

of these very divergent strands of feminism, furnishing the interest in their broad characterisations – subjective or structural tendencies – with more ample space. To

specify the history of these thinkers allows us to radicalise their categories past their historical uses, rather than merely fixing them in their original time and place.

Christina Chalmers

## Artificial reason

Peter Wolfendale, *The Revenge of Reason* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2025). 440pp. £24.99 pb., 978 1 91302 987 6

When Urbanomic put out *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* in 2014 [reviewed in *RP* 191], it presented its subject as that rare thing, a novel ‘ism’ with a coherent genealogy. Accelerationism may by that time have come to be associated primarily with the writhing rhapsodies of Nick Land and his collaborators, but the editors of *#Accelerate* traced a longer history, taking accelerationism as the name for a strain of anti-humanist technological optimism stretching back to Marx. Yet, however coherent the history of the idea, there seemed to be little agreement among accelerationists in the 2010s what it was, exactly, that should be accelerated. Capitalism? Capitalism’s ‘internal contradictions’? Technological development? AI? In the absence of clarity, accelerationists were often caricatured as promoting a worsening of the miserable conditions for which capitalism was responsible: an intensification of suffering that would magically enforce its transmutation.

In *The Revenge of Reason*, a multi-faceted defence of left-accelerationist ‘Prometheanism’, Peter Wolfendale bemoans the ‘persistent misunderstanding’ that ‘the purpose of acceleration is to deepen immiseration in order to hasten revolution.’ He proposes that accelerationism be defined as the ‘insistence that the transition between capitalism and post-capitalism’ mirror ‘the transition between feudalism and capitalism’: ‘a complex process that can and should be accelerated rather than a radical break in the horizon of thought and action.’ Wolfendale describes himself as a ‘systematic philosopher’, and *The Revenge of Reason*, a collection of his essays written between 2010 and 2025, is astonishingly wide-ranging. But there is a clear thread running through its forays into aesthetic theory, ‘transcendental logic’, Deleuzian metaphysics and cognitive functionalism: a metaphysical-political theory of the radical freedom of rational beings.

Aside from *The Noumenon’s New Clothes* (2019), a book-length demolition of Object-Oriented Ontology, the bulk of Wolfendale’s work over the past decade has circulated through an informal economy of blog posts and social media threads. (Wolfendale is described in the author’s note of *The Revenge of Reason* as an ‘independent philosopher’, having lost his institutional position with the collapse of the Philosophy department at Newcastle University. The book is therefore a testament both to the sorry state of academic philosophy and to the tenacity of those who continue to think and write outside it.) His new book arrives at a moment when its call for an embrace of computational intelligence seems at once more pertinent and less palatable than ever before. Today – as the one-time libertarians of Silicon Valley fall in step with neo-fascists, the digital commons are enclosed and enshittified as the result of aggressive corporate takeovers, and the AI arms race consumes ever greater quantities of material and libidinal energies – it is understandable that the left isn’t carried away with technological optimism. Can an account of the interrelation of freedom and rationality, which embraces the liberatory potential of AI, offer any encouragement?

Wolfendale’s account of freedom is self-consciously Kantian: free systems are self-legislating, which means that they are able to set their own goals. Plenty of systems may be capable of intelligently solving problems, but only those that are capable of choosing *which* problems to solve count as autonomous. Examples of intelligent but non-autonomous systems include current AIs, whose goals are set by their human designers, and – more controversially – non-human animals, which Wolfendale characterises, as a behaviourist might, as clusters of instinctual ‘drives’ loosely oriented towards the evolutionary aims of survival and reproduction. The teleological

language of ‘goals’ is in these contexts strictly analogical; the ‘goal’ of a non-autonomous system is simply, to draw on W. Ross Ashby’s cybernetic definition, ‘what it does’. Autonomous beings, by contrast, represent the world not merely as it is, but as it ought to be, and are in a position to make practical decisions concerning how to act. Thus, autonomy is, as Kant held, dependent on the capacity for normativity.



At this point, Wolfendale’s centre of gravity shifts away from Kant himself towards one of his most formidable inheritors: Robert Brandom. Brandom follows Kant in understanding normativity as practical reason, and practical reason as the means by which selves are transcendentally synthesised: we *make* the ‘I’ by saying ‘I should ...’ However, he follows Hegel in suggesting that reason is fundamentally *social*: a means of ‘making explicit’ and taking responsibility for the normative commitments entailed by unconscious inferences. This process takes place in language, which enables us to elaborate the consequences of and eliminate inconsistencies between the things that we believe. Because language is infinitely extendable, there is no final end to this process of revision, no ultimate belief or goal-state at which we must eventually bottom out. This is why humans are

autonomous: we can revise our normative commitments indefinitely. So autonomy is enabled by normativity; normativity is enabled by reason; and reason is enabled by language.

