

Toward an Epicurean Politics: The Two Instrumentalities (Phronesis and the Ineffectual)

Dimitris Vardoulakis

Abstract: The paper demonstrates how instrumentality has been repressed in the philosophical discourse of the past century, while it explores the materialist tradition of epicureanism that foregrounds instrumentality. Further, it demonstrates that the conception of instrumentality in materialism is derived from the ancient notion of phronesis, while the modern repression of instrumentality relies on a conception of an action without ends, or the ineffectual. This series of arguments leads to the conclusion that the competing interests of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, which Marx calls “class struggle,” is best understood as an extension of the epicurean tradition.

Keywords: Epicureanism, Spinoza, Marx, Heidegger, phronesis, materialism

1. Queering philosophy and the repression of instrumentality (phronesis)

You are bored. You check the dating app on your phone. The photo that comes up on your screen shows someone your type. You are about to swipe right, but catch a glimpse of the self-introduction: “I aim to have fun and treat everyone instrumentally.” The last word—worse than a swear—triggers an automatic motor reaction: swipe left! There is no doubt that since Christianity invented the notion of sin, the instrumental is in the thick of it, and has remained there irrespective of one’s confessional beliefs. There is no doubt, also, that the instrumental has also become a code-word for the evil of modernity, the construction of the calculative subject whose pursuit of self-interest erodes social and communal living, as well as the very foundation of political life.

And yet, if it was not for the automatic neuron messaging to your finger to swipe left, maybe you could have paused to consider the disarming honesty of the promise to be treated instrumentally. Just as the “video killed the radio star,” similarly the dating app killed romantic love. Online dating brings to love a sophisticated logistical apparatus designed to determine the ends of interaction as well as the means to attain them. Acronyms like DTF have relegated notions like unconditional love, a love beyond — or, is it above? — means and ends calculations, to a depository of quaint fantasies. Or at least they ought to, were it not for the automatic neurological reaction to swipe left. Romantic love is dead; long live romantic love!

I am not making an off-hand comparison between dating and the king—who, as Foucault reminds us, might have had his head detached from his body but who nonetheless lives on. I am deadly serious. I hold that the automatic swipe left triggered by the word “instrumental” is

symptomatic of a *repression of instrumentality* in the ethical and political realms. Romantic love, no less than the prerogative of the king, are determined by an aversion to instrumentality.¹

The repression of instrumentality is due to a narrow definition of calculative thinking, which invariably has three key characteristics: it is individual-centered; it focuses on acts that are quantifiable; and, it presupposes the possibility of a correct calculation. This instrumental reason is responsible for the objectification of human relations in capitalism and the neoliberal calculative subject who erodes the political. Maybe the first philosophical articulation of this instrumental reason occurs in nineteenth century utilitarianism, such as in Bentham’s “felicific calculus.”

We can find, however, a different instrumental logic in ancient Greek thought that contradicts modern instrumental reason point by point: It is a communal instrumentality that includes in its calculation consideration of others as well as the environment; it is unquantifiable and hence inherently fallible; and, it concerns living as a whole. In Greek thought, this calculation is referred to as *phronesis*, and it seeks to bridge the gap between the two poles of *praxis* in Greek thought, virtue and the pursuit of happiness (*eudaimonia*).

Perhaps the most famous example of this kind of calculation occurs in book 1 of Herodotus *Histories*. The story is about Solon, the wise—which is to say, *phronimos*, someone with *phronesis*—lawgiver of Athens. After devising the first democratic constitution, Solon left Athens for a long trip. When visiting Croesus, the powerful king asked Solon whether he regarded him as happy. Croesus was scandalized to hear that Solon regarded the brothers Cleobis and Biton—mere commoners—happier than him. The reason was that they had a happy death, helping their mother fulfil her promise to worship the gods at a remote temple. The calculation whether one is happy must include the whole of one’s life.² Even though he initially dismissed him, Croesus could not help whispering the word “Solon” when, years later, he had lost his empire and he was about to be executed.³ Virtue and happiness are connected via a calculation, not about individual quantifiable acts, but about living as a whole.

The political stakes of the distinction between the two instrumentalities are high. It suggests that the entire critique of instrumental reason in modernity may be correct, and yet inadequate to the task of describing, let alone critiquing, the sphere of calculation that permeates human interaction. Maybe a radical politics requires a

.....
1 The genius of George Bataille is to have connected the dots between the erotic and sovereignty through the renunciation of the instrumental. See Bataille 1991 and 1993.

2 Herodotus 1920, 1: 29–33.

3 Herodotus 1920, 1: 86.

reworked conception of the instrumental. At the same time, the historical stakes are high. If we are to retrieve and reanimate an alternative tradition of thinking the instrumental, nothing less is required than an alternative genealogy of the conception of praxis from antiquity to the present. Such a genealogy is indispensable in helping us work through modernity's repression of instrumentality.

The political and the genealogical tasks are connected because phronesis is a situated knowledge that includes the emotions. Such a calculation intermeshed with affect cuts across the social sphere today, as the example of the dating app suggests. Thus, the retrieval and reanimation of the forgotten tradition of phronesis has the potential to provide us with a conceptual matrix to think our world in a different framework.

This connection between the political and genealogical stakes of phronesis immediately comes against an obstacle. The most detailed and explicit account of phronesis that has survived from antiquity is contained in book 6 of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, which ends with the disavowal of phronesis in favor of the superiority of sophia. This culminates in the celebration of the life of the mind or contemplation at the end of *Nicomachean Ethics*. The superiority over phronesis opens the way for the celebration of reason—or, Reason—as the purveyor of truth that is a constitutive feature of patriarchal, male-centered politics.⁴ We need to overcome this obstacle if we are not propose yet another celebratory genealogy of Reason.

The epicurean tradition is critical at this juncture because it firmly blocks the way to such a celebration of Reason. Specifically, Epicurus reverses this relation by making phronesis the primary knowledge. In the "Letter to Menoeceus," he explicitly states that phronesis is the primary virtue and the highest form of knowledge, even higher than philosophy. The phrase that he uses to describe this superiority of phronesis is that the end of life is pleasure. This has been taken up by Christian fathers and other opponents of epicureanism to mean that corporeal pleasure as such as is the end of living. Epicurus explicitly rejects this in his "Letter to Menoeceus." Pleasure is constitutive of phronesis since it is part of the situated thinking characteristic of the calculation about living as a whole.⁵

If the highest form of knowledge is one in which pleasure is constitutive of knowledge because phronesis is situated and commensurate with its enactment—that is, if phronesis is a performative—then not only has Reason being displaced from its epistemological supremacy, but also "man" as the gender that represents Reason has also been displaced from his throne. Where the calculation

.....
4 Lloyd 1984.

5 Vardoulakis 2024.

of phronesis is supreme, hierarchies may not be eliminated, but they are flattened and become fluid, undercutting the absoluteness of any power. Thus the primacy of phronesis is nothing short of a *queering* of philosophy already in antiquity.

