

Konrad Wyszowski  
University of Warsaw (Poland)

## Significance of the Social Vision of Great People in Times of Political Transition

**Abstract:** The author offers a new approach to a phenomenon of social legends of great individuals from a philosophical point of view. He starts with a presentation of his interpretation of the concept of the Platonic tradition of a divine man and a cult or hagiography of such men in the ideal Platonic state, alongside with an explanation, inspired by Platonic authors. He collates this concept and its justification (rationalization) with today's social and political reception of axiology, in order to present it as an epiphany of higher values. He collates it also with the results of philosophical reflection on a ductility of history, in order to show it as a prototype of something real in its historical efficiency. The author ends with summary and explanation of his proposal.

**Keywords:** *political philosophy; philosophy of history; nihilism; Neoplatonism; Platonism; moral education; modern reception of axiology*

The aim of this paper is to look at an old concept from a new perspective and show how it can be used in a new, unprecedented way. The old concept consists in a creation of a national and social mythology of great individuals for educational, 'paideutical' reasons. The new use does not aim at an establishment of a new social order, but has a minimalistic ambition, to create some – so to say – basic paradigm for the society in times of change and transition. Unquestionably constructing such a structure of reference is a significant subject, creating a vital challenge in any times of history. But especially today, when – as Alexis de Tocqueville (1840/2002, pp. 403–416) stated – all authorities have fallen (with an exemption for an authority of a public opinion), legitimacy of such a project would be far more important than in other times. This

paper proposes at the same time to keep in mind the fact of social reception of history through the figures of great individuals, not only the scientifically researched biographies of the selected ones.

The old idea, to which we refer in this paper, had originated and developed as a concept in the Platonic tradition. Speaking about this tradition we have in mind almost the whole track of Platonic philosophy – from Plato himself, through older thinkers of his school, to the ancient Neoplatonics. It had been developed in arts and still has a vital significance. But it is not our concern to turn a new light on the history of philosophy, but to use instrumentally its part for our interpretation. For this particular aim we will use not only the works of the Platonics alone but also regulative and inspiring books (O'Meara, 2005; Dzielska & Twardowska, 2013). The problem raised in this paper itself is something, as we assume, innovative and original as far as the proposed solution is concerned. That is why, we do not refer to other works.

We will start from a summary of the old idea, constructed already in the Platonic tradition. (To use the word “idea” in such a meaning is from the Platonic point of view a big mistake, but we do not try to use the Platonic paradigm in this work.) To begin, we will explicitly express this idea. As some old philosophers have said, some humans, especially philosophers-kings, have souls so high and great that they are truly divine. This idea got its full power in the ancient Neoplatonic concept of the “theurgy”, which is a science and skill of evoking divine powers and gods for human aims, especially for self exaltation and unification with the One, the principle of the universe (O'Meara, 2005, pp. 128–131). Humans, who had powers of such divinization, were called in ancient Neoplatonism the “divine men” (Dzielska & Twardowska, 2013). This divinity, which was expressed in making wonders, in their ability to mystical contemplations and in value of their teachings, was not something given by nature; it was earned in an internal battle of the great human with himself. This concept has its origin in the Platonic “Theaetetus”, where Plato writes that becoming better implies becoming more similar to Divinity, which means – in the Platonic context – that becoming wiser implies becoming more divine (Plato, 2006b, 176a-b, pp. 126–129). The fundamental way of achieving this goal, of a victory in this battle, is apprehending the divine knowledge, which is partially esoteric, and partially philosophical. One of the components of the knowledge comprises political competences. The competences have two complementing dimensions. One rests in the value of political science for a philosopher, who tries to become divine (in the Platonic sense of this word, which is, e.g., presented in “Symposium”, philosopher is a person, who is in love with the wisdom, which is the divine world of ideas; that is why below we will use this word in this sense (Plato, 2006d, 202d-204c, pp. 176–183). It is an essential part of the wisdom, because it contains theoretical knowledge about human nature. Of course

this is not clear for a contemporary reader why this knowledge contains in itself the whole political science. Surely this is a very important part of it, but not the only one. But, as Plato wrote in the “Republic”, the nature of an individual man is only the micro-scaled nature of a state (Plato, 2006c, 368c-369b, vol. 1, pp. 146–149). That is why he could deduce who is the just man from what is the just state. On the other hand it makes the philosopher valuable for politics, because of his knowledge of political science and political abilities. As we have stated, philosophical knowledge of ourselves implies the knowledge of our political organization. This knowledge consists not only of a theory, but also practical knowledge, which means – in the Aristotelic sense – the knowledge how to act properly (which contains ethics). But also the philosopher – by exercising his soul and body – acquires the virtues, which turn him into a good citizen, and also a good ruler. That is why the first, most basic virtues are called the “political virtues” in Neoplatonism (O’Meara, 2005, pp. 8–10). Of course it is not a simple identity encoded in today meaning of the adjective “political”, but it has a broader, social sense. Nevertheless it contains virtues of political activity.

