

INTERESTING TIMES

Peter Thiel and the Antichrist

The original tech right power player on A.I., Mars and immortality.

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Hosted by Ross Douthat

Mr. Douthat is an Opinion columnist and the host of the “Interesting Times” podcast.

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Ross Douthat: Is Silicon Valley recklessly ambitious? What should we fear more: Armageddon or stagnation? Why is one of the world’s most successful investors worrying about the Antichrist?

My guest today is a co-founder of PayPal and Palantir, and an early investor in the political careers of Donald Trump and JD Vance. Peter Thiel is the original tech right power player, well known for funding a range of conservative and simply contrarian ideas. But we’re going to talk about his own ideas because, despite the slight handicap of being a billionaire, **there’s a good case that he’s the most influential right-wing intellectual of the last 20 years.**

Peter Thiel, welcome to “Interesting Times.”

Peter Thiel: Thanks for having me.

Douthat: So I want to start by taking you back in time about 13 or 14 years. You wrote an essay for National Review, the conservative magazine, called “The End of the Future.” And basically, the argument in that essay was that the dynamic, fast-paced, ever-changing modern world was just not nearly as dynamic as people thought, and that actually, we’d entered a period of technological stagnation. That digital life was a breakthrough, but not as big a breakthrough as people had hoped, and that the world was stuck, basically.

Thiel: Yes.

Douthat: You weren’t the only person to make arguments like this, but it had a special potency coming from you because you were a Silicon Valley insider who had gotten rich in the digital revolution.

So I’m curious: In 2025, do you think that diagnosis still holds?

Thiel: Yes. I still broadly believe in the stagnation thesis. It was never an absolute thesis. The claim was not that we were absolutely, completely stuck; it was in some ways a claim about how the velocity had slowed. It wasn’t zero, but 1750 to 1970 — 200-plus years — were periods of accelerating change. We were relentlessly moving faster: The ships were faster, the railroads were faster, the cars were faster, the planes were faster. It culminates in the Concorde and the Apollo missions. But then, in all sorts of dimensions, things had slowed.

I always made an exception for the world of bits, so we had computers and software and internet and mobile internet. And then the last 10 to 15 years you had crypto and the A.I. revolution, which I think is in some sense pretty big. But the question is: Is it enough to really get out of this generalized sense of stagnation?

There’s an epistemological question you can start with on the “Back to the Future” essays: How do we even know whether we’re in stagnation or acceleration? Because one of the features of late modernity is that people are hyperspecialized. Can you say that we’re not making progress in physics unless you’ve devoted half your life to studying string theory? Or what about quantum computers? Or what

about cancer research and biotech and all these verticals? And then how much does progress in cancer count versus string theory? You have to give weightings to all these things.

In theory, it's an extremely difficult question to get a handle on. The fact that it's so hard to answer, that we have ever narrower groups of guardians guarding themselves, is itself cause for skepticism. So, yes, I think broadly we're in this world that's still pretty stuck, but it's not absolutely stuck.

Douthat: You mentioned “Back to the Future.” We just showed our kids the original “Back to the Future” — the first one, with Michael J. Fox.

Thiel: It was like 1955 to 1985, 30 years back. And then “Back to Future Part II” was 1985 to 2015, which is now a decade in the past. That's where you had flying cars. And the 2015 future is wildly divergent from 1985.

Douthat: “Back to the Future Part II” did have Biff Tannen as a Donald Trump-like figure in some kind of power, so it had some prescience. But yeah, the big, noticeable thing is just how different the built environment looks. And so one of the strongest cases for stagnation that I've heard is that, yeah, if you put someone in a time machine from various points, they would recognize themselves to be in a completely different world. If they left 1860 and landed —

Thiel: Or 1890 to 1970, those were the 80 years of your lifetime. Something like that.

Douthat: But the world, just to my kids, even as children of 2025 looking at 1985, it's like, the cars were a little different and no one has phones, but the world seems fairly similar. That's a kind of nonstatistical, but —

Thiel: That's a common-sense intuition.

Douthat: That's a common-sense understanding. But what would convince you that we were living through a period of takeoff? Is it just economic growth? Is it productivity growth? Are there numbers for stagnation versus dynamism that you look at?

Thiel: Sure, the economic number would be: What are your living standards compared to your parents? If you're a 30-year-old millennial, how are you doing versus when your boomer parents were 30 years old? How were they doing at the time?

There are intellectual questions: How many breakthroughs are we having? How do we quantify these things? What are the returns of going into research?

There certainly are diminishing returns to going into science or going into academia generally. Maybe this is why so much of it feels like a sociopathic, Malthusian kind of an institution, because you have to throw more and more and more at something to get the same returns. And at some point, people give up and the thing collapses.

Douthat: Let's pick up on that. Why should we want growth and dynamism? Because, as you've pointed out in some of your arguments on the subject, there is a cultural change that happens in the Western world in the 1970s — around the time you think things slow down and start to stagnate — where people become very anxious about the costs of growth, the environmental costs above all.

The idea is you end up with a widely shared perspective that we're rich enough. And if we try too hard to get that much richer, the planet won't be able to support us — we'll have degradation of various kinds. And we should be content with where we are. So what's wrong with that argument?