Such a queering of philosophy through the epicurean conception of phronesis is not dissimilar to Althusser positing an underground current of materialism in the history of thought. Like Althusser, I hold that the important aspect of such a queering of philosophy in epicureanism is its political implications, which consist inter alia in preempting absolute power and fostering a radical materialist politics. Unlike Althusser, I hold that epicurean phronesis ought to be distinguished from ancient atomism; further I hold that phronesis insists on calculative thinking for the articulation of such a politics, while Althusser, who effectively ignores phronesis, needs to posit non-instrumental action, the encounter or the event, to account for radical politics.

My term for the move that posits a non-instrumental action is *the ineffectual*. As I will explain, I derive this term from Heidegger, whom I regard as responsible for its determinative articulation. The effect of the ineffectual is not only to prevent the queering of philosophy that starts with the epicurean conception of phronesis. In addition, it is responsible for the forgetting of epicurean phronesis, and its repression within political philosophy.⁶

The aim of the article is to show how we can undo this repression of phronesis. The first step consists in challenging the critique of instrumental reason in modernity that narrowly determines instrumentality as individual, quantifiable and true, thereby forgetting the instrumentality characteristic of phronesis that is communal, fallible and concerned with living as a whole. We can summarize this critique by distinguishing two arguments against instrumentality. The first holds that instrumentality *of necessity* perpetuates established forms of power; and the second that instrumentality *of necessity* leads to violence. After evaluating these critiques, we will be in a position to compare phronesis and the ineffectual by examining the problem to which they both respond. At the end, we will discover a path that leads from Epicurus to Marx as a way of understanding the historical significance of epicurean politics.

.....
6 The term "repression of phronesis" does not reference only the importance of psychoanalysis for the kind of argument that I am pursuing here, but also Nicole Loraux's position that stasis has been repressed in the thinking of democracy. See Loraux 2006.

2. The instrumental as coopted by power (the ineffectual)

The criticism that calculative thinking is of necessity coopted by power summarizes a variety of different approaches to instrumental reason in modernity—from the Marxist critique of reification to the critique of the neoliberal calculative thinking as ultimately destroying the political sphere. This critique amounts to saying that instrumentality eliminates the possibility of the radically new, or what Hannah Arendt calls natality, because “an end, once it is attained, ceases to be an end and loses its capacity to guide and justify the choice of means.”⁷ Or, differently put, instrumentality is unable to account for political change.

Let me limit myself to one representative example from the cornucopia of iterations of this argument. In *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse uses the oxymoronic expression the “fetter of liberation” to describe the predicament of society in modernity. Techno-science and its constitutive instrumentality preclude any possibility of meaningful change.⁸ As he put it in an essay from the same period, “perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society is its success in integrating and reconciling antagonistic groups and interests. ... The political opposition against the basic institutions of the established society succumbs and turns into opposition within the accepted conditions. An overriding interest in the preservation of the institutional status quo joins the former antagonists.”⁹ Change is eliminated by being translated into non-political pursuits, such as the accumulation of capital, or the sublimation of desire into the latest product—or, the images in the dating app.

Let me be clear: I am in total agreement with this criticism, with two caveats: First, the subject of this critique is the instrumental reason that understands calculation as individualistic, quantifiable and true—that is, the instrumentality that is other than phronesis. Second, phronesis is forgotten and repressed within this discourse because of the positing of a non-instrumental action without ends, or the ineffectual. As soon as we see the connection between the two caveats, we will be in a position to turn the tables and argue that it is in fact the notion of the ineffectual that is *of necessity* liable to be coopted by power.

The ineffectual carves out a positioning of an action as part and yet apart from power. This is the kind of end-free praxis that Arendt calls simply “action” in *The Human Condition*, which she distinguishes from “work” and “labor,” both of which are instrumental. Arendt does not preclude instrumentality from her political philosophy. Rather, she

.....
7 Arendt 1998, 154-55.

8 Marcuse 2002, 163.

9 Marcuse 2001, 37 and 38.

laments the prevalence of instrumentality in modernity since she regards action—non-instrumental action or the ineffectual—as the condition of the possibility of the space in-between, or genuine political interaction. Any instrumental calculation has to come after the establishment of such a space. In modernity instead action—the ineffectual—has ceded its primacy to instrumental ways of acting.

The ineffectual plays a significant structuring role in the determination of power’s “outside.” Since modernity, power has been understood as having two pillars. There are various names for these two pillars, which correspond to distinct discourses each with its own genealogy, but both involve instrumental thinking. Perhaps the most influential articulation of the two pillars of power in the past three or four decades is derived from Foucault’s contrast between classical sovereignty and biopower. The former holds the individual responsible for its actions and punishes any transgression of the law; the latter aims to control populations through various means, ranging from provisions for the population’s welfare to generalized forms of surveillance.¹⁰ Subsequent revisions and rearticulations, such as Agamben’s *zoe* versus *bios*, only reinforced the Foucauldian frame of the distinction of the two pillars of power.¹¹

Critiques of power are always complicated by the fact that the two pillars can be distinguished but not separated. For example, if one critiques classical sovereignty too much to overcome a conception of the end of politics as the state’s self-preservation, then one might veer into the other pillar that has an affinity with “globalization” and neoliberalism. Symptomatic of this danger is the interpretation of Foucault himself as neoliberal. Conversely, if one pursues too stark a critique of the pillar of control in the name of a defense of state power, one is in danger of relinquishing unfettered power to the state. After rejecting “political Romanticism,” Carl Schmitt celebrates the exception of sovereign power.¹²

The ineffectual is conceived as the way around both of these unpalatable solutions. This is the idea that an action without ends, and hence non-instrumental, can short-circuit the synergies of the two pillars of power. In terms of political action, the exemplary articulation of this idea is May ’68. Often, artistic activity is presented as occupying the position of the ineffectual. The ineffectual has also been presented to account for political change in terms of the discourse of the “event” that has had significant traction in the wide and diverse field usually referred to as “continental philosophy.”

10 See the last chapter of Michael Foucault 2003).

11 See e.g. Agamben’s most recent articulation of this distinction in Agamben 2021.

12 See Schmitt 1986 and, 2007.

The frame of the argument for the ineffectual is straight-forward, simple, and seductive: non-instrumental action—or, the ineffectual—is incommensurate both with the instrumental thinking characteristic of control (the calculative logic of high capitalism), and with the sovereign logic of the state that sets its own self-preservation as an end. The difficulty of this position is equally straight-forward: no one has given a convincing description or pointed to a clear example of an ineffectual action.

The examples that are supposed to demonstrate the ineffectual usually fall apart after the briefest scrutiny. Costas Douzinas presented the continuous demonstration at Syntagma Square in the summer of 2011 as an expression of the ineffectual. The demonstration was against the fiscal policies imposed by the EU and IMF following the Greek financial crisis. The austerity measures imposed upon the Greek population were seen as an articulation of the instrumental logic of neoliberalism. Douzinas places the demonstrations of the summer of 2011 in the context of “an age of resistance” against the instrumental logic of neoliberalism.¹³ At that same time, Douzinas compares the demonstrations to May '68, the paradigm of a political action that supposedly lacks any ends, and holds that the demonstrators echoed the assemblies of the demos of classical Athens “who met a few hundred meters away.”¹⁴ As a result, the protest of the *aganaktismenoi* was an event whose significance “standard political science had not and could not understand.”¹⁵ Such an event that was firmly separated from the instrumentality of neoliberalism was supposed to have led to “the appearance of new politicized subjects.”¹⁶

I am struggling to reconcile Douzinas’ description with my own experience of the demonstration of the *aganaktismenoi* at Syntagma square. A first difference is that there were in fact two demonstrations. One part of the square was occupied by reactionary forces motivated by religious nationalism and linked to the Church. Are these *aganaktismenoi* part of the “event” that created new subjectivities? Douzinas does not acknowledge this other half of the demonstrators. In my perception, they resembled more medieval remnants of a desire for a return to theocracy than any direct democratic assembly.

