NOT philosophy. Which creates room for those who are philosophical, but also those who are not.

Ayanna Dozier says

Willful Subjects doesn't take flight until the last third of the book, and when it does, it soars. The subject of "willfulness" as a feminist issue, has been a pressing matter for centuries. In this book, Sara Ahmed examines the philosophical construction of the "will" via Hegel, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Heidegger, and Kant. With the exception of Nietzsche's work, Ahmed is rightly critical of how these philosophers (and some phenomenologists) have shaped individuals who are "willful" as undisciplined children. Ahmed argues that this patronizing discourse is directly related to its temporal construction that is to say these philosopher's were writing (with the exception of Heidegger) during the period of the Trans Atlantic Slave Trade. Ahmed then proceeds to pull out their accounts of racism and declare that the "willful" subject is an individual that

does not confirm, and indeed rebels, against the "will" of the State. Furthermore, in the second to last chapter Ahmed makes the connection of rebelling, not being in line with, to that of the feminist killjoy a term she has defined as the individual who does not make peace and disrupts the order of casual racism and sexism. The feminist killjoy, as a figure, is the individual who sits at the table and speaks out against the "jovial" sexist/racist joke, and through their utterance against, kills the hegemonic joy had at the expense of marginalized individuals. My only critique is that the explicitly of Ahmed's critique against the 16th century's construction of will via the work of Black feminist thought only occupies the ending pages in the book's conclusion. While, Ahmed's use of this rhetoric is dead on, I couldn't help but view this gesture as inherently participating in the institutional citational politics that shapes how scholars engage with Black women's work. Indeed, most of my notes for the first half of the book were discarded by the end, but remain a testament that Ahmed did not account for a field of study that has negotiated with the subject of willfullness until the end. While I think Ahmed's book is a great resource for individuals who desire a feminist critique of the philosophical construction of the will, I can't help but note how Ahmed navigated this critique is problematic.

Quin Rich says

A brilliant, wide-ranging account of the history of the concept of "the will," described by the author as a work of not-philosophy. In her characteristic stylized, almost lyrical prose, Ahmed draws broadly from philosophy, literature, film, and personal experience to craft a deeply inspiring feminist, queer, and anti-racist history of willfulness, the condition of getting in the way. Drawing from the work she began on her blog, *Feminist Killjoys*, Ahmed tracks the willful subject through three key figurations: the guest, the willful child, and the stranger, all of whom are defined as "those who come after." Touching a kind of powerful, feminist rage not often seen in comprehensive academic theory, Ahmed beautifully weaves the theoretical with the polemical. A must read!!!