Thiel: Well, I think there are deep reasons the stagnation happened. There are always three questions you ask about history: What actually happened? And then you have another question : What should be done about it? But there's also this intermediate question: Why did it happen?

People ran out of ideas. I think, to some extent, the institutions degraded and became risk averse, and some of these cultural transformations we can describe. But then I think to some extent people also had some very legitimate worries about

the future, where if we continued to have accelerating progress, were you accelerating toward environmental apocalypse or nuclear apocalypse or things like that?

But I think if we don't find a way back to the future, I do think that society — I don't know. It unravels, it doesn't work.

The middle class — I would define the middle class as the people who expect their kids to do better than themselves. And when that expectation collapses, we no longer have a middle-class society. Maybe there's some way you can have a feudal society in which things are always static and stuck, or maybe there's some way you can ship to some radically different society. But it's not the way the Western world, it's not the way the United States has functioned for the first 200 years of its existence.

Douthat: So you think that ordinary people won't accept stagnation in the end? That they will rebel and pull things down around them in the course of that rebellion?

Thiel: They may rebel. Or maybe our institutions don't work, since all of our institutions are predicated on growth.

Douthat: Our budgets are certainly predicated on growth.

Thiel: Yeah. If you say, I don't know, Reagan and Obama — Reagan was consumer capitalism, which is oxymoronic. You don't save money as a capitalist; you borrow money. And Obama was low-tax socialism — just as oxymoronic as the consumerist capitalism of Reagan.

I like low-tax socialism way better than high-tax socialism, but I worry that it's not sustainable. At some point, the taxes go up or the socialism ends. So it's deeply, deeply unstable. That's why people are not optimistic. They don't think we've hit some stable, Greta future. Maybe it can work, but we're not yet there.

Douthat: Since her name will probably come up again in this conversation, that's a reference to Greta Thunberg, the activist best known for anti-climate-change protests, who to you, I would say, represents a symbol of an anti-growth, effectively authoritarian, environmentalist-dominated future.

Thiel: Sure. But we're not there yet. We're not there yet. It would be a very, very different society if you were really stuck ——

Douthat: If you actually lived in a degrowth, small Scandinavian village.

Thiel: I'm not sure it'd be North Korea, but it would be super oppressive.

Douthat: One thing that's always struck me is that when you have this sense of stagnation, a sense of decadence in a society — to use a word that I like to use for it — you then also have people who end up being eager for a crisis, eager for a moment to come along where they can radically redirect society from the path it's on. Because I tend to think that in rich societies, you hit a certain level of wealth. People become very comfortable, they become risk averse, and it's hard to get out of decadence into something new without a crisis.

So the original example for me was: After Sept. 11, there was this whole mentality among foreign policy conservatives that we had been decadent and stagnant, and now is our time to wake up and launch a new crusade and remake the world. Obviously, that ended very badly. But something similar ——

Thiel: But it was Bush 43 who told people to go shopping right away.

Douthat: So it wasn't anti-decadent enough?

Thiel: For the most part. There was some neocon, foreign policy enclave in which people were LARPing as a way to get out of decadence. But the dominant thing was Bush 43 people telling people just to go shopping.

Douthat: So what risks should you be willing to take to escape decadence? It does seem like there's a danger here where the people who want to be anti-decadent have to take on a lot of risk. They have to say: Look, you've got this nice, stable,

comfortable society, but guess what? We'd like to have a war or a crisis or a total reorganization of government. They have to lean into danger.

Thiel: Well, I don't know if I'd give you a precise answer, but my directional answer is: a lot more. **We should take a lot more risk. We should be doing a lot more.**

I can go through all these different verticals. If we look at biotech, something like dementia, Alzheimer's — we've made zero progress in 40 to 50 years. **People are completely stuck on beta amyloids. It's obviously not working. It's just some kind of a stupid racket where the people are just reinforcing themselves.** So, yes, we need to take way more risk in that department.

Douthat: To keep us in the concrete, I want to stay with that example for a minute and ask: OK, what does it mean to say we need to take more risks in anti-aging research? Does it mean that the F.D.A. has to step back and say: Anyone who has a new treatment for Alzheimer's can go ahead and sell it on the open market? What does risk in the medical space look like?

Thiel: Yeah, you would take a lot more risk. If you have some fatal disease, there probably are a lot more risks you can take. There are a lot more risks the researchers can take.

Culturally, what I imagine it looks like is early modernity, where people thought we would cure diseases. They thought we would have radical life extension. Immortality was part of the project of early modernity. It was Francis Bacon, Condorcet. Maybe it was anti-Christian, maybe it was downstream of Christianity. **It was competitive. If Christianity promised you a physical resurrection, science was not going to succeed unless it promised you the exact same thing.**

I remember 1999 or 2000, when we were running PayPal, one of my co-founders, Luke Nosek — he was into Alcor and cryonics and that people should freeze themselves. And we had one day where we took the whole company to a freezing party. You know a Tupperware party? People sell Tupperware policies. At a freezing party, they sell —

Douthat: Was it just your heads? What was going to be frozen?

Thiel: You could get a full body or just a head.

Douthat: The “just the head” option was cheaper.