Since we have explained the main idea in its essence, we shall go further in the Platonics’ systems. We stated that Platonic tradition, and especially ancient Neoplatonism, has singled out some men as “divine”, because of their abilities – also political. Now, it is time to directly present the object of our interest i.e. the political mythology of great individuals. As Plato wrote in the “Laws”, a man is a doll in the theatre of gods (Plato, 2006a, 644d-645c, vol. 1, pp. 68–71). On one side he is pulled by strong and many ropes of lusts and urges, and on the other side he is pulled very weakly by a thick, golden thread of moral and political laws. The function of state is to present him with proper education and proper social conditions to shape him in the best possible way. One of the instruments used by the ideal state (or near ideal, as in the “Laws”) is the education by examples. As Plato has strongly stressed – especially in the “Republic” – all – the art, the learning of history – should be based on positive, virtuous examples, because man is sensitive to all, what he experiences, and naturally has wrong appetites (Plato, 2006c, 376e-383c, vol. 1, pp. 174–199). That is why art, history and state religion should concentrate on the examples of wise, virtuous, divine men and women, who would personify the eternal ideas in a human form representing the ideals of a mankind. This project is especially emphasized in the part of the “Republic” dealing with the public cult (Plato, 2006c, 469a-b, vol. 1, pp. 490–493). Plato deduces from the ideal model of the state, a need to develop a cult of dead philosopher-kings of the state, as these citizens, who were the most divine in the society: who managed to exalt an immense part of their souls. Embodiment and realization of the ideal in the world is a sanctity. It has educative values because of appealing to the senses.

An appeal to the senses constitutes an essential part of this education, which differentiates it from pure knowledge, which could be learned from ideas and Platonic dialectic. The cause of this is the background of human nature where all basic feelings, notions and needs of a human being based on senses. The pure abstraction as a skill is a rare feature and its necessary condition is a culture of the Mind, conceived as *Bildung* (Jaeger, 1935/1946, pp. v, xvi-xxix), not to mention a reasonable, speculative extraction, grasping the spiritual life in its concreteness (Gentile, 1920/1922, pp. 10–17 etc.). That is why – so to say – effective majority of the population – than and today – has no ability to enter into the world of ideas, in the Platonic sense of this word. Maybe that statement sounds too self-confident, but, if it is true that it sounds like that, it is only a superficial impression. All philosophical and synthetic observations about such a general and wide topic, as the state of the humanity, must be made intuitively in an attempt to sense the mood, ambience and temper of the epoch. Although in historical studies it is not a reliable method (however, it is sometimes the only method), but in studies concerning actual, today state of things, we think that this method is the best. We could express this judgment in a more scientific manner and with necessary proofs; but it is not a place for such a demonstration. We refer, however, to this fact in order to prevent suspicions that we do not see the profoundness of the topic. Effective majority of human population – being sensual in its main epistemic abilities – is keen on knowledge and studies appealing to the senses. That is why the best way to enter into a mind of such an individual is to present him with something sensible, as a piece of art or a historic example. And both art and history are at the same time representations of a special intelligible ideal (in the Platonic sense of this word). Hence, this argumentation lies behind the ratio of the Platonic postulate of using art and history (including mythology) to serve as moral lessons for people – not only average individuals, but them especially, as they have no other appropriate way of getting knowledge. To conclude, the value of this Platonic concept of praising great humans – more or less historical in a positivistic meaning of this word – lies, briefly, in a synthesis of sensible deeds and features with intelligible ratios for them in the concreteness of individual life of a person presented by art, history or by mythology. When a person cannot be taught by principles, judgements and ratios, he or she needs to be taught by noble examples, which will provide him or her with the moral norm by offering a possibility to memorize positive attitudes and behaviours (teaching on examples has also other propagators, but in a different way, which makes them less interesting; e.g. the doctrine of the method of pure practical reason in the *Critique of Practical Reason* of Immanuel Kant (1788/2002, pp. 189–202)). We do not want to sound elitist here. We do not consider this rareness of intellectual abilities mentioned above as something entailed by particular natures of individuals, but rather we consider

this as the consequence of natural proportion between people whose social function connects them with political thought and political theories and the others.

