



Project Astrolabe:

Navigating the Future of Civilization

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Initial Statement of Purpose:

How are we to understand civilization, so that we can form an idea of its future permutations, and perhaps even to assert a measure of control over what we are to become? There is no science of civilization, and if there is a philosophy of civilization it is nowhere as focused and disciplined as, e.g., epistemology or ontology.

If the study of civilization is a science, how is it to be quantified? How are we to conduct observations of civilization? If civilization is an active area of philosophical research, what are the problems and issues in the study of civilization being debated by contemporary philosophers? I think that an honest individual would have to respond that there is, at present, only the haziest notion of how civilization might be quantified for measurement, and similarly only the haziest notion of what the great controversies are in the philosophy of civilization.

The discipline that is closest to being a study of civilization has been history, but history itself has been theoretically problematic: it has not been clear whether history is a literary genre or an incipient science. With the recent emergence of scientific historiography history more and more seems to be securely scientific, and to be based on the scientific method, but at the same time that history has become definitively scientific it has come to comprise the whole of natural history, making it no longer distinctively a study of civilization. Scientific historiography has been an intellectual revolution, but a revolution that has definitively distinguished history from a study of civilization.

Nevertheless, we *need* history for the study of civilization, even if history is not identical to the study of civilization. Friedrich von Schlegel said that, "The historian is a prophet facing backward." To become prophets of the future, we must first be prophets facing backward, looking to the past. In order to understand civilization it is necessary to understand civilization in its historical context, and in order to understand civilization in its historical context we must also understand humanity in its historical context. Civilization in the past was derived from what humanity was *before* civilization; civilization *today* is derived from what civilization *was* in the past and from what humanity became in its civilized state; civilization in the future will be derived from what civilization is *now* and from what humanity will become.

By way of history, then, we gain insight into the deep time of the human future through the study of the deep time of the human past. As observed above, history is now a scientific discipline, and science itself admits of a philosophy of science that seeks to lay bare the presuppositions of the practice of science, so that the disciplines of history, science, and philosophy are all crucial to the study of civilization, even if no one of these traditional areas of study are identical to the study of civilization.

In the study of civilization, then, we are very nearly starting from the ground up; this is both an enormous challenge and an opportunity. Project Astrolabe seeks to meet this challenge, or, at least, to begin to provide an outline of the study of civilization adequate to gaining our bearings in the ocean of time and navigating the storm-tossed waters to a future worthy of human hope.

The scope of this project will include, but is not necessarily limited to:

1. Investigation of methodological considerations in the study of civilization, including investigation of the kind of concepts (historical, scientific, philosophical, etc.) employed in the elucidation of civilization.
2. Review of extant definitions of civilization
3. Review of extant typologies and developmental schemata for civilization
4. Review of quantifiable metrics that have been applied to civilization
5. Formulation of new definitions, typologies, developmental schemata, and quantifiable metrics for civilization.
6. Application of definitions, typologies, developmental schemata, and quantifiable metrics to the future of civilization: how can these ideas be extrapolated?
7. Development of a short list of likely future scenarios for the future of civilization.
8. Review of existing risk concepts and metrics applicable to humanity and civilization.
9. Developing a list of global catastrophic risks and existential risks that threaten civilization today and in the future.
10. Weighting of known global catastrophic risks and existential risks relative to each other.
11. Developing a conceptual framework adequate to the rational discussion of unknowns and uncertainties (i.e., “black swan” events).
12. Cost/benefit analysis of global catastrophic risk and existential risk mitigation.
13. Formulation of recommendations for addressing global catastrophic risks, existential risks, and future unknowns.