Thiel: It was disturbing when the dot matrix printer didn’t quite work, and so the freezing policies couldn’t be printed out.

Douthat: Technological stagnation once again, right?

Thiel: But in retrospect, it’s also a symptom of the decline, because in 1999 this was not a mainstream view, but there was still a fringe boomer view where they still believed they could live forever. And that was the last generation. So I’m always anti-boomer, but maybe there’s something we’ve lost even in this fringe boomer narcissism, where there were at least a few boomers who still believed science would cure all their diseases. No one who’s a millennial believes that anymore.

Douthat: I think there are some people, though, who believe in a different kind of immortality right now. I think part of the fascination with A.I. is connected to a specific vision of transcending limits. And I’m going to ask you about that after I ask you about politics. One of the striking things I thought about your original argument on stagnation, which was mostly about technology and the economy, was that it could be applied to a pretty wide range of things. And at the time you were writing that essay, you were interested in seasteading — ideas of essentially building new polities, independent of the sclerotic Western world — but then you made a pivot in the 2010s.

You were one of the few prominent — maybe the only prominent Silicon Valley supporter of Donald Trump in 2016. You supported a few carefully selected Republican Senate candidates. One of them is now the vice president of the United States. And my view as an observer of what you were doing, having read your arguments about decadence, was that you were basically being a kind of venture capitalist for politics. You were saying: Here are some disruptive agents who might change the political status quo, and it’s worth a certain kind of risk here. Is that how you thought about it?

Thiel: Sure, there were all sorts of levels. One level was these hopes that we could redirect the Titanic from the iceberg it was heading to, or whatever the metaphor is, to really change course as a society.

Douthat: Through political change.

Thiel: Maybe a much narrower aspiration was that we could maybe at least have a conversation about this. So when someone like Trump said “Make America Great Again” — OK, is that a positive, optimistic, ambitious agenda? Or is it merely a very pessimistic assessment of where we are, that we are no longer a great country?

I didn't have great expectations about what Trump would do in a positive way, but I thought at least, for the first time in 100 years, we had a Republican who was not giving us this syrupy Bush nonsense. It was not the same as progress, but we could at least have a conversation. In retrospect, this was a preposterous fantasy.

I had these two thoughts in 2016 — and you often have these ideas that are just below the level of your consciousness — but the two thoughts I had that I wasn't able to combine was, No. 1, nobody would be mad at me for supporting Trump if he lost. And No. 2, I thought he had a 50-50 chance of winning. And I had this implicit —

Douthat: Why would nobody be mad at you if he lost?

Thiel: It would just be such a weird thing, and it wouldn't really matter. But I thought he had a 50-50 chance, because the problems were deep and the stagnation was frustrating. And the reality was people weren't ready for it.

Maybe we've progressed to the point where we can have this conversation in 2025, a decade after Trump. And of course, you're not a zombie left-wing person, Ross —

Douthat: I've been called many things, Peter.

Thiel: But I'll take whatever progress I can get.

Douthat: So from your perspective, let's say there's two layers. There's a basic sense of: This society needs disruption, it needs risk; Trump is disruption, Trump is risk. And the second level is: Trump is actually willing to say things that are true about American decline.

Do you feel like you, as an investor, as a venture capitalist, got anything out of the first Trump term?

Thiel: Um.

Douthat: What did Trump do in his first term that you felt was anti-decadent or anti-stagnation? If anything — maybe the answer's nothing.

Thiel: I think it took longer and it was slower than I would've liked, but we have gotten to the place where a lot of people think something's gone wrong. And that was not the conversation I was having in 2012 to 2014. I had a debate with Eric Schmidt in 2012 and Marc Andreessen in 2013 and Bezos in 2014.

I was on "There's a stagnation problem," and all three of them were versions of "Everything's going great." And I think at least those three people have, to varying degrees, updated and adjusted. Silicon Valley's adjusted.

Douthat: And Silicon Valley, though, has more than adjusted —

Thiel: On the stagnation question.

Douthat: Right. But a big part of Silicon Valley ended up going in for Trump in 2024 — including, obviously, most famously, Elon Musk.

Thiel: Yeah. And this is deeply linked to the stagnation issue, in my telling. These things are always super complicated, but my telling is — and again, I'm so hesitant to speak for all these people — but someone like Mark Zuckerberg, or Facebook, Meta, in some ways I don't think he was very ideological. He didn't think this stuff through that much. The default was to be liberal, and it was always: If the liberalism isn't working, what do you do? And for year after year after year, it was:

You do more. If something doesn't work, you just need to do more of it. You up the dose and you up the dose and you spend hundreds of millions of dollars and you go completely woke and everybody hates you.

And at some point, it's like: OK, maybe this isn't working.

Douthat: So they pivot.

Thiel: And it's not a pro-Trump thing.

Douthat: It's not a pro-Trump thing, but it is, both in public and private conversations, a sense that Trumpism and populism in 2024 — maybe not in 2016, when Peter was out there as the lone supporter, but now, in 2024 — they can be a vehicle for technological innovation, economic dynamism and so on.

Thiel: You're framing it really, really optimistically here.

