Parnassus House
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Great Founders — Peter Thiel and Lee Kuan Yew

Lee Kuan Yew (1923–2015) was a Singaporean statesman. He first led the city-state to sovereignty from the British Empire, and then led Singapore to complete independence in 1965. He was elected Singapore's first prime minister, and served in that role until 1990.

1. Lee was indomitable, never backing down from a challenge. Part of what made him so successful was his willingness to start all over, if necessary. He forces many opponents to fold in the face of his strength and will.

2. Lee was also willing to bend the rules, as evidenced by his tactics in Operation Coldstore. In Machiavellian fashion, he understood that a great founder cannot merely *follow* rules when the regime, itself, is on the line.

3. However, one senses that Lee did not have a clear understanding of the causes of his own success. He seems to have thought of himself, first and foremost, as a capable technocrat. As evidenced by his eagerness to spread the "Singapore model" to China, he seems to have overestimated his *general* recipe for success, and underestimated his own *prudence* — i.e. his ability to seek the *particular* good available to Singapore.

Peter Thiel (1967–present) is a German-American entrepreneur and venture capital investor. He rose to prominence for his success founding PayPal. Subsequently, he founded Clarium Capital, and has played key roles in funding Facebook, Palantir, and more. His book, *Zero to One*, exposits his view of start up success — but also embeds Thiel's personal belief in the importance of pursuing *singular* goods, over and against engaging in mimicry and "group think."

1. Thiel is heavily influenced by his Stanford professor, Rene Girard. Girard's work focuses on the risks of *mimetic desire*. Humans are predisposed to mimicry. We tend to *compete* with each other, even when it makes no sense to do so. Thus, we fall into dangerous traps, like forming bitter rivalries and using scapegoats to resolve conflicts.

2. For Thiel, there are three levels at which we benefit from combatting mimesis. First, *business* benefits from seeking *monopoly* over and against the trap of *competition*. Monopolies produce healthy profits and innovation, whereas competition eliminates profits, produces knockoffs, and wastes human potential.

3. Second, individuals benefit *psychologically* from resisting mimetic desire. People who compete for prestigious degrees, positions, etc. risk wasting their own unique *particular* talents chasing *general* goods — i.e. those that are widely desired, but are often overrated, and are unlikely to actualize any individual person's *unique value*.

4. Lastly, Thiel sees *theological* reasons for opposing mimesis. The great Christian insight for Thiel (and Girard) is the elevation of the individual against the crowd. He is concerned that focusing on benefitting *humanity in general* sacrifices benefitting any *particular individual*. The former leads to totalitarian, technocratic social engineering. It is the way of the "Antichrist." The antidote is to always *love the individual* as Christianity teaches.