

The Ruse of Techné

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PERSPECTIVES IN
CONTINENTAL
PHILOSOPHY

DIMITRIS VARDOULAKIS

The Ruse of Techne

Heidegger's Magical Materialism

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for Andrew, again

Contents

<i>Exordium</i>	<i>xiii</i>
Preamble: The Ineffectual and the Instrumental	1
1. The ineffectual, 1 ■ 2. The instrumental, 4	
1 Introduction: What is the Ruse of Techne?	10
3. The ruse of techne, 10 ■ 4. Metaphysical materialism (the metaphysics of morals), 14 ■ 5. The reception of Heidegger and the ruse of techne, 16 ■ 6. The repression of instrumentality, 31 ■ 7. The underground current of a materialism of instrumentality, 35 ■ 8. Effects of the ruse of techne (or, why the repression of instrumentality still matters today), 39 ■ 9. On method, 42	
2 The Problematic of Action Within a Single, Unified Being: Monism in Heidegger's Thought	44
10. Heidegger's other path, 44 ■ 11. The first problem: How to be a different materialist?, 47 ■ 12. The second problem: How is action possible within a monist ontology?, 52 ■ 13. The third problem: Can monism provide qualitative distinctions between actions?, 55 ■ 14. Two kinds of monist materialism, 57 ■ 15. Two historical difficulties arising from Heidegger's solution to the problematic of action in monism, 61 ■ 16. The double bind of the repression of instrumentality: Between the vacuous and the self-contradictory, 66 ■ 17. Why Heidegger's solution to the problematic of action in monism matters, 72	

3	The Conflation of Causality and Instrumentality: Phronesis and the Genesis of the Ruse of Techne	76
	18. Heidegger's bildungsroman, 76 ■ 19. The truth of phronesis as the combination of calculation, emotion, and situatedness, 79 ■ 20. The two ends of action in Aristotle (<i>Nicomachean Ethics</i> 1139a32), 82 ■ 21. Techne and phronesis distinguished through their ends, 86 ■ 22. The distinction between final and instrumental ends and the problematic of action in monism, 90 ■ 23. A Greek-hating philhellene, 91 ■ 24. The context of Heidegger's interpretation of phronesis, 94 ■ 25. Heidegger's mistranslations of the <i>hou heneka</i> , 98 ■ 26. Heidegger's discussion of <i>hou heneka</i> and <i>heneka tinos</i> : The repression of instrumentality, 101 ■ 27. The genesis of the ruse of techne: sophia as the virtue of techne, 105 ■ 28. Teleocracy, 112 ■ 29. Phronesis, resoluteness, and temporality: The "either/or", 115	
	Excursus: Through the Looking Glass of the Distinction Between Causality and Instrumentality	119
	30. Acting and the other: The politics of instrumentality, 119 ■ 31. The repression of instrumentality in metaphysics, 126 ■ 32. Causal and instrumental ends in monist materialism, 133	
4	The Concealment of Instrumentality: The Conception of Action in <i>Being and Time</i>	144
	33. The reason for focusing on the examples of action in <i>Being and Time</i> , 144 ■ 34. The epigraph and the problem of action in the <i>Sophist</i> , 146 ■ 35. Destruction and monism, 149 ■ 36. Inauthentic, indifferent, and authentic action, 151 ■ 37. Hammering and the concealing of instrumentality (<i>Being and Time</i> §15), 155 ■ 38. The breakdown of ends (<i>Being and Time</i> §16), 160 ■ 39. Sign and reference, understanding and interpretation (<i>Being and Time</i> §17), 164 ■ 40. Dictatorship, 169 ■ 41. The temporality of death and the myth of Care, 172 ■ 42. Techne as the virtue of theory, 176 ■ 43. Subjectum absconditum, 184	
5	The Ontology of Conflict: Conjuring Authority	186
	44. The "turn" and action, 186 ■ 45. Authority as the means to repress instrumentality, 189 ■ 46. Conflict and the three senses of techne, 193 ■ 47. The subjectivism of authority (<i>Prometheus</i>), 196 ■ 48. The problem of the metaphysico-political conflict, 202 ■ 49. The historical decision and phusis (<i>Oedipus Rex</i>), 204 ■ 50. Apolis and the spontaneous creation of authority (<i>Antigone</i> 1), 208 ■	