Second, and most significantly, the *aganaktismenoi* countered the neoliberal instrumental arguments for austerity with their own instrumental arguments. Negatively, their use of instrumental thinking was to demonstrate that the calculations of neoliberal economics that plunged Greece into a socially painful and detrimental recession were in fact inaccurate and erroneous. Positively, they suggested that ethical

.....
13 Douzinas 2013, 9.

14 Douzinas 2013, 139 and 148.

15 Douzinas 2013, 148.

16 Douzinas 2013, 144.

and political calculation is about living as whole—not about quantifiable segments of life. Thus, the *aganaktismenoi*, far from presenting an event that made their demonstration devoid of ends and hence ineffectual, in fact posed the distinction between two forms of calculation: one that is quantifiable and which can be correctly measured as it applies to individual acts; and another that aims at the good in living as a whole, whereby there is no stable criterion to measure it by. It was not the event or the ineffectual that the *aganaktismenoi* embodied, but rather the calculation called phronesis. There was no such a thing as the ineffectual or the event taking place at Syntagma Square.

I have to confess that I have been looking for an example of the ineffectual for several years, but I have been unable to find one that is remotely convincing. This poses a significant problem: If the ineffectual does not exist, then isn't the kind of thought that posits such an ineffectual in danger itself of being implicated in the perpetuation of established power structures? Judith Butler seems to suggest as much in the context of discussing Giorgio Agamben. Agamben's notion of the ineffectual is presented through the figure of *homo sacer* who marks a "threshold of indistinction" between biopower and sovereignty. The problem with this argument is that if we are hard-pressed to find any example of such a *homo sacer*, then "we've actually subscribed to a heuristic that only lets us make the same description time and again, which ends up taking on the perspective of sovereignty and reiterating its terms and, frankly, I think nothing could be worse."¹⁷ In other words, the danger is that the ineffectual reiterates the impossibility of change but now under an illusion of freedom that only further reinforces sovereignty and biopower.

We can summarize the political response to the ineffectual as follows: The critique of instrumental reason suggests that the instrumental is of necessity co-opted by power making change impossible. To account for change, this critique turns to the ineffectual, an action and thought without ends. But the ineffectual itself, by virtue of being hard to find, raises the suspicion that it is not a feature of our material reality, which turns the tables on the initial accusation against instrumentality: Perhaps it is the ineffectual that is of necessity complicit in supporting established forms of power and preventing real change.

The political argument is inseparable from the genealogy of the ineffectual. The most important figure for such a genealogy is Martin Heidegger, who first systematically delineates the concept of the ineffectual, starting with his reading book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* as part of his course titled *Plato's Sophist*.¹⁸ Heidegger argues that

.....
¹⁷ Butler and Spivak, 2007, 43.

¹⁸ See section 4. For a detailed analysis, see Vardoulakis 2024.

techne is the praxis that includes all end-oriented activity. This means that the virtue of techne is science, which entails that all end-oriented action can be broken down into individual acts to be quantified and judged as true or false. By contrast, phronesis is, according to Heidegger, an activity that is entirely free of ends. Phronesis as purified of ends is the first clear delineation of the ineffectual.

From then on, Heidegger never tired of pointing out that which escapes quantifiable calculation. In the “Letter on Humanism” the thinking of being is defined by the fact that it “has no result [*kein Ergebnis*]. It has no effect [*keine Wirkung*].”¹⁹ And “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” insists that “there is a thinking outside [*außerhalb*] of the distinction of rational and irrational, more sober-minded still than scientific technology, more sober-minded and hence removed, without effect [*ohne Effekt*], yet having its own necessity.”²⁰ Maybe. But maybe also the thinking of being can dress itself up in Rector’s regalia to ruminate about the future of the German university.

I am not concerned about poor personal, or “ontic,” choices. I am concerned, rather, that the thought of the ineffectual in Heidegger—which means the forgetting of the second notion of the instrumental, that is, the forgetting of phronesis—has had such a major impact on what came to be called “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—that is, on the ineffectual—to counter modernity’s instrumental rationality.

This genealogical perspective helps us see what it is that the ineffectual precludes. Albert Hirschman’s *The Passions and the Interests* demonstrates an impoverished understanding of the history of thought next to Heidegger’s accounts of the historicity of being. And yet, Hirschman’s book aims to demonstrate that “interest,” which is nothing but the economic articulation of calculative thinking, determines historical progress in modernity *because* of its historical development.²¹ Hirschman shows that historicity cannot be divorced from the calculative. As a result, Hirschman’s genealogy of interest—despite all its glaring historical shortcomings—manages to secure for neoliberalism

.....
19 Heidegger 2002a, 259/358.

20 Heidegger 2002b, 449/89.

21 In section 6, we will see how we can find a different notion of interest in Marx.

exclusive control of instrumentality.²² Would this have been possible without the construction of the ineffectual in Heidegger's discourse, and from thereon dominating in continental philosophy?

At this point we see how the political and the genealogical perspectives make sense of the convergence of the ineffectual and neoliberalism. Neoliberalism happily embraces the ineffectual, since the ineffectual represses phronesis, that is, the notion of instrumentality that is different from the instrumentality of neoliberalism. If the economic sphere that includes social interaction and dictates the terms of the political is permeated by instrumentality, then it is fine to leave a space "outside" that sphere that has "no result" and "no effect." Even better, if it is artists who represent that sphere, the neoliberal corporation would hasten to patronize them. "Show us the next Hölderlin or the new Van Gogh and we will give them philanthropic—and tax exempt—grants so that they can perpetuate the ineffectual outside our sphere of operation!" they would think. And rightly so, for sponsoring those forms of power that have no material capacity to criticize them—they are *ineffectual!*—enhances their own power.

I hold, then, that it is not instrumentality as such that is doomed to endlessly reproduced instituted forms of power. Rather, the reproduction of power is contingent upon abandoning the thinking of the radical political potential of instrumentality through the construction of the ineffectual, which also means, as its obverse side, the abandoning of the field of instrumentality to established forms of power, such as neoliberalism. To embrace the critique of instrumental reason in modernity, one also needs to criticize the ineffectual on the grounds that it achieves precisely the opposite of what it aims, namely, to be coopted by power by virtue of evacuating the political "proper" from instrumentality.