This ends the Platonic part of our presentation; to conclude, we would like to stress its two characteristics: first, the need of such examples of political virtues that apply to the senses; and second, the synthesis of such examples in their historicity with an ideal in individuals considered to have divine features.

At this point, we will briefly describe today's state of social axiology employing the method of intuition, sense of mood, ambience, temper of the epoch, which we used above. Nowadays axiology has no point of reference in its evaluation of higher values. There are two specific phenomena, which are implied by this fact. The first is a concentration of axiological consensus on lower values. The second could probably be called the specialization of values, in accordance with Alexis de Tocqueville's predictions about the specialization of knowledge in times of equality (Tocqueville, 1840/2002, pp. 407–410). These two phenomena can be epitomised in Friedrich Nietzsche's term nihilism, i.e. the fact that the highest values are losing their value (Nietzsche, 1906/1914, vol. 1, p. 8). We do not want to enter into a discussion about clear distinction between higher (or the highest) and lower values, but we will use this term – higher values – as synonymic to representation of actions, thoughts and intentions, which demand from a man a sacrifice of his individual, vegetative in their essence, interests; e.g. sanctity, divinity, wisdom. The way in which they are in an opposition to lower values and a more detailed (but only in a degree necessary for this paper) description of higher values will constitute a part of the subsequent deliberations.

The first phenomenon becomes especially apparent in the argumentation used in politics. This argumentation uses the concept of higher values to create distinction between followers of some faction and the others. This suggests that higher values unify people only in particular groups and differentiate them at the same time from the others. We do not mean a simple fact that the same axiological value could have many interpretations, when it is going to be implemented in the ordinary life. We want to stress the fact that there is no value, which – even in all its interpretations – can unite a whole political community (as e.g. a state). And we do not think about the whole of this community, in a sense of its totality, but we only think about a whole, which can represent an effective core of this community. Values like patriotism or humanitarianism are the aims of a limited unification, as they are too high to establish a major consensus and concord. This brief examination leads us to the second aspect of the first phenomena, which makes the lower values a target of social concord. This means that political argumentation for the sake of establishing peace and order uses values, which come from interest of an individual in a simple – not to say animal – life. We

can see this clearly, when a public discussion concentrates on topics like an efficiency of the state in its relation with a particular individual, like health, security, wealth. There is no controversy – as it is in the case of higher values – **if** it is needed to implement those values, but only **how** they should be implemented. Even in case of some – so to say – intermediate values (but not intermediate in their essence, but only in their double axiological – so to say – meaning), like education, the consensus about their necessity does not arise from their higher aspect, as liberation of human reason, but from their lower aspect, as a guarantee of prospect wealth fare of our children. We do not want to state that lower values are something morally bad, we even do not want to establish moral evaluation of values, but we only want to make clear that today's society is axiologically congruent only on basis of values, which are representations of individual interests. We think that this is a result of the development of social equality, which is still in motion (Tocqueville, 1840/2002, pp. 666–676). Though it is a very interesting topic, we will not continue this speculation in order not to digress from the main subject. We do not perceive it as the ultimate result of a wider historical process, but only as the result of this specific, current process of equalization.

The second phenomenon is also, apparently, the result of the process of equalization; although it may seem less obvious than in the case of the first one, described above. Namely, this is a fact of enclosure of axiological theories for any synthetical, general theory, in the social scale. The enclosure is the further reaching consequence of the negative effect of any statement concerning any higher value. It results in a withdrawal of political circles, which want to construct a stable and permanent basis of their rule, from discussions, proposals and reforms dealing with higher values. Even if one of those has some higher ratio, it has to be publicly presented as a mean for an ordinary aim, in order to be effectively propagated. The higher values' discourse is left for experts: those, who do not have any political, and even not directly social (i.e. not political, in a wide sense of this word), purposes and intentions in participating in such a discourse. These are, e.g., theologians and believers of some religion, truly committed to the believe, who cultivate the notion of sanctity and divinity, scientists and lovers of science, who cultivate the goals of grasping the truth and knowledge, benevolent solders and admirers of the military, cultivating the code of honour who want to make a sacrifice of their life for their homeland.