Douthat: I know you're pessimistic. But people —

Thiel: When you frame this optimistically, you're saying these people are going to be disappointed and they're just set up for failure and things like this.

Douthat: I mean, people expressed a lot of optimism, that's all I'm saying. Elon Musk expressed some apocalyptic anxieties about how budget deficits were going to kill us all, but he came into government and people around him came into government basically saying: We have a partnership with the Trump administration and we're pursuing technological greatness. I think they were optimistic.

You're coming from a place of greater pessimism, or realism. What I'm asking for is your assessment of where we are — not *their* assessment. Does populism in Trump 2.0 look like a vehicle for technological dynamism to you?

Thiel: It's still by far the best option we have. Is Harvard going to cure dementia by just puttering along, doing the same thing that hasn't worked for 50 years?

Douthat: That's just a case for: It can't get worse; let's do disruption. But the critique of populism right now would be: Silicon Valley made an alliance with the populists, but in the end, the populists don't care about science. They don't want to spend money on science. They want to kill funding to Harvard just because they don't like Harvard. And in the end, you're not going to get the kind of investments in the future that Silicon Valley wanted. Is that wrong?

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Thiel: Yeah. But we have to go back to this question of: How well is the science working in the background? This is where the New Dealers — whatever was wrong with them, they pushed science hard, and you funded it and you gave money to people and you scaled it. Whereas today, if there was an equivalent of Einstein and he wrote a letter to the White House, it would get lost in the mail room. And the Manhattan Project is unthinkable.

If we call something a moonshot — that's the way Biden talked about, let's say, cancer research — a moonshot in the '60s still meant that you went to the moon. A moonshot now means something completely fictional that's never going to happen: Oh, you need a moonshot for that. It's not like we need an Apollo program. It means it's never, ever going to happen.

Douthat: But it seems like you're then still in the mode of — for you, as opposed to maybe for some other people in Silicon Valley — the value of populism is in tearing away the veils and illusions. And we're not necessarily in the stage where you're looking to the Trump administration to do the Manhattan Project, to do the moonshot. It's more like, populism helps us see that it was all fake.

Thiel: You need to try to do both. They're very entangled with each other.

There's a deregulation of nuclear power, and at some point we'll get back to building new nuclear power plants or better-designed ones, or maybe even fusion reactors. So, yes, there's a deregulatory, deconstructive part. And then at some

point you actually get to construction, and it's all things like that. In some ways you're clearing the field, and then maybe ——

Douthat: But you've personally stopped funding politicians?

Thiel: I am schizophrenic on this stuff. I think it's incredibly important, and it's incredibly toxic. So I go back and forth on what one should ——

Douthat: Incredibly toxic for you personally?

Thiel: For everybody who gets involved. It's zero sum. It's crazy. And then in some ways ——

Douthat: Because everyone hates you and associates you with Trump. How is it toxic for you personally?

Thiel: It's toxic because it's in a zero-sum world. The stakes in it feel really, really high.

Douthat: And you end up having enemies you didn't have before?

Thiel: It's toxic for all the people who get involved in different ways. There is a political dimension of getting "Back to the Future." You can't — this is a conversation I had with Elon back in 2024, and we had all these conversations. I had the seasteading version with Elon where I said: If Trump doesn't win, I want to just leave the country. And then Elon said: There's nowhere to go. There's nowhere to go.

And then you always think of the right arguments to make later. It was about two hours after we had dinner and I was home that I thought of: Wow, Elon, you don't believe in going to Mars anymore. 2024 is the year where Elon stopped believing in Mars — not as a silly science tech project, but as a political project. Mars was supposed to be a political project; it was building an alternative. And in 2024 Elon came to believe that if you went to Mars, the socialist U.S. government, the woke A.I. would follow you to Mars.

It was a meeting with Elon and the C.E.O. of DeepMind, Demis Hassabis, that we brokered.

Douthat: This is an A.I. company.

Thiel: Yeah. And the rough conversation was Demis telling Elon: I'm working on the most important project in the world. I'm building a superhuman A.I.

And Elon responds to Demis: Well, I'm working on the most important project in the world. I am turning us into interplanetary species. And then Demis said: Well, you know my A.I. will be able to follow you to Mars. And then Elon went quiet. But in my telling of the history, it took years for that to really hit Elon. It took him until 2024 to process it.

Douthat: But that doesn't mean he doesn't believe in Mars. It just means that he decided he had to win some battle over budget deficits or wokeness to get to Mars.

Thiel: Yeah, but what does Mars mean?

Douthat: What *does* Mars mean?

Thiel: Well, is it just a scientific project? Or is it like a Heinlein, the moon as a libertarian paradise or something like this?

Douthat: A vision of a new society. Populated by many, many people descended from Elon Musk.

Thiel: Well, I don't know if it was concretized that specifically, but if you concretize things, then maybe you realize that Mars is supposed to be more than a science project. It's supposed to be a political project. And then when you concretize it, you have to start thinking through: Well, the woke A.I. will follow you, the socialist government will follow you. And then maybe you have to do something other than just going to Mars.

Douthat: So the woke A.I., artificial intelligence, seems like, one, if we're still stagnant, it's the biggest exception to the place where there's been remarkable progress — surprising, to many people, progress.