3. The instrumental as leading to violence (agonism)

The second standard argument against instrumental rationality is that it *of necessity* leads to violence. The dialectic of the Enlightenment is a one-way street to Auschwitz. Techno-scientific rationality is responsible for the destruction of the environment, putting the whole planet into peril. Arendt started associating instrumentality with violence as soon as she arrived in the US, such as in *Between Past and Future*. This culminates in one of the purest articulations of this argument, her late book *On Violence*, whose central distinction is between power that is proper to the political, and instrumentality that is responsible for violence.

.....
22 Hirschman 1977).

I would subscribe to the argument that instrumentality, especially if it is individualist, quantifiable and purporting to attain to truth, *can* lead to violence. But it is easy to find illustrations to demonstrate that instrumentality—especially the one that is related to phronesis—can be employed to prevent violence. For example, during the global demonstrations following the murder of George Floyd, Dylan Martinez from Reuters took a photograph from the protests in London on June 14, 2020. It shows a black man carrying on his shoulders—in a so-called “fireman’s lift”—an injured white man who looks semi-conscious, dazed and confused.²³ The black man was Patrick Hutchinson and the injured white man was Bryn Male, a counter-protester and a member of a far-right group. According to Martinez, the photograph was taken near Waterloo Bridge, when a group of anti-racism protesters encountered a group of counter-protesters. Male was beaten by anti-racism protesters and he had sustained facial injuries. With the help of his friends who formed a cordon around him, Hutchinson delivered Male to the police so that he can be treated for his injuries. There was no love of humanity or any such value in Hutchinson’s actions. There was no pacificism or pluralism, but a cold instrumentality: “My real focus was on avoiding a catastrophe, all of a sudden the narrative changes into ‘Black Lives Matters, Youngsters Kill Protesters.’ That was the message we were trying to avoid.”²⁴ Saving the life of someone whom he hated was to prevent a death being mobilized against the cause he believed in. This was a judgment that considered the whole—not the calculation about a single, quantifiable act. Instrumentality too, insofar as it is the instrumentality of phronesis, is a viable strategy to prevent violence.

How are we to make sense of the argument that instrumentality of necessity leads to violence, when our experience readily contradicts it? A genealogy of this argument will be useful. And again, what we find larking in this genealogy is the figure of the ineffectual. No one denies that the desired end of political interaction is peace and consensus. But to avoid a utopianism of universalized harmony, one has to acknowledge the potential of conflict in human relations. The discourse of agonism has recourse to a notion of the ineffectual to distinguish between physical violence mired in instrumentality and an “ontological” violence purified of instrumentality.

The term “agonism” as applied to the social and political spheres is a neologism invented by Jacob Burckhardt in *The Greeks and Greek Civilization* to refer to the period between the wars of the Doric invasion and the classical age—the age of democracy. The key social feature of the agonal age, according to Burckhardt, were the various competitions

.....
23 The photograph as well as a description of what transpired it can be found Martinez 2020.

24 Amir Vera et al. 2020.

permeating social interaction. Burckhardt's agonal age contains a critical contrast: the agonistic life is the life of the aristocrats, as opposed to the tyrants and later the democrats. The distinction is drawn on the basis that the agonal is unconcerned with utility, or, in my terms, it is ineffectual, as opposed to the "utilitarian" culture of the non-aristocrats.²⁵ In this line of thought, the agonistic and the ineffectual are the obverse sides of the same coin. They mark a notion of competition or conflict that is separate from actual violence.

The ineffectual pervades the discourse of agonism. Heidegger is yet again a critical conduit when he notes the conflictual nature of being: "aletheia posses a conflictual essence [as it unfolds within the polis that] gathers originally the unity of everything. ... Here lies concealed the primordial ground of that feature Jacob Burckhardt presented for the first time in its full bearing and manifoldness: the frightfulness, the horribleness, the atrociousness of the Greek polis."²⁶ The unity of being that Heidegger originally discovers in Aristotle is transferred to the political realm—to the unity of the polis—through the "conflictual essence" of the truth of being. But, as the reference to Burckhardt makes clear, the agonism of aletheia is stripped of all "utilitarianism," which is to say, it is stripped of all end-oriented action, which is supposed to make its agonism "ontological" instead of actually violent.

Consonantly with this position, Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* praises the agonism of Greek culture precisely because it is non-instrumental. The agonal renunciation of ends is deliberately employed by Arendt in contrast to the modern predicament. She argues that the equality of the Greek city was due to the fact that "the public realm itself, the polis, was permeated by a fiercely agonal spirit, where everybody had constantly to distinguish himself from all others, to show through unique deeds or achievements that he was the best of all (*aien aristeuein*)."²⁷ The pursuit of excellence which is also an aristocratic pursuit—the *aien aristeuein* refers to both—permeates the entire political realm. This is the spirit of action, which in Arendt's terms, following Burckhardt and Heidegger, is purified of ends. In this rarified image of ancient Athens, citizens are equal because their "agonal spirit" is without concern for utility. By contrast, the spirit of modernity is determined by what Arendt calls work and labor that are nothing but instrumental. As such, instead of agonism, they lead to violence that Arendt distinguishes from the political proper. The constitutive violence of instrumentality marks it as qualitatively distinct from the agonal that is free of ends.

.....
25 Burckhardt 1998, 160 and 185.

26 Heidegger 1992, 90.

27 Arendt 1998, 41.

The relatively recent discourse of “agonistic democracy” is indebted to this tradition. William Connolly uses the term to highlight a political theory that diverges from the orthodoxy of a politics of consensus. The first determinative use of agonistic democracy occurs in the Preface to *Identity\ Difference*.²⁸ Connolly seeks to arrive at a new conception of democracy that prioritizes difference over identity. Still, Connolly draws a qualitative distinction between two kinds of action, one characterized by hostility and violence, and another that is ethical. Connolly traces the hostility to a “generalized resentment” against claims by “others” to fairness and equality.²⁹ Such resentment relies on calculative thinking. By contrast, an “ethic of cultivation” consists in the “cultivation of agonistic care for the contingency of things and engagement in political contestation [that] are locked into a relation of strife amidst their mutual implication.”³⁰ Calculation entails resentment and violence, while agonal care entails a “mutual implication” or pluralism.

The tradition about agonism that starts with Burckhardt passes through philosophers such as Heidegger and Arendt and culminates in the discourse of agonistic democracy in political theory. It understands the agonistic as distinct from the instrumental because the instrumental is of necessity violent. In other words, it posits the dilemma either the ineffectual—the non-instrumental action in a variety of different descriptions—or violence.

The epicurean tradition that privileges phronesis as the primary virtue and knowledge also recognizes that instrumental thinking *may* lead to violence, but not necessarily. Epicureanism does not know of an ontological conflict or a conflictual pluralism that are sharply separated from violence. Violence is a possibility within the political sphere and it is a matter of a realist approach to politics to acknowledge the prospect of violence.

The most succinct presentation of Epicurus’ political program is preserved in sections 32 to 38 of his *Principal Doctrines*, where the guiding idea is that political justice as well as the “social contract” (*symfonia*) are determined by the effects of action. In other words, justice and the legal framework are dependent on the instrumentality of phronesis. Thus, according to section 37 of *Principal Doctrines*, the calculation of the useful gives us the sense of justice in the political realm. But justice is not a universal; rather, it is historicized because it is tethered to its effects. The just is that which is useful, not to the individual, but to the polity as a whole. This means that when the conditions change, the sense of justice also changes. We should in fact

.....
28 Connolly 2002a, x.

