

Sara Ahmed  
*Willful Subjects*  
Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2014  
ISBN 978-0-8223-5783-4

Anna Mudde (Campion College, University of Regina)

**Anna Mudde** is an assistant professor of philosophy at Campion College at the University of Regina, Canada. She works in feminist epistemologies and metaphysics and specializes in self-knowledge, subjectivity, and Simone de Beauvoir. She has interests in science, technologies, and practices, as well as in the philosophy of mirrors and in theorizing objectivity and responsibility.

[anna.mudde@uregina.ca](mailto:anna.mudde@uregina.ca)

annamudde.com

bodiestechnologiespractices.org

\*\*\*\*\*

Sara Ahmed describes this book as a work of "not philosophy" (15): willfulness charts *not* being compelled by another's reasons as much as it charts ways of being human in which "just *being* is willful work" (160). This is a philosophy of beings not on the path, a philosophy of the wanderer, the stray, the swerve. Like Ahmed's other projects, this is a queer philosophy.

Coming out of and refocusing parts of her earlier work, in *Willful Subjects*, Ahmed's "willfulness archive" draws new attention to what remains one of the most pervasive phenomenological challenges of feminist, queer, and queer feminist lives. Using an inter-imbricative<sup>i</sup> style of writing and thinking, Ahmed "follows" will around, collecting various ways of will by noting when will arises (and is judged to have arisen), in what form, and through its relations of allegiance and opposition. Will emerges as often unexpected and pressing, as that which at once draws attention to itself, unbidden by others, unintended by oneself, and--potentially--highlighting the background against which it appears. Ahmed's "following" reveals why and how will is so intimately related to selfhood and individuality, all the while troubling orthodox Western views of selfhood and individuality as expressions (and suppressions) of will as intention.

The chapters of this book move not as philosophical arguments move, but as many forms of thought-experience do. In particular, unlike a *train* of thought (produced by training thought into line), the movement suggests the experience of following something/someone else around, allowing its "will" to chart your course of attention. In reading this book, I found that keeping hold of my own line of thought was often difficult, and the effect is entirely productive. This is not stream-of-consciousness writing on Ahmed's part; rather, in attending to the ways that will arises and is attributed--by oneself, to oneself--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.

This effectiveness has two important implications: first, it seems to imitate the phenomenal experience of will--not of "the will" in the traditional sense, but of willing and unwilling, and of

willfulness. Second, by 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.

In chapter 1, "Willful Subjects," Ahmed offers a social phenomenology of will entwined with a genealogy of will, which she achieves by suspending the assumption that the will is "behind" our actions, and giving a history of how it comes to be understood as "behind." She considers what is required for us to will something, asking where will appears, and where it does not appear, proposing that will is one way of noticing how we are (already) involved in our surroundings. In particular, through the examples of Silas Marner's pot and Molly Poyser's jug (in Eliot's *Adam Bede*), Ahmed considers the ways that we attribute (and do not attribute) will to objects (echoing themes in her *Queer Phenomenology*). We often fail to notice how objects already express a will--the will of the maker, for instance--while we notice their unwillingness to cooperate with us, their "willfulness" when they do not work. This opens space, too, for noticing our will that they would work. Considered as a feature of material objects, will is found in experiences of things "on the way to actualization" (44), and willfulness in what "gets in the way of what is on the way" (47): a frustration of a will makes the frustrator "willful." Willfulness is what interrupts a "flow," in particular a flow produced by cooperation--which Ahmed describes as a "willing with," or attunement to, others. Silas's pot is willful when it is no longer attuned to him because it is broken; it disrupts what was previously a smooth, symbiotic functioning, and his warm feelings toward it dissipate.

Translating from object will to interpersonal demands for attunement and maintaining flow reveals how to be willing (as opposed to willful) is to be willing to be *with*: witness requires "will work" (52), and the implications for women and other others are not hard to miss. One need not will *anything* to be judged "willful." Failure to *be* (or be judged to be) with others for any reason is generally read as willful; it gets in the way; it destroys warm feelings. Ahmed describes will work as laboring to close the gap between how we do feel and how we should feel, at once articulating the costs of not closing that gap, and highlighting the importance of the work that goes into agreeing to be willing, even before acting in accordance with that willing.