It's also the place — we were just talking about politics — where the Trump administration is, I think, to a large degree, giving A.I. investors a lot of what they wanted in terms of both stepping back and doing public-private partnerships. So it's a zone of progress and governmental engagement.

And you are an investor in A.I. What do you think you're investing in?

Thiel: Well, I don't know. There's a lot of layers to this. One question we can frame is: Just how big a thing do I think A.I. is? And my stupid answer is: It's more than a nothing burger, and it's less than the total transformation of our society. My place holder is that it's roughly on the scale of the internet in the late '90s. I'm not sure it's enough to really end the stagnation. It might be enough to create some great companies. And the internet added maybe a few percentage points to the G.D.P., maybe 1 percent to G.D.P. growth every year for 10, 15 years. It added some to productivity. So that's roughly my place holder for A.I.

It's the only thing we have. It's a little bit unhealthy that it's so unbalanced. This is the only thing we have. I'd like to have more multidimensional progress. I'd like us to be going to Mars. I'd like us to be having cures for dementia. If all we have is A.I., I will take it. There are risks with it. Obviously, there are dangers with this technology. But there are also —

Douthat: So you are a skeptic of what you might call the superintelligence cascade theory, which basically says that if A.I. succeeds, it gets so smart that it gives us the progress in the world of atoms, that it's like: All right, we can't cure dementia. We can't figure out how to build the perfect factory that builds the rockets that go to Mars. But the A.I. can.

And at a certain point, you pass a certain threshold and it gives us not just more digital progress but 64 other forms of progress. It sounds like you don't believe that, or you think that's less likely.

Thiel: Yeah, I somehow don't know if that's been really the gating factor.

Douthat: What does that mean? The gating factor.

Thiel: It's probably a Silicon Valley ideology. Maybe in a weird way it's more of a liberal than a conservative thing, but people are really fixated on I.Q. in Silicon Valley, and that it's all about smart people. And if you have more smart people, they'll do great things.

And then the economics anti-I.Q. argument is that people actually do worse. The smarter they are, the worse they do. It's just that they don't know how to apply it or our society doesn't know what to do with them, and they don't fit in. And so that suggests that the gating factor isn't I.Q., but something that's deeply wrong with our society.

Douthat: But is that a limit on intelligence or a problem of the sort of personality types that human superintelligence creates?

I'm not very sympathetic to the idea — and I made this case when I did an episode of this podcast with an A.I. accelerationist — that certain problems can just be solved if you ramp up intelligence. We ramp up intelligence and boom, Alzheimer's is solved. We ramp up intelligence and the A.I. can figure out the automation process that builds you a billion robots overnight. I'm an intelligence skeptic in the sense that I think you probably have limits.

Thiel: Yeah, it's hard to prove. It is always hard to prove these things.

Douthat: Until we have the superintelligence.

Thiel: But I share your intuition because I think we've had a lot of smart people and things have been stuck for other reasons. And so maybe the problems are unsolvable, which is the pessimistic view. Maybe there is no cure for dementia at all, and it's a deeply unsolvable problem. There's no cure for mortality. Maybe it's an unsolvable problem.

Or maybe it's these cultural things. So it's not the individually smart person, but it's how this fits into our society. Do we tolerate heterodox smart people? Maybe you need heterodox smart people to do crazy experiments. And if the A.I. is just

conventionally smart, if we define wokeness — again, wokeness is too ideological — but if you just define it as conformist, maybe that's not the smartness that's going to make a difference.

Douthat: So do you fear a plausible future where A.I., in a way, becomes itself stagnationist? That it's highly intelligent, creative in a conformist way. That it's like the Netflix algorithm: It makes infinite OK movies that people watch. It generates infinite OK ideas. It puts a bunch of people out of work and makes them obsolete. But it deepens stagnation in some way. Is that a fear?

Thiel: It — *[sigh]*. It's quite possible. That's certainly a risk. But I guess where I end up is: I still think we should be trying A.I., and the alternative is just total stagnation.

So, yeah, there's all sorts of interesting things that can happen. Maybe drones in a military context are combined with A.I., and OK, this is scary or dangerous or dystopian, or it's going to change things. But if you don't have A.I., wow, there's just nothing going on.

There's like a version of this discussion on the internet: Did the internet lead to more conformity and more wokeness? And there are all sorts of ways where it didn't lead to quite the cornucopian, diverse explosion of ideas that libertarians fantasized about in 1999. But counterfactually, I would argue that it was still better than the alternative, that if we hadn't had the internet, maybe it would've been worse. A.I. is better, it's better than the alternative, and the alternative is nothing at all.

Look, here's one place where the stagnationist arguments are still reinforced. The fact that we're only talking about A.I. — I feel that is always an implicit acknowledgment that but for A.I., we are in almost total stagnation.

Douthat: But the world of A.I. is clearly filled with people who, at the very least, seem to have a more utopian, transformative — whatever word you want to call it — view of the technology than you're expressing here. And you mentioned earlier the idea that the modern world used to promise radical life extension and doesn't

anymore. It seems very clear to me that a number of people deeply involved in artificial intelligence see it as a mechanism for transhumanism — for transcendence of our mortal flesh — and either some kind of creation of a successor species or some kind of merger of mind and machine.