29 See e.g. Connolly 2002a, 22–23.

30 Connolly 2002b, 158.

say: when the circumstances change, the sense of justice changes of *necessity*. As soon as we add the necessary nature of the transformation of justice as it relies on instrumental thinking, the agonistic nature of epicurean politics comes to the fore. The reason is that the calculations of phronesis that yield the sense of utility Epicurus identifies with justice will then inevitably—by force of the same *necessity*—also lead to a clash between constituted forms of power that strive for the preservation of the established order, and those who have judged that the established order no longer serves the utility of the state. In this conception, instrumentality is agonistic and conflictual but this is only a way to attain the just and the communal good, even if it entails the danger of lapsing into violence.

As soon as conflict is circumscribed with competing conceptions of utility, there emerges a conceptual apparatus for a radical politics that is firmly within the purview of instrumentality. Thus, for example, La Boétie calls “voluntary servitude” the situation where the people submit to a ruler who acts against their utility. Such an apparatus acknowledges the possibility of violence—such as a revolution against the oppressive ruler—but sees violence as neither necessary, nor necessarily undesirable. If the laws of the state do not lead to the good of the polity as whole, then they are, as Epicurus puts it in *Principal Doctrines* 37, nothing but “empty words,” and the political exigency is to discover the best means possible to effect a change toward the communal good.

The agonism of phronesis is differently framed from the agonism that starts with Burckhardt. The agonism aligned with the ineffectual posits an action that is separated from instrumentality on the grounds that the effects of the instrumental are of necessity violent. The agonism aligned with phronesis accepts the possibility of violence. But that’s nothing more than the realist recognition that our calculations about the good change, and in the course of doing so they challenge established forms of power. To love your neighbor, as Freud notes in *Civilization and its Discontents*, can never be a universal. The possibility of peace, no less than the prospect of violence, depend on the given circumstances. If your neighbor is coming at you with a knife, you will most certainly be better off to calculate the means to avoid injury, which may also include inflicting injury in turn. A fend off, however, is unlikely while wrecking your brains to discover an action that is ineffectual.

At this point, we have seen that the two main criticisms leveled against instrumentality as a whole do not in fact hold for phronesis. But this only shows that the criticisms of instrumentality from the perspective of the ineffectual are weak—they are *either* trivial *or*, worse, implicated in the perpetuation of established forms of power. To avoid this trap of the critique of instrumental reason in modernity, we need to show why phronesis is an indispensable component of the political.

For this, we need to investigate the ontology of instrumentality as it is connected to praxis.

4. Materialism (the problematic of action)

The ontology of both phronesis and the ineffectual is a materialist, “secular” ontology. By this I mean an ontology that renounces transcendence. There is neither a transcendent being subsisting in a realm separate from ours, nor transcendent values or principles that are universal irrespective of their circumstances. Even though both the ineffectual and phronesis are built on such an ontology, I will show here that the ineffectual cannot account for difference in action without contradicting its ontological starting point. This is not the case with phronesis, which means that phronesis offers a coherent relation between ontology and praxis.

A specific problem that has followed materialist ontologies since antiquity is how to account for difference in action. If there is no transcendence, if in monist terms existence is a totality outside of which nothing exists, then does that mean whatever we do is of no consequence? What is the basis of the difference between our actions, if they are all of the same ontological quality, that is, if they are all “beyond good and evil”? I call this kind of questioning *the problematic of action*.

In ancient philosophy, the problematic of action, appears as the difficulty to account for difference. For example, it frames Plato’s *Sophist*. The dialogue starts with two of Socrates’ students, Theodorus and Theaetetus, bringing to him a visitor from Elea, that is, an adherent to Parmenidean monism. Socrates probes the Eleatic Visitor by asking him whether his school regards the sophist, the philosopher and the statesman as one, or two, or three distinct kinds of activity.³¹ The question will appear nonsensical unless we place it within the context of the problematic of action: As soon as one posits a totality outside of which nothing exists, then it becomes difficult to demarcate an essential difference between actions. If there is only one being, which also suggests an identity of thought and action, then should a Parmenidean have to assert that the actions of the sophist, the philosopher, and the statesman are mere modifications of that one being? Is only differentiation possible and difference impossible? Socrates’ question frames the *Sophist* on the problematic of action that has challenged materialism and its monist ontology since antiquity.

The problematic of action resurfaces as a response to an ontology that rejects transcendence throughout the history of thought. For example, we find it in the most influential response to Spinoza in

.....
³¹ Plato 1921, 217a.

the initial reception of his work: the entry “Spinoza” in Pierre Bayle’s *Historical and Critical Dictionary* from the late seventeenth century. Following the ban of Spinoza’s works, Bayle’s entry on Spinoza became *the* main source of Spinoza’s thought until the Paulus edition at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In his entry, Bayle compulsively returns to the problematic of action in monism. For example, he argues that “in Spinoza’s system all those who say, ‘The Germans have killed ten thousand Turks,’ speak incorrectly and falsely unless they mean, ‘God modified into Germans has killed God modified into ten thousand Turks,’ and the same with all the phrases by which what men do to one another are expressed.”³² Monism entails, according to Bayle, the eradication of difference. Not only is it incapable of distinguishing between Christians and infidels; it cannot even distinguish between the dead and the living. Bayle’s vehement tone is different from Socrates’ playful disposition, but the problem they both raise is substantively the same: the difficulty to account for difference in monism.

In the twentieth century, we rarely find the same clarity about the problematic of action in relation to a monist materialist ontology.³³ But the lack of explicit philosophical scrutiny only seems to intensify its power as it is intuitively grasped in the everyday life of a secular outlook that has lost all guarantees offered by the transcendent. For example, the existential dread for the lack of a moral compass can be understood within the same register: If nothing matters, if all is the same and hence there is no difference, if everything is indifferent, it little matters if Meursault in Camus’ *The Stranger* kills an Arab on the beach. Existentialism can be understood as a response to the problematic of action.

The ineffectual and phronesis, then, rely on the a materialist ontology, which in turn leads to the problematic of action. Can we discern from this vantage point a significant divergence about how the ineffectual and phronesis account for action? My contention is that we can. The discourse of phronesis since antiquity accounts for difference through the effects of action, which is why it regards the instrumental as indispensable. By contrast, the repression of the instrumental in the discourse of the ineffectual requires the qualitative distinction between actions that are instrumental and those that are not, which, however, as we will see, results in insurmountable contradictions.

Ancient thought responds to the problematic of action through an examination of the ends of actions: difference is not in existence itself, it is not a response to the question “what is?”; rather, difference is in the effect of what is. This affects even the definition of being. To bypass

.....
32 Bayle 1965, 312.