51. The human as <i>deimon</i> and the repression of instrumentality (<i>Antigone</i> 2), 213 ■	
52. A politics without reaction or an agonistic politics, 219 ■	
53. The preservers and the magical founding of the city, 222	
6 The Ontology of the Ineffectual: The Purloined Letter of Instrumentality	229
54. The reversal of the critique of monism, 229 ■	
55. The turn, the return, and the other turn (the critique of Sartre as self-critique), 234 ■	
56. Transformations of the ruse of <i>techne</i> , 238 ■	
57. Instrumentality incorporated into causality (the first sense of <i>techne</i>), 239 ■	
58. The ambivalence of the calculable and enframing (the second sense of <i>techne</i>), 244 ■	
59. The killing power of the saving power (the third sense of <i>techne</i>), 248 ■	
60. Metaphysical or materialist monism?, 252 ■	
61. The French appropriation of the repression of instrumentality, 256 ■	
62. The new Kantianism, 260 ■	
63. Technophobia and the repression of instrumentality, 263 ■	
64. The paradox of the final end, 266	
Peroratio	272
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	279
<i>Works by Martin Heidegger</i>	283
<i>Bibliography</i>	287
<i>Index</i>	301

Exordium

ζυνόν ἐστι πᾶσι τὸ φρονέειν
Heraclitus, D113

Heraclitus's fragment 113 does not mean merely that phronesis is common to all; it also, and primarily, indicates that commonality is constituted by the capacity to make the instrumental judgments that the Greeks called phronesis.

Heidegger started *Being and Time* by suggesting that philosophy had forgotten the question of being. He failed to add that the notion of the single, unified being that he discovered in Greek thought faced a problem recognized since antiquity, namely, the problem of how to account for action: Can actions be different if they are part of the all-encompassing and hence unchanging being? Can anything be other than a mere modification of being if it constitutes a totality outside of which nothing exists? By repressing this problem, Heidegger instituted a forgetting of the answer that the ancients provided, which emphasized the ethical and political import of instrumental judgment, or phronesis. The Greeks thought that we can account for action only by understanding being through its effects. Heraclitus's fragment points out, in this context, that the effects of being register in thinking that the ends of action are always situated in a material context of relations that includes others. Phronesis is an ethical and a political virtue, grounded in a materialist ontology.

Instrumentality has, for too long, been condemned as complicit in the production and perpetuation of power. It is rarely noted that, if existence consists in the unfolding of power relations, then instrumentality ought to be a—nay, *the*—key term of ontology, ethics, and politics. For this to be possible, we need to understand how Heidegger—who sets the matrix of the presentation of ethics and politics in continental philosophy—precipitated the forgetting of instrumentality.

The Ruse of Techné

Preamble

The Ineffectual and the Instrumental

1. The ineffectual

The Ruse of Techne is concerned with a single idea in Heidegger—an idea, however, with far-reaching implications. This is the idea that there is a kind of action without ends or effects, or what I call *the ineffectual*. The positive articulation of his philosophy is inextricable from the ineffectual that denotes a series of terms that Heidegger uses over the years to refer to an action without effects and ends. For example, authenticity in *Being and Time* encapsulates the reference to the ineffectual; art or poetry are the most common articulations of the ineffectual in the years from around the mid-1930s; and his late work typically refers to the ineffectual as simply thinking or the thinking of being.

Heidegger frames his project by staging a series of oppositions. In the opening chapters of *Being and Time*, he talks about the “destruction of metaphysics”; elsewhere he describes his conception of ontology as resisting the reduction of being to mere presence. So, to evaluate the idea of the ineffectual, we need to understand what Heidegger is arguing against. The real target of Heidegger’s rejection of metaphysics is not religion as such, given that the notion of an action without effects, or the ineffectual, plays a significant function in mysticism, which explains his fascination with Meister Eckhart.