Do you think that's all irrelevant fantasy? Or do you think it's just hype? Do you think people are raising money by pretending that we're going to build a machine god? Is it hype? Is it delusion? Is it something you worry about?

Thiel: Um, yeah.

Douthat: I think you would prefer the human race to endure, right?

Thiel: Uh —

Douthat: You're hesitating.

Thiel: Well, I don't know. I would — I would —

Douthat: This is a long hesitation!

Thiel: There's so many questions implicit in this.

Douthat: Should the human race survive?

Thiel: Yes.

Douthat: OK.

Thiel: But I also would like us to radically solve these problems. And so it's always, I don't know, yeah — **transhumanism**. The ideal was this radical transformation where your human, natural body gets transformed into an immortal body. And there's a critique of, let's say, the trans people in a sexual context, or, I don't know, a transvestite is someone who changes their clothes and cross-dresses, and a transsexual is someone where you change your, I don't know, penis into a vagina. And we can then debate how well those surgeries work. **But we want more transformation than that. The critique is not that it's weird and unnatural, it's:**

Man, it's so pathetically little. And OK, we want more than cross-dressing or changing your sex organs. We want you to be able to change your heart and change your mind and change your whole body.

And then Orthodox Christianity, by the way — the critique Orthodox Christianity has of this, is these things don't go far enough. That transhumanism is just changing your body, but you also need to transform your soul and you need to transform your whole self. And so ——

Douthat: Wait, wait. I generally agree with what I think is your belief, that religion should be a friend to science and ideas of scientific progress. I think any idea of divine providence has to encompass the fact that we have progressed and achieved and done things that would've been unimaginable to our ancestors.

But it still also seems like the promise of Christianity in the end is you get the perfected body and the perfected soul through God's grace. And the person who tries to do it on their own with a bunch of machines is likely to end up as a dystopian character.

Thiel: Well, it's — let's articulate this.

Douthat: And you can have a heretical form of Christianity that says something else.

Thiel: Yeah, I don't know. I think the word “nature” does not occur once in the Old Testament. And so there is a word in which, a sense in which, the way I understand the Judeo-Christian inspiration is it is about transcending nature. It is about overcoming things. And the closest thing you can say to nature is that people are fallen. That's the natural thing in a Christian sense, that you're messed up. And that's true. But there's some ways that, with God's help, you are supposed to transcend that and overcome that.

Douthat: Right. But most of the people — present company excepted — working to build the hypothetical machine god don't think that they're cooperating with Yahweh, Jehovah, the Lord of Hosts.

Thiel: Sure, sure. But ——

Douthat: They think that they're building immortality on their own, right?

Thiel: We're jumping around a lot of things. So, again, the critique I was saying is: They're not ambitious enough. From a Christian point of view, these people are not ambitious enough. Then we get into this question: Well, are they ——

Douthat: But they're not morally and spiritually ambitious enough.

Thiel: And then are they still physically ambitious enough? And are they even still really transhumanists? And this is where, OK, man, the cryonics thing that seems like a retro thing from 1999 — there isn't that much of that going on. So they're not transhumanists on a physical body. And then, OK, well, maybe it's not about cryonics, maybe it's about uploading. Which, OK, well, it's not quite — I'd rather have my body. I don't want just a computer program that simulates me.

Douthat: Yes, I agree.

Thiel: So that uploading seemed like a step down from cryonics. But then even that's part of the conversation, and this is where it gets very hard to score. And I don't want to say they're all making it up and it's all fake, but I don't ——

Douthat: Do you think some of it's fake?

Thiel: I don't think it's — fake implies people are lying, but I want to say it's not the center of gravity.

Douthat: Yeah.

Thiel: So there is a cornucopian language, there's an optimistic language.

I had a conversation with Elon a few weeks ago about this. He said we're going to have a billion humanoid robots in the U.S. in 10 years. And I said: Well, if that's true, you don't need to worry about the budget deficits because we're going to have so much growth, the growth will take care of this. And then — well, he's still worried about the budget deficits. This doesn't prove that he doesn't believe in the billion robots, but it suggests that maybe he hasn't thought it through or that he

doesn't think it's going to be as transformative economically, or that there are big error bars around it. But yeah, there's some way in which these things are not quite thought through.

If I had to give a critique of Silicon Valley, it's always bad at what the meaning of tech is. The conversations tend to go into this microscopic thing, like: What are the I.Q.-E.L.O. scores of the A.I.? And exactly how do you define A.G.I.? We get into all these endless technical debates, and there are a lot of questions that are at an intermediate level of meaning that seem to me to be very important, like: What does it mean for the budget deficit? What does it mean for the economy? What does it mean for geopolitics?

One of the conversations I recently had with you was: Does it change the calculus for China invading Taiwan? Where, if we have an accelerating A.I. revolution, the military — is China falling behind? And maybe on the optimistic side, it deters China because they've effectively lost. And on the pessimistic side, it accelerates them because they know it's now or never — if they don't grab Taiwan now, they will fall behind.

Either way — this is a pretty important thing — it's not thought through. We don't think about what A.I. means for geopolitics. We don't think about what it means for the macro economy. Those are the kinds of questions I'd want us to push more.