33 See Strauss 1930.

the problematic of action, the Eleatic Visitor in Plato's *Sophist* provides a definition of existence in terms of power (*dynamis*): "I suggest that everything which possesses any power of any kind, either to produce a change in anything of any nature or to be affected even in the least degree by the slightest cause, though it be only on one occasion, has real existence. For I set up as a definition which defines being, that it is nothing else but power [τὰ ὄντα ὡς ἔστιν οὐκ ἄλλο τι πλὴν δύναμις]."³⁴ Being is neither a static quality nor an incessant movement of differentiation, but rather the effects of its existing. The real ontological question is not "what is?" but rather "what are the effects of what is?" Consequently, the question of the ends of action, and instrumentality in general, become critical not only for a theory of praxis, but also for how praxis and theory are connected within a materialist ontology.³⁵

Within this context, it is not surprising that Cicero—the great summarizer of ancient thought—calls the question of the ends of action the primary question of philosophy in *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*. In book 5, Cicero discusses the most significant question of philosophy. It is, as he puts it, the question that, when it is properly settled or rightly constituted, will also settle all other philosophical questions. This is the question of the good understood in terms of the ends (*de finibus*) of action. Philosophical disagreement arises only about what these ends are so as to reach good and bad effects—but everyone agrees on the pivotal position of the question about ends (*rerum finibus*) in solving the ethical and political dilemmas of the good.³⁶

The discourse of the ends is translated in modernity into the discourse of *utilitas*, which is entirely consistent with identifying the question "what are the effects of what is" as the primary ontological question. The notion of utility permeates Spinoza's thought because, *pace* Bayle, Spinoza develops a notion of difference relying on the ancient strategy. Thus, for example, he states in the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics* that no action is in itself good or bad. But this is far from saying that all actions are indifferent. Rather, he insists in Proposition 35 that there is nothing more useful to a human being than other human beings, whereby a human is like a god to other humans. Thus difference can be discerned in the mutual help that we provide each other, which not only protects us from threats, but is also the precondition for communities to thrive and prosper. Far from a "night where all the cows are black," locating difference at the end of actions makes the instrumental thinking of phronesis indispensable for social being.³⁷

.....
34 Plato 1921, 247d–e.

35 See Vardoulakis forthcoming.

36 Cicero 1931, 5.15–16.

37 See Vardoulakis 2020.

The history of the ineffectual within a “secular,” monist materialist ontology starts more recently, but it has had a more determinative influence in the last hundred years.³⁸ The first clear articulation of this strategy to respond to the problematic of action that I have been able to discover is in a course that Heidegger offered at Marburg in 1924–25. The course was titled *Plato’s Sophist*, but from September till Christmas Heidegger concentrated on a reading of phronesis in book 6 of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this course, Heidegger describes in detail a move that has since exercised an enormous influence in philosophy. He argues that there is a realm of activity that gathers all ends of action, claiming that Aristotle called that realm *techne*. Heidegger holds that *techne* is part of scientific knowledge, striving for “a determination of beings insofar as they are *finished, com-plete* [*fertig, voll-ständig*].”³⁹ This denies any essential difference between the ends of action and their effects.

At the same time, Heidegger distinguishes sharply between *techne* and *phronesis* on the grounds that *phronesis* is purified of ends. Consequently, “in the case of *phronesis*, the *praktion* [the doing or the action] is of the same ontological character as the *aletheuein* [disclosing] itself. And here, presumably, the *telos* [end] is in fact disclosed and preserved; for it is the Being of the deliberator himself.”⁴⁰ The *telos* of *phronesis*, in other words, is nothing but one’s concern for oneself, which in *Being and Time*, written the following year, will become the defining characteristic of *Dasein*. *Phronesis* has no other ends, it does not strive for any effects in the world. This entails, according to Heidegger, that *phronesis* is uniquely oriented toward the disclosure of being. Unlike *techne* that is trapped in the pursuit of ends, leading to a forgetting of being, “there is no *lethe* [forgetting] in relation to *phronesis*.”⁴¹ The truth of being is given only through an activity that is purified of all ends of action.

This suggests a *qualitative* difference between two kinds of action, one that is end-oriented and one that is end-free. Heidegger will reformulate this distinction between *techne* and *phronesis* in numerous ways throughout his writings, and it is arguably the determinative distinction for his entire philosophical project. For example, the distinction corresponds to the two parts of *Being and Time*. Division 1 describes *Dasein*’s end-oriented activity in the world. This can either lead us astray to lose being in the chatter and averageness of the everyday. Or it can be a first station toward authenticity that discloses being, which

.....
38 I say within secular monist materialism because the idea of an action without effects plays a determinative role in religion, especially mysticism. I am not concerned here with notions of action without effects within an ontology that admits transcendence.

39 Heidegger 1997, 85/123.

40 Heidegger 1997, 34/49.

41 Heidegger 1997, 39/56.

he describes in Division 2 of *Being and Time*. The authentic in *Being and Time*, like phronesis in the earlier seminar, is an ineffectual action, devoid of ends. The ineffectual, in its various articulations throughout Heidegger's philosophy, is the precondition for the unforgetting of being as single and unified, that is, as a totality outside of which nothing exists and which knows of no metaphysical transcendence. This *qualitative* distinction between an action with and an action without ends has exercised an enormous influence in modern thought and it has become the canonical response to the problematic of action in "continental philosophy."⁴²

The genealogy of the problematic of action shows that the discourse of the ineffectual is grounded on a fundamental contradiction. Specifically, Heidegger distinguishes between *techne* (which includes all ends of action) and *phronesis* (the ineffectual) on the grounds that they are qualitatively separated because one leads to the forgetting and the other to the disclosure of being. But if there is indeed a single and unified being, as Heidegger puts, or if there is an ontological totality outside of which nothing exists, as I put it earlier, any qualitative distinction is untenable. There is nothing that is inherently good or bad, as Spinoza puts it in the Preface to Part IV of the *Ethics*, because the moment one draws a qualitative distinction between actions, one has ipso facto to admit different qualities within being, which contradicts the initial ontological commitment.

By being consistent with its materialist ontology, the ancient approach to the problematic of action—followed by radical thinkers in modernity like Spinoza—starts appearing increasingly appealing. Maybe we can judge the effects of actions by calculating the means and ends at our disposal. In that instance, our judgments will lack any guarantee to be correct. The effects are produced by given circumstances, which change all the time, so the judgment on the effects of action cannot rely on a universal rule. This approach has, nonetheless, three strongly appealing features. Instrumental judgments concern living as a whole, and thus they have the capacity to contribute to a communal living, as opposed to individualistic pursuits to self-interest; the fallibility of instrumental judgments means that they are predisposed to resist any form of voluntary servitude, and any form of absolute power; and, as a result, instrumental calculations can make a difference, or provide a conception of political action that is open to change.

.....
42 See Vardoulakis 2024.

5. The ubiquity of phronesis (miscalculations)

The difficulty that arises at this point is whether the queering of philosophy through phronesis actually reproduces the same mistake that the discourse of the ineffectual makes. In other words, how can we avoid asserting that there is a “good” instrumentality and a “bad” one, which merely draws a qualitative distinction within being, just like in the discourse of the ineffectual? The “cunning of the ineffectual” is that it cannot be negated without thereby affirming its qualitatively distinct existence. The position I want to defend is that there is only the instrumentality of phronesis. But phronesis, as fallible, is liable to miscalculation. The instrumentality of the ineffectual is nothing but the miscalculations that fail to live up to phronesis, and yet they still evidence its operative presence.