To sum up this part of our paper, we distinguish between the political and social result of actual nihilism, that is a lack of an effective, unifying higher value, which implies particularization and specialization of higher values and concentration of social axiological concord on lower values. Now, we will briefly mention some philosophical grounds for treating the history as something ductile, but not in the simple sense that it is prone for manipulation. In the beginning, we must establish a distinction between

history meant as a science (or art, a university discipline, something scientific) and history meant as a social remembrance, mythology in some way. This is a known and not new distinction, very clearly presented by F. Nietzsche (1893/1913, vol. 2, pp. 1–100). It is very important to stress however, at this point, that this mythological – so to say – history is the very history, which effectively exists in a social discourse and which is a necessary mediate between scientific, historical inquiries and their social vision and perception. In other words, history cannot be presented as a pure science, because the past lies in the interest of reason, of any personality and identity. Everyone seeks his personality and social identity in the past. That means that past must be – by them, who present it, or by them, who learn it – constructed as an ontologically stable, secure ground, which is an inspiring and transparent source of patterns. We need also to stress an ontological insight, which was made by the discoveries of the Hegelian and Neohegelian studies concerning epistemology of history. Namely, the history as a science relies on actual consciousness – not empirical and social as the mythological history (as we named it), but transcendental and collective, spiritual (Gentile, 1920/1922, pp. 49–53 etc.). It means that even human reason, which is the centre and arbitrator of all sciences, cannot construct a history once for all times. Needless to say, this is a very deep problem. We only want however to summarize the basic results of speculations that deal with this issue. As, according to our observations, history in both meanings of this word is a changeable concept, it requires which would concentrate its logic, or even construct its logic, for the purpose of social consensus. The history needs a dominant, which would be a guide for all, who seek a historical synthesis, synopsis (Hegel, 1840/1902, pp. 43–65). As we will see below this guidance will present itself in a social construction of great individuals.

Now as we are approaching the end of this paper we must do just the one last remark. We want to emphasize in particular, that we are rather aware of a problem, which arises than we want to express what should be done. That is why, we will write what should be done, **only if** we want to establish common higher values and **only if** we want to describe a certain feature of social remembrance, which is the reception of great people. We will say it once more: this paper proposes to have in mind the reality of social reception of history in the features of great people, not only the scientifically researched biography of a certain man.

After this remark, we can finally express the last statement of this paper. To conclude, we propose to see in a legend of a great individual an epiphany of higher values in their ability to unite, i.e. in their universality. In today's reality a legend of a great person is something politically unifying a community or even a society. Of course there are such legends that are not unifying so effectively as lower values, or even are not unifying at all, but we should keep in mind the existence of unifying legends.

Moreover, a great person has double faced attributes, about which we wrote above in context of a Platonic concept of a divine man. One face is his historicity – not scientific, which is out of our concern, but historicity of a man as perceived by the society, about which we wrote above referring to Nietzsche. This enables a great man to be a personal, sensible example for every man and, consequently, a determinant of political norms and values, with all attitudes and attributes of such an example, which we have described earlier. The other face is his axiology, the values. Those values are higher in respect to present him as a great personality. We can see, clearly, that a social legend attributes virtues to its heroes, even in times when higher values are not praised. So to say, a great individual is an epiphany of higher axiology into the social consensus. If we praise a concord concerning those people, we should praise also the benign influence of those personal examples. They unify axiology with the most attractive way of influencing people. Process of equalization is also a process of relentless transitions, which implies the lack of the concord, about which we wrote, and creates a need for such examples.

Moreover, such a recognition of a great personality in social remembrance is something ontologically real – as real, as all scientific research of the past events. We should not abuse social remembrance by a supposition, that those individuals, who are remembered and cherished by a society, in reality had not been as great, as they are portrayed by their legend. The legend is as true as its reception – we should not undermine the legend, but we should only with piety differentiate it from the individual, who is a basis for this legend. In any case, the history of the society is dynamic and its effectiveness addresses not the individual, but his legend.

Verification of the proposal to treat a legend of a great man in times of transition – by treating it as a real epiphany – is present in every attempt of describing a social and political significance of such legends. Although this paper has a philosophical character, we will refer to a study from political science and sociology, which would serve us as *pars pro toto*, illustrating a possible use which can be made of our theory and exemplifying the area, in which the theory could be applied. As the object of the example we have chosen the legend of Józef Piłsudski's, which for sure present him as a great man, and which served Poles in times of political transitions; the study which we have chosen is Mr. Biskupski's *Independence Day* (2012). To begin, our theory explains why Piłsudski as the "salvational personage" being the object of "the myth of the Commandant" was a popular figure in the beginning of the Great War despite an unpopularity of his ideals and movements that he animated (Biskupski, 2012, pp. 9–10). The further application of the theory runs as follows. Sensibility of a myth of a great person stimulates the imagination of artists to make pieces of art expressing the idealistic and high content, including and praising the higher values (Biskupski,