Brandom’s ‘inferentialist’ account, which implies that reasoning is a social, discursive process rather than a formal, algorithmic one, is sometimes contrasted with more clearly ‘computationalist’ accounts. Even so, as Wolfendale sees it, Brandom defines reason in broadly functional terms, as the means by which competing representations of the world are made consistent and coherent. On this view, the ‘game of giving and asking for reasons’ can be run on any possible substrate; there is nothing special about the ‘wetware’ of human brains and bodies. An artificial general intelligence, or AGI, would be as autonomous as any human, and many times more powerful.

Wolfendale somewhat underplays how radical his own account is. ‘Computation’, in the discussion of intelligent systems, is often a byword for mechanism, which is in turn a byword for determinism. By arguing that freedom itself is coextensive with computational processes, Wolfendale challenges some of the most deeply entrenched commitments in philosophy of mind. A project so ambitious is bound to be contentious. I shall sketch some potential philosophical problems with Wolfendale’s account, then turn to the question of whether it can ground a viable political project.

Because Wolfendale claims that language is what makes possible the infinite ‘extensibility’ of reason, we might expect him to be committed to the position that language-producing systems such as Large Language Models (LLMs) are rational and thus autonomous – more autonomous, indeed, than dogs, deafmute people or newborn babies. But in a recent review of Leif Weatherby’s *Language Machines*, Wolfendale asserts that LLMs are not really making the inferential judgments that rationality entails; they are, like trained parrots, merely mimicking syntactic relations without grasping their semantic import. So what makes systems capable of understanding reasons, if not language? Perhaps Wolfendale, in line with standard computational functionalism, would propose that reason is implemented by a specific cognitive architecture, which is present in the human brain (and, we might anticipate, in an AGI) but not in an LLM-style neural net. But if we can’t locate this all-important archi-

ture simply by looking at systems and seeing whether or not they can speak, then the position that non-human life forms cannot have rational capacities – to which Wolfendale is so committed he is willing to mount an argument against vegetarianism – begins to look much more suspect.

Wolfendale expresses enthusiasm for ‘predictive processing’ approaches in cognitive science, which understand cognition as a process through which predictive models are integrated with error-correcting feedback. But many theorists working in this area have suggested that such ‘active inference’, and the autonomy that comes with it, is the defining characteristic of all living matter, such that even a slime mould creeping towards a pool of glucose solution possesses some minimal capacity for valence (the glucose is *good*) and thus a slimy little transcendental ego (I should pursue it). Wolfendale’s distaste for vitalism might cause him to baulk at this idea. But if we want no part of parochial anthropocentrism in relation to silicon-based intelligences, why should we indulge it when it comes to our carbon cohabitants? It seems to me plausible to retain Wolfendale’s account of the interrelation of autonomy, normativity and reason while rejecting the hard line he draws between rational and non-rational beings. One might, for example, take the position that evolution produces many different forms of reasoner, occupying various points on a continuum of expanding autonomy.

If we did grant Wolfendale’s picture of the human subject as distinctively and radically free, what kind of politics might follow? The first few essays in *The Revenge of Reason* sketch out an argument for ‘Promethean’ praxis, heavy on galvanising rhetoric but light on economic or tactical detail. Left accelerationism, like its right-wing cousin, is organised around the Humean idea that naturalistic claims have no currency in political thought: that what is provides no guide as to what could or ought to be. Wolfendale cites the 2018 *Xenofeminist Manifesto*: ‘If nature is unjust, change nature.’ But if nature itself is unjust, then where does our sense of injustice come from? What co-ordinates can we use to make moral and political decisions, if we are not confined by any sense of what kind of beings we are?

To stick with the *Xenofeminist Manifesto*, consider biohacking technologies relating to biological sex characteristics, such as hormones, surgeries and endocrine

blockers. Why should we advocate, as Wolfendale does, for access to these technologies? The intuitive answer is surely not because we are free to do so, but because they promise to reduce distress and advance equality. Consider, by contrast, some of the technologies currently being pushed by techno-feudalists, such as Elon Musk’s Grok, for allowing users to generate pornographic images of real people. To be in a position to critique or support novel technologies, we must be able to say which do, and which do not, advance the creation of a just world. And to be able to draw on such an idea of justice, we must present ourselves as rather less free than Wolfendale would have us – as beings whose values are indexed to existing features of our bodies, desires and social realities.