Someone is bored. That is the starting point of Luis Buñuel’s critique of capitalism and modernity in *Belle de Jour*. The absence of phronesis that simultaneously determines every other expression of instrumental calculation is critical for Buñuel’s film. If phronesis is nowhere, it is consequently everywhere. Its repression makes it all the more powerful, all the more operative, and all the more effective.

The film centers around Séverine, played by Catherine Deneuve. She is the young wife of Pierre Serizy, a surgeon working in a big hospital. They live in a Parisian apartment at the new part of the city, built in the nineteenth century to house the bourgeoisie. A domestic takes care of all the housework, so Séverine has nothing to do. At the same time, Séverine finds it impossible to be intimate with her new husband. In this life of the bourgeoisie, a deep-seated boredom prevails. Séverine finds out about a high-class brothel, and decides to work there in the afternoons. It is not the need of money that drives her to Anais’ establishment. It is rather the boredom of the life of the upper middle class. The brothel is the reverse of her home apartment, the only place where she can feel any erotic desire and overcome her boredom. But this is an individualistic calculation, which will lead to horrible consequences for her life.

A second sphere of the narrative that constantly intrudes into the plot without any explicit relation to it consists in Séverine’s fantasies. These correspond to an aristocratic time signified by the ever-present horse-drawn carriages. This fantasy of an aristocratic *ancien régime* is characterized by erotic excess that is entirely useless. This is the realm of the ineffectual. Even though this seems irrelevant to the plot, it nonetheless demonstrates that Séverine has sexual desires that aspire to aristocratic erotic excess and the useless expenditure of erotic energy that Bataille writes about. That this is a complete fantasy, disconnected from reality, is driven home by Séverine’s first client. He is prone to the excessive and the useless as means of erotic gratification, but instead

of a noble aristocrat he is a fat and sweet industrialist who rejects Séverine for her rigidity—that is, insufficient excess.

Séverine's desire is given a different direction with the arrival of Marcel, with whom she forms a bond. Marcel is what Marx would call lumpen proletariat. His financial condition places him at the bottom of the economic hierarchy, but unlike the proletariat he lives in the margins of society, subsisting through petty crime. He is introduced in the film by a robbery he conducts, which gives him money to visit Anais' brothel. His quaint cane suggests aristocratic fantasies like the ones Séverine has, but everything else, from the holes in his socks to his broken teeth, is decidedly un- or anti-aristocratic. In particular, instead of uselessness and the ineffectual, Marcel is constantly calculating. Every action he undertakes is instrumental. From counting money to ambushing Séverine's husband to shot him, Marcel constantly calculates. But his calculations are just as individualistic as Séverine's, driven by the illusory erotic desire to be with her.

We have then three class positions: the bourgeois that is driven to individualistic calculations through boredom and unfulfilled sexual desire; the aristocratic that is erotic because it is useless and excessive of any calculation; and the petty criminal that is constantly calculating. All three positions indicate forms of miscalculation. The aristocratic excess and uselessness is a fantasy that does not exist—the ineffectual is not—even though it produces effects such as Séverine's decision to join the brothel. The bourgeois and lumpen proletarian calculations are individualistic and ultimately fail: Marcel is killed by the police, and Séverine is effectively imprisoned in her apartment with her husband paralyzed and unable to communicate as a result of Marcel's shot. Within this whirlwind of miscalculations that delimit a realm we can call "romantic love," where is the instrumental calculation of phronesis? It seems nowhere. There is no communal calculation concerned with living as a whole.

And yet, behind the miscalculations needed to produce the fantasy of the ineffectual, the instrumentality of phronesis is ever present in the film. If without the ineffectual the critique of instrumental reason in modernity loses its positive articulation, and hence its conceptual purchase, then the alternative prevails. The calculations of the characters are misguided because they did not live up to phronesis. We can derive three significant insights from these miscalculations:

First, calculative thinking as phronesis is the condition of the possibility of representation *as well as* its deconstruction. The operative presence of phronesis—operative through its absence from the representations of the film—organizes the entire story, as well as the critique of bourgeois mentality.

Second, there is an ethical and political exigency that is irreducible to the normative. There is no "thou shan't not prostitute thyself" at the end of the film. Rather, this is an ethics and politics where no

action is inherently bad. What can be measured are only the effects of miscalculation.

Third, the different calculations and miscalculations permeate the entire social and political field. The instrumentality of phronesis is everywhere; or, perhaps more accurately, there is no outside phronesis. Class relations—or, class struggle—appears in *Belle de Jour* as the conflict that arises from the miscalculations due to the pursuit of romantic love. Romantic love is the source of the fallibility of phronesis. Phronesis should be striving instead for a love of community, for a love of the good as it affects everyone implicated in instrumental calculation.

Maybe, then, it is high time we refuse to be duped by the critique of instrumental reason that confines instrumentality to the conjunction of technoscience with power so as to construct the fantasy of the ineffectual. If we return to the epicurean principle that “pleasure is the end of living,” which suggests that phronesis accompanies our actions that strive for the good, we will be in a better position to regard current social and political issues. Such an epicurean politics give us the means to work through our misplaced love, to resist the compulsive motor response that represses instrumentality, and to “swipe right” when we hear the word “instrumental.”

6. Queering history (class struggle)

If we reflect on the rehabilitation of instrumentality that I have been proposing here, then we can see how it configures the historical in a double sense. First, it suggests that what happens—that is, history—can never be thematized into a clear trajectory or it can never be submitted to a concept. History can be on horseback, but not because, as Hegel thought, because there is such a thing as a world history that can be incorporated into the absolute. To the contrary, history is on horseback solely for the accidental or aleatory reason that Hegel saw Napoleon on his horse in Jena in 1806. Given that calculative thinking is dependent on the given circumstances, our actions that utilize instrumentality are also always tied up to the contingent conditions within which we act. Consequently, if we make phronesis the primary form of knowledge and virtue in pursuit of the good, then we need to admit that history is simply an indefinite series of performatives with no hidden meaning or telos.

Second, this does not entail a radical historical agnosticism or a capitulation to skepticism. Even if there is no logic to history, still there are two ways in which this can be understood. *Either*, as an interminable wait for the ineffectual to occur—that is, the harkening toward the historical manifestation of that which can never be thought of in instrumental terms. This can be understood in many different ways, such as the notion of the miracle in Judeo-Cristian metaphysics, the

exception in political theology, or the event in the political philosophy of the continental tradition. *Or*, as the interminable grappling with the exigency to calculate; as the recognition—expressed by Epicurus—that there is no “outside” to calculation because phronesis is the primary forms of knowledge and virtue.

There is a third element that comes to the fore as soon as place this double sense of the historical next to the insight from the previous section, namely, that instrumentality can operate—and in fact it operates even more forcefully—even when it appears as if it is absent. This third element entails that there is in fact no “either/or” between the ineffectual and instrumentality, and that in fact phronesis is always operative. This is not to suggest that we are actively calculating all the time, but rather that our actions—no matter how they may be determined by unconscious drives and desires—are ultimately part of matrices that evidence instrumentality. The manifestations of the ineffectual are merely miscalculations that in turn also evidence the operative presence of the instrumental. We can call these three moves *the queering of history*.