The real target is technoscience as the key to modernity. Heidegger holds that the end-oriented actions, characteristic of modern science and

technology, may be necessary for providing us with the notion of the world within which we live, such as the world of tools in *Being and Time* or the world of the housing crisis in “Building, Dwelling, Thinking.” But this experience can go two ways: either we are lost in the world of instrumental calculation, or we take the step beyond instrumental calculation to join the path of the ineffectual that leads to being. Thus, the real target of Heidegger’s thought is the end-oriented kind of action and thinking, or what I call *the instrumental*, because he holds that it leads us astray from uncovering being.

Against Heidegger, I hold that it is reductive and distorting to confine the prevalence of the instrumental in modern technoscience. Crucially, the instrumental plays a critical role in ancient Greek thought. At this point, we can observe a curiosity: the instrumental is indispensable for phronesis as presented in book 6 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, and yet it is precisely in his reading of Aristotle’s phronesis that Heidegger adumbrates the ineffectual. I will demonstrate that the historical basis of the discovery of the ineffectual in ancient Greek thought is mistaken, and that in fact the ineffectual *does not exist* in the Aristotelian texts where Heidegger claims to discover it.

This has major repercussions for his ontology since Heidegger’s conception of being requires the ineffectual to account for action. If the ineffectual does not exist, then Heidegger’s ontology faces the prospect of being pure theory without a practical philosophy. To put this in terms of his own diagnosis of metaphysics as the forced separation of theory and praxis, if the ineffectual does not exist, then Heidegger’s ontology loses its practical side and thus lapses back into metaphysics.

The Ruse of Techne examines Heidegger’s technique to identify the ineffectual, starting with his interpretation of phronesis. In chapter 3, I offer a close analysis that shows the “blind spot” in Heidegger’s reading of book 6 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, which enables him to identify phronesis with the ineffectual. I will explain how Aristotle distinguishes between two actions according to their different kinds of ends. The action that Aristotle calls *techne* is governed by the final ends of causality, whereas phronesis is determined by the calculation of instrumental ends. By contrast, Heidegger argues that all ends—both causal and instrumental—belong to *techne*. This allows Heidegger to argue that phronesis is purified of all ends of action. In this interpretation of phronesis, Heidegger constructs the ineffectual.

I argue in *The Ruse of Techne* that the conflation of causality and instrumentality in *techne* is a move that persists throughout Heidegger’s work as we see, for example, in “The Question Concerning Technology,” and

that it is fundamental in the construction of the ineffectual. I call Heidegger's blindness to the function of the instrumental in this history *the forgetting of instrumentality*, and I call the way in which this obscuring of the instrumental leads to a conception of the ineffectual that traverses the entirety of Heidegger's thought *the repression of instrumentality*. In chapters 1 to 3, I show how Heidegger constructs the ineffectual through the forgetting and repression of instrumentality.

Techne is pivotal in Heidegger's technique to construct the ineffectual. Through his conception of techne, he performs the kind of "trick" that I call *the ruse of techne*. Specifically, the ruse of techne employs three meanings of techne from ancient Greek to make instrumentality disappear. First, techne as implicated in the singularity of being in Greek ontology. Heidegger holds that Greek thought does not know of metaphysical transcendence, which also means that it posits a single, unified being. For short, I refer to this conception of the single, unified being without transcendence as monism. Second, techne as technology. This includes all activities that are oriented toward ends, according to Heidegger, that is, it includes the instrumental. Third, techne as artistic practice exemplifies an activity unconcerned with any ends and effects. This is the ineffectual that leads, according to Heidegger, to the truth of being. Thus techne, a single term, can denote three distinct positions that are critical for Heidegger's philosophical position: monism, the instrumental, and the ineffectual.

The three senses of techne furnish Heidegger with his typical argumentative strategy. This consists in saying that if one is to accept the first sense—monism—then the second sense denotes, at best, a preliminary step toward the truth of being, as described for instance in Division 1 of *Being and Time*; or, at worse, a decisive deviation from being, which is responsible for the "nihilism of modernity." In either case, the only way to the truth of being is through the ineffectual or the kind of action free of all ends that characterizes the third sense of techne. This argumentative strategy is endlessly repeated in Heidegger's works, as we will see. The strategy, however, is a trick or ruse involving the second and the third meanings of techne—the instrumental and the ineffectual. A conjurer's trick makes something disappear and something else appear in its place. Heidegger's ruse of techne makes instrumentality disappear with the ineffectual taking its place.