How do some of us learn this willingness, this pressure to go with the flow that others have created before us by having already willed? In chapter 2, "The Good Will," Ahmed considers histories of the formation of "good will" as opposed to willfulness by looking at accounts of childhood, and to the various forms of "poisonous pedagogy" (following Alice Miller) offered in the Western tradition. She articulates the violence that is associated with disciplining children's wills, with the "straightening out" of wills that have gone awry, and documents how traditions of worrying about "sparing the rod" and "spoiling" children express an anxiety about the need to shape the "natural will" to fit the "social will" (79). Acquiring (the) good will, then, the will that wants the things that societal ancestors have already willed, is a way of constructing social harmony: the good will is "with" other wills; the good will supports and reproduces the social or "general" will.

Ahmed observes in chapter 3, "The General Will," that where descent and kinship involve "will relatedness," women's wills are inherently at issue. Resonating with, among others, Marilyn Frye's work on separatism (Frye 1983), Ahmed shows how, through the lens of the general will, willfulness is problematic because it is read as selfish or self-regarding, as not *providing support*, whereas willingness expresses accepting inheritance, being supportive of the institution and the good of the family and the community. As she notes, this is often gendered: "to become a boy is to be given permission to acquire a will of your own *as the freedom not to be supportive*" (231, n. 12). Invoking George Eliot's *Romola*, Ahmed suggests that for women, will is opposed to duty, much as wanderer is opposed to wife. The queerness of the wandering figure hints at a queer feminist history of the will, which is, for Ahmed, "a history of willful parts, parts that *in willing* are *not* willing to reproduce the whole" (121). Noticing willfulness can also help us to articulate the general will: in communities, families, and lived situations, there are always some wills, some forms of self-regard, that go unnoticed, that do not appear, precisely because that will is already given expression in the general will (Ahmed uses the example of the general heterosexual will). At the same time, like the wills of objects, to be judged as willful need not involve an active attempt to be willful. When spaces are not accessible to some bodies, or where those bodies are unable to accommodate themselves, they seem already to be in the way (of what is on the way), to upset the flow; their very existence is judged as somehow willful, as "not with."

Ahmed argues in chapter 4, "Willfulness as a Style of Politics," that, whether willful bodies, feminist killjoys (see Ahmed's blog, *Feminist Killjoys*), or broken pots, being "not with" ruins the atmosphere; like the child who is "spoiled" by being allowed to bend the wills of others through crying, getting in the way is often judged as getting one's own way (154). Being already "difficult" can build a willingness not to go with the flow, and to willingly contribute to its obstruction. But as a politics, Ahmed argues, "willfulness is not a side" (168), it is not a position, held come what may. It requires feeling along (with) and situated judgments.

What Ahmed uncovers in "following willfulness around" is a more "impulsive" model of subjectivity, and not--as one might expect, and hope against--a more intentional one (175). Thus she thankfully does not find, even in thinking about taking up a politics of willfulness, a prescriptive, intentional stance about will. This is so because one's impulses and acts of resistance often aren't intentional; they arise when one comes up against the general will, cultural hegemonies of the everyday, of simply being the sort of being that does not allow the "shiny surfaces" of supposed "getting along" to obtain (157). Ahmed thus proposes a willfulness that--when we follow it around instead of positing it--"can bypass intentionality" (175).