Karl Marx made an ingenious contribution to this queering of history. By translating the epicurean conception of phronesis into the notion of interest, he offered a most compelling presentation of the twofold aspect of history, both as aleatory and as inextricable from unfolding of instrumentality. His schooling in epicureanism may have contributed. It is customary to read his doctorate on Epicurus and Democritus as a coded commentary on the state of play of the political philosophy of his time.⁴³ And we will look in vain in the portion of the dissertation that has survived, let alone in the even more fragmentary notes, for any explicit reference the political important of phronesis in Epicurus. In his surviving notes, Marx does not address in any sustained way Epicurus’ discussion of phronesis in the “Letter to Menoeceus,” nor the notion of utility—I almost said, *interest*—that permeates the political aphorisms 32 to 38 of Epicurus’ *Principal Doctrines*.

And yet, we find in other writings a most succinct and compelling presentation of the three moves regarding the historical that I highlighted above. This is particularly so in *The Communist Manifesto*. At first blush, Marx and Engels seem to be making an empirically dubious, if not indefensible, claim. They assert that the entire history of humankind can be reduced to the agonism between two social classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. No doubt a historian would dismiss such a notion while digging for dusty documents in an archive.

From the perspective of the queering of history, the historicization of the class struggle assumes a significance that is irreducible to empirically verifiable “facts.” Marx and Engels hold that the entire

.....
⁴³ For a summary and compelling reconstruction of the context of Marx’s dissertation, see Barbour 2023.

social sphere is determined by the struggle between two competing conceptions of interest represented by two classes, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. From the perspective of the history of thought that represses instrumentality and thus forgets epicureanism, the assertion that the entire history of humanity can be reduced to the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat appears absurd, even laughable. But from the perspective of an epicurean political philosophy, it simply asserts that we have two fundamental conceptions of calculation in modernity: the bourgeois for which instrumentality is based on “naked self-interest” determined by the “the icy water of egotistical calculation”; and the proletarian that is concerned with the whole of living, renouncing the possibility that calculation can be reduced to quantifiable—and hence monetizable—acts.⁴⁴ The former is the target of the discourse against instrumental reason; the latter is a development of concept of phronesis. Such an epicurean politics maintains both the contingency of historical acts, and the fact that all acts are intertwined with the instrumental.

Consequently, an epicurean politics cannot take the class struggle as a mere sociological fact, or an empirical fact that can be presented with a certain measurable accuracy. If that were the case, the class struggle would be viewed from the perspective of the instrumental logic of the bourgeoisie. The opposite is the case in the *Communist Manifesto*. The bourgeoisie are their own “grave diggers” because the logic of their expression of interest presupposes of necessity the logic of phronesis characteristic of the proletariat.⁴⁵ The “coda” of epicurean politics is the agonism between two notions of instrumentality, one that hopes for a miracle or the event to save us from the usurpation of power by instrumental reason in modernity; and another that views instrumentality as concerned with living as a whole—as communal or “communist”—and hence as the expression of history. The former, however, is nothing but an effect of the latter, which is why upon scrutiny it “melts into air.”

.....
44 Marx and Engels 1976, 487.

45 Marx and Engels 1976, 496.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

- Agamben, Giorgio 2021, *Where Are We Now? The Epidemic as Politics*, trans. Valeria Dani, London: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Arendt, Hannah 1998, *The Human Condition*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Barbour, Charles 2023, "Last of the Schoolmen: The Young Marx, Latin Culture, and the Doctoral Dissertation," *The European Legacy*, 28:1, 44-64
- Bataille, George 1991, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, volume 1, *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Zone Books.
- ____ 1993 *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, volumes 2 and 3, *The History of Eroticism and Sovereignty*, trans. Robert Hurley, New York: Zone Books.
- Bayle, Pierre 1965, *Historical and Critical Dictionary: Selections*, trans; Richard H. Popkin, Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Burckhardt, Jacob 1998, *The Greeks and Greek Civilization*, trans. Sheila Stern, New York: St Martin Griffin.
- Butler, Judith and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak 2007, *Who Sings the Nation-State? Language, Politics, Belonging*, London, Seagull Books.
- Cicero 1931, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*, trans. H. Rackham, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Connolly, William E. 2002a, *Identity\ Difference: Democratic Negotiations of Political Paradox*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- – 2002b, *The Augustinian Imperative: A Reflection on the Politics of Morality*, Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Douzinas, Costas 2013, *Philosophy and Resistance in the Crisis: Greece and the Future of Europe*, Cambridge: Polity.
- Foucault, Michael 2003, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976*, trans. David Macey, New York: Picador.
- Heidegger, Martin 1992, *Parmenides*, trans. Andre Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- – 1997, *Plato's Sophist*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz and Andre Schuwer, Bloomington: Indiana University Press = GA 19.
- – 2000a, "Letter on Humanism", in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell, London: Routledge = GA 9.
- – 2000b, "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in *Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell, London: Routledge = GA 14.
- Herodotus 1920, *Histories*, trans. A. D. Godley, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Hirschman, Albert 1977, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Lloyd, Genevieve 1984, *The Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*, London: Routledge.
- Loroux, Nicole 2006, *The Divided City: On Memory and Forgetting in Ancient Athens*, trans. Corinne Pache and Jeff Fort, New York: Zone.
- Marcuse, Herbert 2002, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, New York: Routledge.
- – 2001, "The Problem of Social Change in Technological Society", in *Collected Papers, Volume 2: Toward a Critical Theory of Society*, ed. Douglas Kellner, London: Routledge.
- Martinez, Dylan 2020, "Black Man Carries Suspected Far-Right Protester to Safety", June 16, <https://widerimage.reuters.com/story/black-man-carries-suspected-far-right-protester-to-safety>
- Marx, Karl and Frederick Engels 1976, "Manifesto of the Communist Party", in *Collected Works*, vol. 6, New York: International Publishers.
- Plato 1921, *Sophist*, in *Theaetetus and Sophist*, trans. H.N. Fowler Cambridge, Mass. Harvard, University Press.
- Strauss, Leo 1930, *Die Religionskritik Spinozas als Grundlage seiner Bibelwissenschaft: Untersuchungen zu Spinozas Theologisch-politischem Traktat*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag.
- Schmitt, Carl 1986, *Political Romanticism*, trans. Guy Oakes, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT.
- – 2007, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George D. Schwab, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Vardoulakis, Dimitris 2020, *Spinoza, the Epicurean: Authority and Utility in Materialism*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- – 2024 *The Ruse of Techne: Heidegger's Magical Materialism*, New York: Fordham University Press.

-- forthcoming, *The Logic of Living: The Materialism of Greek Thought*.

Vera, Amir, Salma Abdelaziz and Zahid Mahmood 2020, "Black protester who carried injured white man through angry crowd says he was trying to avoid catastrophe", June 15, <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/06/14/uk/london-blm-protester-injured-man-photo-trnd/index.html>

C
R
I
S
I
S

&

C
R
I
T
I
Q
U
E

/

Volume 10
Issue 1