Karl Löwith records how students at Marburg University saw "Heidegger's personality," the young teacher who sought to change philosophy. According to Löwith, the students used to call him "the magician" due to his lecturing *technique*: "He knew how to perform magic by making what he had just demonstrated disappear before the eyes of his audience. The technique of his lecturing consisted in building thought constructs that

he then drew away so as to leave the enchanted listener suspended in a vacuum before a riddle.”¹ Löwith’s description of Heidegger’s magic fits the technique of the ruse of *techne* to present before us a thought construct of action that is promptly withdrawn, leaving his readers suspended in a vacuum, that is, in a place devoid of action—the ineffectual.

Heidegger was never entirely satisfied with his determination of the ineffectual. As I will show, this leads Heidegger to develop three distinct versions of the ruse of *techne*. I will present each separately in chapters 4 to 6, and I will further argue that they all remain unconvincing, resulting in a conception of action that is either trivial or self-contradictory.

2. The instrumental

The ineffectual is of paramount importance for Heidegger’s influence in subsequent philosophy. If there is one feature that unites the diverse array of positions and approaches of the whole tradition of thought that received the name “continental philosophy” in the aftermath of World War II, it is the assumption that an action without ends is indispensable for a conception of the ethical and the political. In other words, Heidegger’s ineffectual has been widely accepted in an array of variations that organize the conception of praxis in continental philosophy. For example, Levinas determines the Other as transcendent whereby it is separate from the application of specific rules; Blanchot conceives of an outside that establishes a community distinct from everyday action; Derrida compulsively returns to an unconditioned beyond calculation; Deleuze adumbrates a pure immanence that is sheer potentiality; and Badiou imagines an event that ruptures the instrumental field of politics. These pivotal thinkers—and many others—in continental philosophy may disagree, by and large, but all concur on the centrality of an action without ends, or the ineffectual, to counter modernity’s technoscientific threats.

This unquestioned acceptance of the ineffectual is inseparable from Heidegger’s forgetting and repression of instrumentality. More precisely, Heidegger’s ineffectual is part of the broader “critique of instrumentality,” which has been one of the, if not *the*, main avenues of approaching the ethics and politics of modernity. We can summarize this critique as follows: The successes of science and technology in modernity established a naturalism according to which we can determine what to do by neutrally examin-

1. Karl Löwith, *Mein Leben in Deutschland vor und nach 1933: Ein Bericht* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersehe, 1986), 42, 43.

ing causes and effects. But actually, causality is anything but neutral as it is always implicated with the instrumental calculations of means and ends that are responsible for the consolidation of structures of power and oppression. Causality and instrumentality intermesh to produce a “dialectic of Enlightenment” that is nothing but a project of domination.

Heidegger’s major contribution to the critique of instrumental reason consists in its radical historicization. In most cases, the critique of instrumental reason is narrowly circumscribed within the Enlightenment project that culminates with Hegel, and the kind of historical materialism reliant on teleology that arises through a particular interpretation of Marx. For example, Weber and Adorno take the Reformation as the starting point of their castigation of instrumental reason. In the wake of Heidegger’s historicization of ontology, the critique of instrumental reason can extend all the way back to ancient Greek thought. As we discussed earlier, Heidegger discovers the conflation of causality and instrumentality already in Aristotle’s conception of *techne* (§1). Heidegger’s discovery of the ineffectual in Greek thought extends the philosophical critique of modernity back to antiquity. This opens up exciting possibilities for the philosophical diagnoses of contemporary issues to resonate with problems and questions that have exercised thought for centuries, such as the question of the one, unified being.