As I see it, accelerationists have two options when presented with this dilemma. The first is to concede that while certain facts about human being – facts relevant to our political choices – can be described as ‘natural’ in the sense that they are given rather than made, these facts should not be considered impervious to change. We might have a nature, but it is perpetually evolving, such that the nature of this ‘we’ will change as the world does. (As Mary Midgely observed in *Beast and Man*, from 1978, even doctrines holding that humans ‘have no nature’ are bound to claim that humans are ‘naturally’ plastic.) Accordingly, the political trajectory of humanity cannot be thought of in terms of teleological ‘fulfilment’, only endless transformation. This might be one way of interpreting Marx’s notion of ‘species-being’, which implies that the human, although self-transforming, must be understood at any given moment in its historical development in terms of a set of definite physical, social and creative needs. If man did not have a species-being, then we wouldn’t be in any position to see the alienating techniques of capitalism as, specifically, dehumanising.

The other option would be to embrace something more like an existentialism, in which the subject is indeed radically free, and moral commitments thus essentially arbitrary. Wolfendale moves close to this position, but then pivots, claiming that autonomous beings are in fact bound by a categorical imperative, which is the demand to maximise freedom itself. ‘The only thing that matters necessarily’, Wolfendale argues in ‘Why Does Anything Matter?’, ‘is that *something* must matter, and this means that no matter who we are and what we want,

we should care about the freedom of ourselves and others, and promoting its unconstrained evolution.' Here Wolfendale runs up hard against a core paradox of free will: we are not, it turns out, free to relinquish freedom. We *do* have a final goal, which is the infinite revision of goals. The problem with this position is the same one that befalls ethical theories focused on the maximisation of 'utility' (Wolfendale himself observes that his position is 'surprisingly similar to utilitarianism'): it merely renames, without reframing, the concept that in classical ethical theories is known as 'the good'.

From a political perspective, I am not sure that this account of freedom gets Wolfendale to the place he wishes to go. For while his picture of the autonomous subject may provide a metaphysical basis for accelerationism, it is not clear that it supports a specifically *left* accelerationism. Wolfendale bolsters his socialist commitments with the claim that 'our capacity for individual self-understanding and self-transformation is to some extent mediated by our capacity for collective self-understanding and self-transformation'. But, on his own account, there seems no reason why this is *necessarily* so. A right accelerationist might claim that collective interdependence is just another one of the natural obstacles that it is within our power to change.

In short, *The Revenge of Reason* has not assembled the resources it would need in order to convince its opponents, from those who think that AI can never be autonomous to those who believe that human autonomy is as illusory as that of an LLM. However, it will certainly disturb the complacent slumber of the post-accelerationist moment. Left analysis, having inherited an uneasy mixture of historicism and messianism, can tend towards a compatibilist conception of human freedom which will seem to some properly dialectical, to others a stubborn disavowal. This tension is encapsulated in Marx's own assertion that although men 'are free to make their own history', they 'do not make it as they please': 'The tradition of dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.' Wolfendale asks us to follow the first half of Marx's claim without indulging in retreat or caveat, asking what it means to be truly free to make our own histories and escape our nightmares. Most will feel at present that we are simply not free with respect to novel technologies: that we are at the mercy of forces of development which seem entirely inimical to the requirements of collective rehumanisation. Yet *The Revenge of Reason* reminds us that if we are to keep faith with an emancipatory politics, then we had better work out what degrees and kinds of freedom remain possible.

Georgie Newson

## Expressive sex

Juliana Gleeson *Hermaphrodite Logic: A History of Intersex Liberation* (London: Verso 2025). 256pp. £16.99 pb., 978 1 83976 093 8

Juliana Gleeson's *Hermaphrodite Logic* is a book about organising sex. Gleeson starts from the founding moments of ISNA (Intersex Society of North America) in the early 1990s, from their actions against the ongoing medical subjugation of intersex children. The surgical procedures many of the activists had themselves endured, as Gleeson relays in her intro, 'while framed as emergency treatments to correct pressing congenital defects ... aimed to soothe cultural anxieties (on the part of both clinicians and parents). Rather than preventing harm, they caused lifelong numbness. Rather than improving aesthetics, they imposed scarring and permanently delimited any fu-

ture options.' Gleeson introduces ISNA's early members not least by the cool and punkish stances of these 'hermaphrodites with attitude'. Organising, like sex, needs to take on a shared communal form to move out of the standards of administration and into the struggles of politics. Gleeson's *Logic* is concerned with exactly those forms. Through narrating the history of intersex struggles she is also promoting something like a new genre of writing, an Intersex Realism, if you will.

Gleeson identifies herself as part of this struggle for shaping the sex of politics, as her own frequent use of catchphrases and tongue in cheek formulations – such as