2012, pp. 3–4, 15). For enemies of the myth omitting the Piłsudski's person becomes intuitively more rational, than criticising his historical role (Biskupski, 2012, pp. 71–75); this is a result of the fact that a power of a personal myth arises from its sensibility, particularization in biography (however legendary) and in historical fact. The personal myth is empowered by all the sensible and particular symbols, which could be incorporated by it, because it enlarges itself by such an incorporation; that is why the 11th of November served as the strengthening of Piłsudski's personal legend (Biskupski, 2012, pp. 51–56, 57–62 etc.). On the other hand, the personal myth is an excellent basis for the introduction of new values, because it presents them in the most attractive and effective way. That is a ratio for actions raised after the Piłsudski's death to present him as an embodiment of new values (Biskupski, 2012, pp. 83–92). The complex nature of a personal myth smoothly passes on elements of the myth changing the biographical facts into the symbols of higher values, which unite the society. That is the case of the day 11th of November, which became independent from the Piłsudski's myth, resisting a symbol of such a characteristic as described above (Biskupski, 2012, pp. 123–125 etc.). We could provide more examples, but we think that this amount is sufficiently illustrative. We have presented **how** a legend of a great person is constructed and why this construction gives it a special place between social symbols. Moreover, we have established an explanation **why** such legends are popular and unifying as a kind of symbols. The topic, which is relevant but not established above by us, because of its extensiveness, is a problem of the **conditions** of popularity of a chosen concrete personal legend. Here we will only say, that the solution lies – in our opinion – in the apprehension of the personal legend (and its object as an acting person) as an individualization of a historical spirit (intentionally we do not use here the word “Zeitgeist”) of a nation in a legendary biography – in the imaginary content of the nation's consciousness. This sentence may sound obscure, but it could be instructive for readers, who are acquainted with mentioned modern philosophers. An imaginary representation of this statement could be a comparison made by Piłsudski between the “King-Spirit” and Juliusz Słowacki, which probably entails analogous comparison of Piłsudski himself with the “King-Spirit” (Biskupski, 2012, pp. 59–60).

To sum up the whole paper, we will briefly summarize its logic and a final statement. In the beginning we established our interpretation of a Platonic program of cult of great people and teaching by examples, presenting also a justification inspired by works from the Platonic tradition. Secondly, we have described the state of nihilism in political and social life and social life and process of today's world. Thirdly, we presented briefly the results of a profound and affluent philosophical examination concerning the notion of history. We ended by a synthesis of results of those three tracks in one way: in the ideal of a great person, who is an epiphany of higher values

and – as such – a guarantee of not spoken (which would cause a disagreement), but implemented social concord including higher values and political ideals. Finally, we proposed to see it as the fact valuable in itself and as axiologically and politically effective. We hope that it is an interesting proposal.

### References:

- Biskupski, M. B. B. (2012). *Independence Day: Myth, symbol, and the creation of modern Poland*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Dzielska, M. & Twardowska, K. (2013). *Divine man and women in the history and society of late Hellenism*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego.
- Gentile, G. (1922). *The theory of mind as pure act*. (H. W. Carr, Trans.). London: Macmillan. (Original work published 1920)
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1902). *Lectures on the philosophy of history*. (J. Sibree, Trans.). New York: American Home Library. (Original work published 1840)
- Jaeger, W. (1946). *Paideia: the ideals of Greek culture* (Vols. 1–3). (G. Highet, Trans.). Oxford: Basil Blackwell. (Original work published 1935)
- Kant, I. (2002). *Critique of practical reason*. (W. S. Pluhar, Trans.). Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company. (Original work published 1788)
- Nietzsche, F. (1913). *Thoughts out of season* (Vols. 1–2). (A. M. Ludovici, Trans.). London: George Allen & Unwin. (Original work published 1893)
- Nietzsche, F. (1914). *The will to power* (Vols. 1–2). (A. M. Ludovici, Trans.). London-Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis. (Original work published 1906)
- O'Meara, D. J. (2005). *Platonopolis: Platonic political philosophy in late antiquity*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Plato (2006a). *Laws* (Vols. 1–2). (R. G. Bury, Trans.). Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press.
- Plato (2006b). *Theaetetus*. (H. N. Fowler, Trans.). Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press.
- Plato (2006c). *The Republic* (Vols. 1–2). (P. Shorey, Trans.). Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press.
- Plato (2006d). *The Symposium*. (W. R. M. Lamb, Trans.). Cambridge-London: Harvard University Press.
- Tocqueville, A. de (2002). *Democracy in America*. (H. C. Mansfield & D. Winthrop, Trans.). Chicago-London: The University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1840)

### Author

Mr Konrad Wyszkowski

University of Warsaw, College of Inter-Area Individual Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences. Contact details: ul. Dobra 72, 00–312 Warszawa, Poland; e-mail: konradwyszkowski@gmail.com