Douthat: There's also a macroscopic question that you're interested in. We'll pull on the religion thread a little bit here. You have been giving talks recently about the concept of the Antichrist, which is a Christian concept, an apocalyptic concept. What does that mean to you? What is the Antichrist?

Thiel: How much time do we have?

Douthat: We've got as much time as you have to talk about the Antichrist.

Thiel: All right. Well, I could talk about it for a long time. I think there's always a question of how we articulate some of these existential risks, some of the challenges we have, and they're all framed in this sort of runaway dystopian science text. There's a risk of nuclear war, there's a risk of environmental disaster.

Maybe something specific, like climate change, although there are lots of other ones we've come up with. There's a risk of bioweapons. You have all the different sci-fi scenarios. Obviously, there are certain types of risks with A.I.

But I always think that if we're going to have this frame of talking about existential risks, perhaps we should also talk about the risk of another type of a bad singularity, which I would describe as the **one-world totalitarian state**. Because I would say the default political solution people have for all these existential risks is **one-world governance**. What do you do about nuclear weapons? We have a United Nations with real teeth that controls them, and they're controlled by an international political order. And then something like this is also: What do we do about A.I.? And we need **global compute governance**. **We need a one-world government to control all the computers, log every single keystroke, to make sure people don't program a dangerous A.I.** And I've been wondering whether that's going from the frying pan into the fire.

The atheist philosophical framing is "One World or None." That was a short film that was put out by the Federation of American Scientists in the late '40s. It starts with the nuclear bomb blowing up the world, and obviously, you need a one-world government to stop it — one world or none. **And the Christian framing, which in some ways is the same question, is: Antichrist or Armageddon?** You have the one-world state of the Antichrist, or we're sleepwalking toward Armageddon. "One world or none," "Antichrist or Armageddon," on one level, are the same question.

Now, I have a lot of thoughts on this topic, but one question is — and this was a plot hole in all these Antichrist books people wrote — how does the Antichrist take over the world? He gives these demonic, hypnotic speeches and people just fall for it. It's this demonium, Ex-Machina —

Douthat: It's totally — it's implausible.

Thiel: It's a very implausible plot hole. But I think we have an answer to this plot hole. The way the Antichrist would take over the world is you talk about Armageddon nonstop. You talk about existential risk nonstop, and this is what you

need to regulate. It's the opposite of the picture of Baconian science from the 17th, 18th century, where the Antichrist is like some evil tech genius, evil scientist who invents this machine to take over the world. People are way too scared for that.

In our world, the thing that has political resonance is the opposite. The thing that has political resonance is: We need to stop science, we need to just say "stop" to this. And this is where, in the 17th century, I can imagine a Dr. Strangelove, Edward Teller-type person taking over the world. In our world, it's far more likely to be Greta Thunberg.

Douthat: I want to suggest a middle ground between those two options. It used to be that the reasonable fear of the Antichrist was a kind of wizard of technology. And now the reasonable fear is someone who promises to control technology, make it safe and usher in what, from your point of view, would be a universal stagnation, right?

Thiel: Well, that's more my description of how it would happen.

Douthat: Right.

Thiel: I think people still have a fear of a 17th-century Antichrist. We're still scared of Dr. Strangelove.

Douthat: Yes, but you're saying the real Antichrist would play on that fear and say: You must come with me to avoid Skynet, to avoid the Terminator, to avoid nuclear Armageddon.

Thiel: Yes.

Douthat: I guess my view would be, looking at the world right now, that you would need a certain kind of novel technological progress to make that fear concrete.

So I can buy that the world could turn to someone who promised peace and regulation if the world became convinced that A.I. was about to destroy everybody. But I think to get to that point, you need one of the accelerationist apocalyptic scenarios to start to play out. To get your peace and safety Antichrist, you need more technological progress.

Like, one of the key failures of totalitarianism in the 20th century was it had a problem of knowledge — it couldn't know what was going on all over the world. So you need the A.I. or whatever else to be capable of helping the peace and safety totalitarian rule. So don't you think you essentially need your worst-case scenario to involve some burst of progress that is then tamed and used to impose stagnant totalitarianism? You can't just get there from where we are right now.

Thiel: Well, it can ——

Douthat: Like, Greta Thunberg is on a boat in the Mediterranean, protesting Israel. I just don't see the promise of safety from A.I., safety from tech, even safety from climate change right now as a powerful universal rallying cry, absent accelerating change and real fear of total catastrophe.

Thiel: Man, these things are so hard to score, but I think environmentalism is pretty powerful. I don't know if it's absolutely powerful enough to create a one-world totalitarian state, but man, it is ——

Douthat: I think it is not — in its current form.

Thiel: I want to say it's the only thing people still believe in in Europe. They believe in the green thing more than Islamic Shariah law or more than in the Chinese Communist totalitarian takeover. The future is an idea of a future that looks different from the present. The only three on offer in Europe are green, Shariah and the totalitarian communist state. And the green one is by far the strongest.

Douthat: In a declining, decaying Europe that is not a dominant player in the world.

Thiel: Sure. It's always in a context.

