Beyond Survival

Introduction

"Thinking has interests that do not coincide with those of living" — Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*

Species Survival

We live in times that confront us with important questions regarding how we will survive as a species, questions which invite radical answers:

How will we survive catastrophic environmental change? *Abandon the earth?*

How will we survive technological self-modification? *Radical techno-conservatism?*

How will we survive competition with artificial super-intelligence? *Enslave it?*

Scales and Limits

Species… Cultures, Nations, Corporations, Families… *Persons*

Conceptual Problems

The way in which these questions are posed tends to distort strategic thinking about how we answer them:

By warping our understanding of *what* these systems are and *how* they work.

By warping our conception of the *means* and *ends* of possible action.

The Abuse of Survival

Conceptual Collapse

The *explanatory* and *normative* significance of the concept of survival have been distorted by being collapsed into one another:

Agonistic Metaphysics: treating competition over scarce resources as the fundamental principle governing the behaviour of all systems at all scales.

Egoistic Hermeneutics: interpreting all motivations as in some way expressions of a fundamental drive to optimise one's chances of survival.

In each case, survival is treated as the *default priority*, from which observed behaviour can accidentally diverge.

Conceptual Strategy

Question the *naturalness* of survival.

Redefine the notion of *self-interest*.

Articulate the relation between *personal* and *supra-personal* scales.

Denaturalising Survival

Pseudo-Goals

Indeterminate Content: it is not a specific goal but a *general schema* for such goals.

Analogical Structure: it is a schema for *constructing* explanations and predictions about the behaviour of complex systems.

Analogical Bootstrapping

Functional Explanation: works by analogy with *practical reasoning,* getting predictive purchase on a system's behaviour by borrowing the distinction between *success* and *failure*.

Represenational Explanation: works by analogy with theoretical reasoning, extending our predictive purchase on a system's behaviour by borrowing the distinction between *accuracy* and *inaccuracy*.

Functional Bootstrapping

There are three layers of biological complexity.

Machine

Mode: *composition* (means and ends)

Problems: autopoiesis, environment

Strategy

Mode: *interaction* (competition and co-operation)

Problems: subordination, self-sacrifice

Replicator

Mode: *reproduction* (variation and selection)

Problems: divergence, conflict, identity

Representational Bootstrapping

There are three layers of psychological complexity.

Control

Modes: *simulation* (integration and availability); *selection* (self-model and options)

Problems: death, satiation/satisfaction

Generality

Modes: *representation* (extension, integration, and revision); *action* (reasons, taking-true/making-true, unrestricted goals)

Problems: extrapolated volition, integration/revision

Autonomy

Mode: *self-legisation* (theoretical/practical duality, selfhood as integration)

Problems: libidinal outsourcing, suicidal projects

Analogical Failures

Conceptual Failures

How do misunderstandings of this analogy collapse the explanatory and normative dimensions of survival? How does a pseudo-goal become a universal default?

Agonistic Metaphysics: *literalises* the survival analogy, which demands that *local* assumptions about the identity conditions of the agent and the structure of the problem space can be made *globally* determinate.

Egoistic Hermeneutics: *inverts* the survival analogy, which means treating the goals of autonomous systems as if they were the drives of non-autonomous ones, and thus treating self-defining systems as if they were defined by explanatory assumptions.

Personal

Self-interest is self-realisation.

Self-realisation demands self-definition.

Supra-Personal

Cultural Evolution: *proliferation of ends* rather than *monopolisation of means*.

Cultural Survival: survival of the *infrastructure of selfhood* rather than survival of the *species*.