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Definite Vs Indefinite Optimism & False Dichotomies | Jason Crawford & Benjamin Reinhardt

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6-7 minutes

Dear Ben,

We both think a lot about how to get our society to accomplish more big, long-term goals. So I wanted to start a conversation with you about Peter Thiel's concepts of "definite" vs. "indefinite" optimism. I think there is a false dichotomy here.

These terms were introduced to the world in [Blake Masters' Stanford class notes](#), which later became the book *Zero to One*. I think Thiel was saying a few things in this lecture, some of which I agree with and some of which I don't.

One idea here is that our society no longer comes up with bold, ambitious, long-term plans. We lack vision, or are afraid of it. I am sympathetic to this. I think it's important to have bold vision and ambitious plans, and I think he's probably right that we have lost some of that since about the 1950s (although I would give different reasons for that).

Where I think I diverge from Thiel is in the application of this to technological/industrial projects. When he describes his "definite optimism", it sounds as if you start out with not only a vision, but a blueprint for how that vision will unfold, a detailed plan from the start that you follow:

When you send a rocket to the moon, you have to calculate precisely where it is at all times. It's not like some iterative startup where you launch the rocket and figure things out step by step. Do you make it to the moon? To Jupiter? Do you just get lost in space?

In an [earlier lecture](#), talking about how founder mentality changed post-bubble, he says:

First, you had to believe and practice incrementalism. Grand visions and moving quickly fell out of favor.

Second, your startup had to be "lean." You should not, in fact, know what you're going to do. Instead, you should experiment, iterate, and figure it out as time goes on.

I think this draws a false dichotomy between grand visions and iterative, experimental execution.

The paradox is: we *can* achieve big visions, we *can* master fate, we *can* control our destiny—but our knowledge is *always* incomplete, risk and uncertainty are *always* present, and we can *never* predict the future except in broad outline.

Even a big vision needs iterative development. When we began the Apollo program, we didn't know *how* we were going to get to the Moon. Even the basic strategy of lunar orbit rendezvous was not obvious and [almost didn't happen](#). Nor did we try to get to the Moon on our first launch. There was a series of experimental steps to prove concepts and technology before we even made the attempt.

Further, although I can agree that big visions are underrated these days, not every great development in history has started with a big vision. When James Watt began tinkering to improve the efficiency of the steam engine, I don't think he was setting out to revolutionize the entire economy. William Henry Perkin tried to synthesize the anti-malarial drug quinine, and failed—but succeeded in creating the first synthetic dye, thus kicking off the dye industry, which paved the way for the wider chemical industry. When Pasteur did his work to improve fermentation for French wine and beer makers, he couldn't have known that his would ultimately lead to the germ theory and a revolution in medicine; nor did he begin his work on chicken cholera thinking it would lead to the first vaccine in over a hundred years. Columbus, of course, did not set out to discover a new continent.

Even Thiel's own startup, PayPal, doesn't fit his paradigm! They started with a big vision that turned out to be wrong (beaming money between handheld devices), pivoted several times, and became a success when a payment feature they built as an *demo* started taking off in real usage, eclipsing their actual product by orders of magnitude.

Another way of looking at all of these examples is that they represent a stack or hierarchy of goals, with some levels being more certain and some more iterative. Apollo had a definite end goal, a Moon landing, but the means were uncertain. Pasteur didn't know *how* his work would have an impact, but he had conviction that he was working on an important area, the science of disease, and that careful observation and experiment would lead to knowledge and ultimately pay off. PayPal was wrong about the form their product should take, but they were right that online payments were an extremely valuable thing to build.

We should absolutely identify big goals, and go directly after them. But we should also realize that we don't know what all the valuable goals are, and so we need to leave room for tinkering and experimentation, even if it seems at the time to be on toy problems or niche interests. I fear that Thiel's emphasis on "definite optimism", and his disparaging comments about "not knowing what you're going to do", fail to strike the right balance.

Ultimately I see "definite" vs. "indefinite" as a false alternative. There are always some things that are known and some that are not. We should identify what we know and what we don't, and act accordingly, rather than choosing full allegiance to certainty or uncertainty, as if we had to pick sides. It's no more a virtue to over-invest or to fail to diversify when appropriate, than it is to fail to recognize and act on clear truths or big opportunities. The right approach was [articulated by Jeff Bezos](#): stubborn on vision, flexible on details.

However, you said that you sympathize with the "definite" vs. "indefinite" distinction and see value in it. So I'd love to know whether you agree with what I've written, how you interpret Thiel, and what value you see in these concepts.

Yours,

Jason