We had this really complicated history with the way nuclear technology worked, and — OK, we didn't really get to a totalitarian, one-world state. But by the 1970s, one account of the stagnation is that the runaway progress of technology had gotten very scary, and that Baconian science ended at Los Alamos.

And then it was: OK, it ended there, and we didn't want to have any more. And when Charles Manson took LSD in the late '60s and the murders started, what he saw on LSD, what he learned was that you could be like an antihero in a Dostoyevsky book and everything was permitted.

Of course, not everyone became Charles Manson. But in my telling of the history, everyone became as deranged as Charles Manson and the hippies took over —

Douthat: But Charles Manson did not become the Antichrist and take over the world. We're ending in the apocalyptic, and you're —

Thiel: But my telling of the history of the 1970s is the hippies did win. We landed on the moon in July of 1969, Woodstock started three weeks later and, with the benefit of hindsight, that's when progress stopped and the hippies won. And yeah, it was not literally Charles Manson —

Douthat: OK. I want to stay with the Antichrist, just to end. And you're retreating. You're saying: OK, environmentalism is already pro-stagnation, and so on. OK, let's agree with all that.

Thiel: No, I'm just saying things are powerful.

Douthat: But we're not living under the Antichrist right now. We're just stagnant. And you're positing that something worse could be on the horizon that would make stagnation permanent, that would be driven by fear. And I'm suggesting that for that to happen, there would have to be some burst of technological progress that was akin to Los Alamos, that people are afraid of.

And my very specific question for you: You're an investor in A.I. You're deeply invested in Palantir, in military technology, in technologies of surveillance and technologies of warfare and so on. And it just seems to me that when you tell me a story about the Antichrist coming to power and using the fear of technological change to impose order on the world, I feel like that Antichrist would maybe be using the tools that you are building. Like, wouldn't the Antichrist be like: Great, we're not going to have any more technological progress, but I really like what

Palantir has done so far. Isn't that a concern? Wouldn't that be the irony of history, that the man publicly worrying about the Antichrist accidentally hastens his or her arrival?

Thiel: Look, there are all these different scenarios. I obviously don't think that that's what I'm doing.

Douthat: I mean, to be clear, I don't think that's what you're doing either. I'm just interested in how you get to a world willing to submit to permanent authoritarian rule.

Thiel: Well, there are these different gradations of this we can describe. But is what I've just told you so preposterous, as a broad account of the stagnation, that the entire world has submitted for 50 years to peace and safetyism? This is I Thessalonians 5:3 — the slogan of the Antichrist is “peace and safety.”

And we've submitted to the F.D.A. — it regulates not just drugs in the U.S. but de facto in the whole world, because the rest of the world defers to the F.D.A. The Nuclear Regulatory Commission effectively regulates nuclear power plants all over the world. You can't design a modular nuclear reactor and just build it in Argentina. They won't trust the Argentinian regulators. They're going to defer to the U.S.

And so it is at least a question about why we've had 50 years of stagnation. And one answer is we ran out of ideas. The other answer is that something happened culturally where it wasn't allowed. And the cultural answer can be sort of a bottom-up answer, that it was just some transformation of humanity into this more docile kind of a species. Or it can be at least partially top-down, that there is this machinery of government that got changed into this stagnationist thing.

Nuclear power was supposed to be the power of the 21st century. And it somehow has gotten off-ramped all over the world, on a worldwide basis.

Douthat: So in a sense, we're already living under a moderate rule of the Antichrist, in that telling. Do you think God is in control of history?

Thiel: [pause] Man, this is again — I think there's always room for human freedom and human choice. These things are not absolutely predetermined one way or another.

Douthat: But God wouldn't leave us forever under the rule of a mild, moderate, stagnationist Antichrist, right? That can't be how the story ends, right?

Thiel: Attributing too much causation to God is always a problem. There are different Bible verses I can give you, but I'll give you John 15:25, where Christ says, "They hated me without cause." So all these people that are persecuting Christ have no reason, no cause for why they're persecuting Christ. And if we interpret this as an ultimate causation verse, they want to say: I'm persecuting because God caused me to do this. God is causing everything.

And the Christian view is anti-Calvinist. God is not behind history. God is not causing everything. If you say God's causing everything —

Douthat: But wait, but God is —

Thiel: You're scapegoating God.

Douthat: But God is behind Jesus Christ entering history, because God was not going to leave us in a stagnationist, decadent Roman Empire, right? So at some point, God is going to step in.

Thiel: I am not that Calvinist. And —

Douthat: That's not Calvinism, though. That's just Christianity. God will not leave us eternally staring into screens and being lectured by Greta Thunberg. He will not abandon us to that fate.

Thiel: For better and for worse, I think there's a great deal of scope for human action, for human freedom. If I thought these things were deterministic, you might as well just accept it — the lions are coming. You should just have some yoga and prayerful meditation and wait while the lions eat you up. And I don't think that's what you're supposed to do.

Douthat: I agree with that. And I think, on that note, I'm just trying to be hopeful and suggesting that in trying to resist the Antichrist, using your human freedom, you should have hope that you'll succeed, right?

Thiel: We can agree on that.

Douthat: Good. Peter Thiel, thank you for joining me.

Thiel: Thank you.



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