But willfulness is not swervy (following Lucretius, with whom she begins the book) so much as it is sometimes *unable* to go with the flow, *unable* to adjust to the situation; sometimes, we "snap": our hands refuse to act out the will of our bodies, our eyes draw hot tears, our arms reach up, fists in the air, becoming willful parts, getting in the way of what is on the way. Ahmed's framing of willfulness shows how the body is often willful--as when our minds understand, but our bodies cannot; the body sometimes "comes up" when it seems to have a will of its own. Willful parts are not always resistant, Ahmed notes, but in parting company from the rest of the body, they raise "what cannot be given form as intent" (178). This is the will embodied not only in human bodies, but in objects, in prostheses, and in stones; we express our characters, Ahmed

suggests, much as stones express their qualities: bearing histories in their shapes and textures, their "essence" in their responses to particular engagements--how they respond to being thrown, or whether they are suitable for use in a wall. Attending to willfulness, Ahmed argues, is "stone pedagogy"; will is often what "allows us not to register how things are determined" (191), and yet also marks moments of the "shared condition" of "not being fully determined from without" (192)--the world's parts are never fully bendable to human will.

Using a lens that seeks and rereads willfulness leaves some things out of focus. In keeping with Ahmed's spirit of doing "not philosophy," I don't intend here to support practices of philosophical "doggedness" about covering an entire territory (Spelman 2006); my claim is that Ahmed has left helpful openings for thought. Her analysis of willful women, particularly in the various moments of social reproduction, suggests but does not articulate an important, lived tension: many of the things some women are not willing to do, many of the things that render them "self-regarding," wandering, and queer in the judgments of others, are tasks and affects tied up with genuine human need and real vulnerabilities. Some sites of feminist anger are, similarly, tied to being denied recognition for women's (expected, perhaps unwilling) role in meeting human needs, and in *providing support* for the general will. If this is important, it is in part because, as Ahmed shows, the general will is not simply ideological. It becomes concretized into actual lived options, for example, for care.

Like others, I am called upon to do certain things, to be willing to do them, in the fullest sense of "willing to," and I have been trained to do them skillfully and well; not doing them will mean real hardship for others, and real losses. Those losses can be intensely personal, but they are also products of the general will. In exalting mother-child relations, refusing stories of collective responsibility for children, and demonizing wandering mothers, the general will in the West is that children of wandering women often live with intimations that there is something inherently wrong with them, as with their mother. It is the general will that children, but especially daughters (and daughters-in-law), be willing to provide care for parents as they age. In many Western nations, the quality and private cost of elder care is such that if children are unwilling or unable to care for or help care for their parents, the level of care for their relatives really suffers, which in a variety of ways can disrupt warm relations, "ruining the [family] atmosphere." Regardless of the source of will (ideological or concrete opposition), to be unwilling to take up, to wander away from, for example, one's inheritance of family care--as mother or as daughter--is not laden with consequences for the wanderer alone, but for those from whom one wanders away.

This is to say that both family inheritance and the breaking of the child's will seem, to me, to be caught up and felt together with real needs for care work, for *support*. Thus, although Ahmed beautifully articulates the pull of willfulness, of wandering, for many women and others who are trained to care, "will work" and care work are often lived as inextricable. The knowledge that to will care is to concretely support a general will that one does not ideologically support can be another source of anger, where personal ties are made inseparable from ties to an oppressive social will. And many women know well that if they wander away from their inheritance(s) of care, those next in line to inherit that work are often other women, nonwhite others, poorly paid others. This is another way of articulating why a politics of willfulness is so difficult: Ahmed

describes how those at the front of movements often experience a newly found freedom from norms that "can quickly translate into the freedom to exploit others" (172).

Yet that danger points to important ways in which taking up a politics of willfulness might include doing the work of willfully rearticulating and rereading the purported "willfulness" of others. Non-wandering women who find themselves impatient with wanderers, women who "snap" in expressing the idea that wandering women are selfish, claiming that there is care that simply must be provided, are not wrong; but this is a place where their impatience with other women reproduces the general will, whereas "registering," and being impatient with, the ways that daughters and mothers are expected to be "fully determined from without" would take up a politics of willfulness.

---

<sup>i</sup> Deborah Hoffmann offered this word when I was willing, but unable, to find it.

### ***References***

- Frye, Marilyn. 1983. Some reflections on separatism and power. In *The politics of reality: Essays in feminist theory*. Berkeley: Crossing Press.
- Spelman, Elizabeth. 2006. Philosophical doggedness. *Hypatia* 21 (4): 232–38.