It is significant that we can locate, with some precision, the sites of Heidegger’s critique of instrumentality as intertwined with the discovery of the ineffectual in antiquity. It then becomes possible to analyze these sources, such as his pivotal reading of Aristotle’s *phronesis*, to show that the ineffectual can only be discovered by forgetting and repressing instrumentality. This enables us to question the function of the ineffectual in Heidegger’s thought as a whole, as well as its unquestioned acceptance by continental philosophy. From this perspective, *The Ruse of Techne* is both a close exegesis of how Heideggerian texts determine the ineffectual, and a recognition that the critique of Heidegger is also applicable to the repression of instrumentality in continental philosophy. Thus, *The Ruse of Techne* suggests that the question “what would it be like to challenge the ineffectual and to unravel the forgetting of instrumentality today?” signifies a fundamental question for philosophy. It is the task that Heidegger’s astonishingly successful conception of the ineffectual bequeaths us today.

Differently put, *The Ruse of Techne* suggests that the most significant effect of Heidegger’s thought in subsequent philosophy, and the reason for his pivotal position in twentieth-century philosophy, is the prevalence of the ineffectual. Such an *effects of the ineffectual* suggests that the ineffectual, as such, never existed and it cannot exist. This is consistent with my

position that an action without ends, or the ineffectual as conceived by Heidegger, ends up being *either* a trivial, vacuous conception of action which amounts to a disavowal of the possibility of thinking ethically and politically, *or* it presupposes instrumentality, which makes the ineffectual at best self-contradictory and at worse complicit in perpetuating existing power structures. I will demonstrate that this oscillation between triviality and complicity plays an analytic function to distinguish the three different versions of the ruse of *techne* (§1).

It would be impossible to undo the forgetting and repression of instrumentality without an understanding of how instrumentality functions in the philosophical discourse. *The Ruse of Techne* is part of a long project that seeks to unearth the philosophical potency of instrumentality, or to redeem the value of instrumental or calculative thinking.

Two insights structure such a project. The first insight is a historical one. The notion of the instrumental today is circumscribed by the conception of consequentialism in nineteenth-century utilitarianism, according to which calculative or instrumental judgments aspire to certainty. Thus, Bentham strives to develop a calculus to validate the consequences of calculation. It is customary to take this utilitarian conception of instrumentality as the only possible one. For example, Hannah Arendt does not see any need to refer to anything other than utilitarianism for her critique of instrumentality in *The Human Condition*.² However, the instrumentality of the kind of knowledge and virtue that the Greeks called *phronesis* is decidedly opposed to the possibility that instrumental calculation can lead to certainty. Instead, *phronesis* in Greek thought is inherently fallible.

A significant part of the project to undo the forgetting of instrumentality is to reexamine its function in the history of thought. For example, it is critical to discover the role it plays in the conception of *praxis* in antiquity, especially in the notion of *phronesis*.³ This allows us also to reconsider the function of instrumentality in modernity. A key feature of the radical politics of Spinoza is to translate the discourse of *phronesis* into his conception of the good, or virtue, in terms of the calculation of utility.⁴

The second insight concerns the importance of instrumentality. It is *because* of all the perils of instrumentality, well-documented in the numerous

2. See in particular §43 of Hannah Arendt's *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

3. See Dimitris Vardoulakis, *The Logic of Living: The Materialism of Greek Thought* (forthcoming).

4. See Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Spinoza, the Epicurean: Authority and Utility in Materialism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

discourses against “calculative or instrumental reason,” that instrumentality is a pivotal concept in ethical and political discourse. Instrumentality becomes even more central following the historical argument that the ineffectual cannot be found in the ancient conception of praxis. From this perspective it is necessary to work through the repression of instrumentality by discovering how instrumentality is critical for fundamental ethical and political concepts, such as sovereignty and democracy.⁵

Such a new perspective on instrumentality requires that we overcome the utilitarian prejudice that calculation presupposes certainty, or to put it positively, it requires that we embrace the fallibility of phronesis. What Foucault says about power—that it is neither good nor bad, but rather should be measured by its effects—also applies to the fallibility of phronesis. One of the essential effects of phronesis, which is constitutive of its democratic potential, is that its lack of certainty entails that practical judgments are subject to dispute. Thus, the democratic politics of phronesis are built on a ground that accepts the inevitability of conflict. The instrumental leads to an agonistic conception of human interaction.⁶

The historical and ethico-political insights about instrumentality are intertwined in a materialist ontology. This becomes visible as soon as we discern what I call *the problematic of action*. If we accept the “secular” hypothesis that there is no transcendence, or that existence has one quality—if being is one and unified, as Heidegger put it—then, regardless of whether this one existence is referred to as substance or being, as god or the plane of immanence, the difficulty is always the same, namely, that all actions within the one appear as simple variations of that one. Difference becomes an epiphenomenon rather than real. The “existential vacuum” experienced in the “materialist culture” of high capitalism can be traced back to this problematic.

In ancient Greece, there was a specific response to this problematic. Difference is not located in existence but rather in the effects of existence. The ontological question that allows for the link between theory and praxis is not the “what is?” question, but rather the “what are the effects of what is?” question.⁷ There are numerous versions of this argument. For example, the epicurean tradition formulates this idea through the distinction between

5. See Dimitris Vardoulakis, *Sovereignty and Its Other: Toward the Dejustification of Violence* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), and *Stasis Before the State: Nine Theses of Agonistic Democracy* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

6. See Dimitris Vardoulakis, *The Agonistic Condition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025).

7. See Vardoulakis, *The Logic of Living*.

causality and instrumentality: the one—substance, god, or nature—can be conceived in terms of causality, whereas action is accounted for through instrumentality.⁸ Without a conception of the instrumental, it is impossible to forge a link between theory and praxis within a materialist ontology that posits a single and unified existence.

I refer to the tradition of thought that resonates with the problematic of action as *monist materialism*. It is monist in the sense that it denotes existence without transcendence. It is materialist in the sense that praxis is discernible in its effects. The resonances with Heidegger are obvious. He posits a single, unified being that is determined through the ontological difference between being and beings. In this sense, Heidegger is a monist materialist. But, unlike earlier monist materialists, his conception of the ineffectual precludes the standard response to the problematic of action with recourse to instrumentality. I find Heidegger's approach unsatisfactory for two reasons that I have already mentioned: first, ontologically, the ineffectual does not exist; and second, in terms ethics and politics, the ineffectual leads to either a trivial or a self-contradictory conception of action. The huge influence of Heidegger's ineffectual blocks contemporary philosophy's ability to see the solution to the problematic of action offered by earlier forms of monist materialism.

To call Heidegger a monist can be construed as both self-evident and preposterous. It is self-evident in the sense that monism can designate his notion of the unity of being that lacks transcendence in any metaphysical sense. It is preposterous in the sense that Heidegger views his ontology as doing away with all preestablished metaphysical assumptions about being, which includes rejecting all "labels" and nomenclature in favor of developing a new way to speak about being. Developing such a new vocabulary for philosophy was particularly relevant in the early twentieth century, when philosophy was undergoing a radical transformation that demanded a rupture with the past. It also characterized various modernisms that boldly advocated for actions such as doing away with museums as a means to create an entirely new artistic vocabulary. Unfortunately, this modernist attitude has led to a constraining imperative in Heidegger studies today, which we can express as: "When one speaks not in Heidegger's terms, one better remain silent about Heidegger."

I resolutely disagree with such an approach. Even though I am committed to immanent critique—the critique of another's position in the context of their own terms—as indispensable to a rigorous critical attitude, a

8. See Vardoulakis, *Spinoza, the Epicurean*.

vigorous critique cannot set it as a rule that no terms from lateral discourses can possibly be introduced and incorporated. Besides the dreaded “performative contradiction” if this imperative implies a radical nominalism and hence a return to metaphysics, it alienates “nonexpert” scholars and diminishes the influence of Heidegger’s thought. Contrary to this approach, then, I hold that there is no greater service to Heidegger’s thought than placing it in seemingly lateral registers, such as monist materialism. This keeps his thinking alive and relevant in new and unexpected places while probing its limits.

The Ruse of Techne is a contribution to such a task. It shows how the ineffectual is constructed through the ruse of *techne* in such a way that both affirms Heidegger as a monist materialist and demonstrates the deficiency of his approach to respond to the problematic of action in materialism. His notion of the ineffectual is not merely an action conceived as separated from the effects of calculative thinking; it is also, unfortunately, a conception of action that is, plain and simple, ineffectual.