

# Psychopolis: Reading Plato's *Republic* as Psychology



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**[john-uebersax.com/plato](http://john-uebersax.com/plato)**

# What is Main Topic of Plato's *Republic*?

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- Psychology or politics?
- *Both* a disingenuous answer
- Political interpretation dominates public mind

*Which of these aspects should drive our interpretation?*

*Crudely put, is the Republic about ethics or about politics?*

~ Annas (1999; 72)

# Why It Matters?

2

- **Political interpretations of *Republic* cause mischief (e.g., neo-conservatism; Burnyeat 1985)**
- **And calumination of Plato (Popper)**
- **Political overemphasis distracts from vital *moral* message**
- **Psychological meaning may suggest more useful political implications**

# Should We Delve Into This?

3

- Did Plato veil *Republic's* deeper message?
- Is personal effort necessary to discover it?
- Risks of making too explicit: *dilution, legalism, sophistry*
- We should at least *consider* these issues.

# Present Thesis

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- *Republic* is about morals and psychology.
- It asks:
  - (a) What is *righteousness* (*dikaiosyne*) in the human soul?
  - (b) Is the righteous person happiest?
- The city is a *didactic device*: its details matter only for psychological meanings.
- New psychological theories support this view.

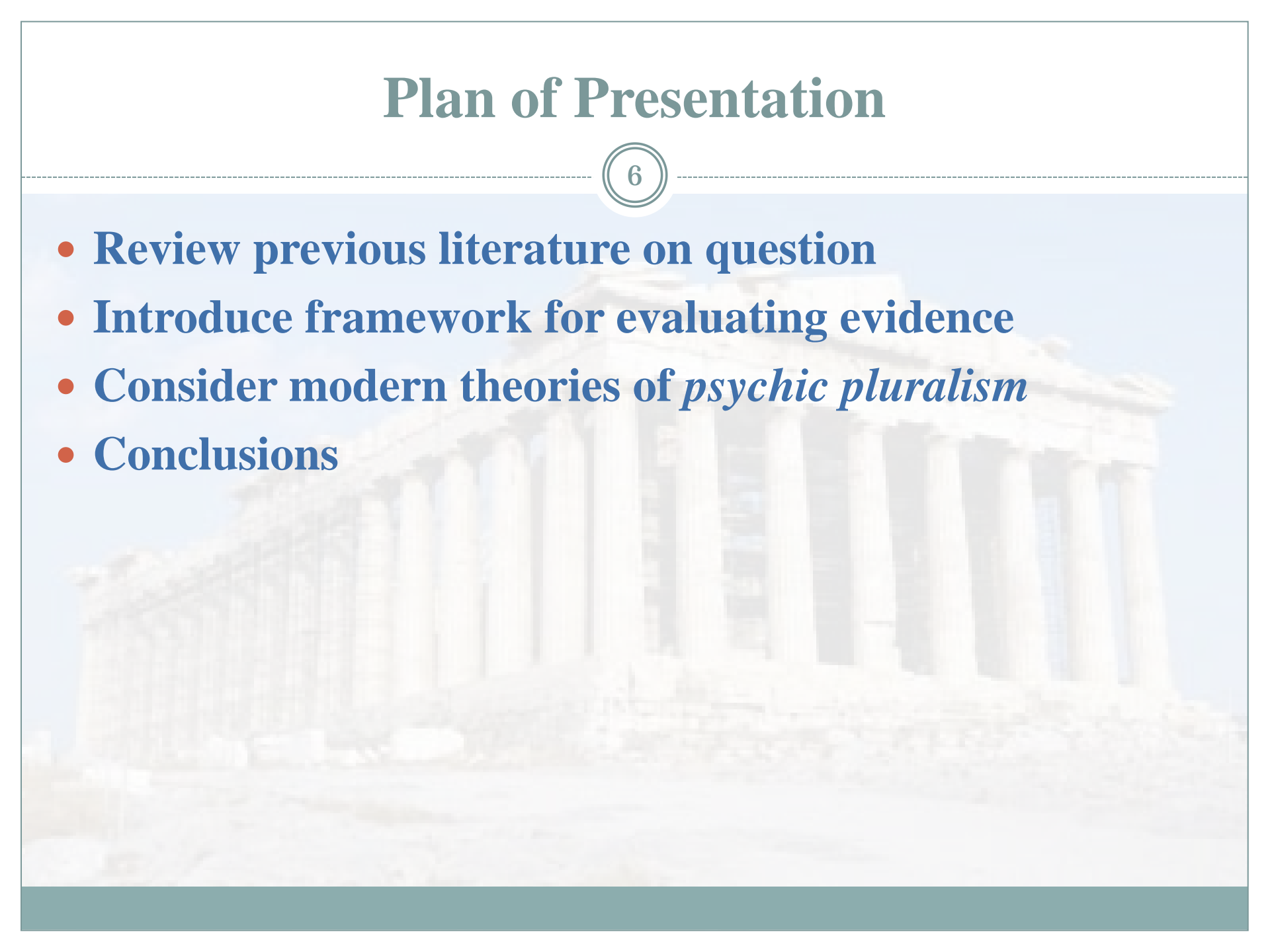
# Aside: This is Still Good for Political Scientists

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- If thesis is correct, political scientists may gain considerably.
- A fuller psychological reading has vast implications for politics.
- Examples:
  - Is there a *natural right* to mental integrity?
  - What political systems most promote personal morals?

# Plan of Presentation

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- **Review previous literature on question**
  - **Introduce framework for evaluating evidence**
  - **Consider modern theories of *psychic pluralism***
  - **Conclusions**
- 

# Previous Literature

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## *Republic is about politics*

- Aristotle (*Politics* 2.1–7)
- Cicero (*De re publica*)
- Proclus (*In Remp.* 1)\*
- Popper (1945)
- Demos (1958)
- Strauss (1964)
- many more ...

\* mixed position

## *Republic is about psychology*

- Jones (1890)
- Chartier (1939)
- Hoerber (1944)
- Guthrie (1986)
- Waterfield (1993)
- Annas (1999, 2000)
- Uebersax (2014–2017)



# Annas (1999, 2000)

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- Topic of interior morals structures *Republic*.
- Ancient readers appreciated this point.
- *Seventh Letter* potentially spurious, without evidential value.
- Modern political reading derives from limited 19th century view and ...
- On mistaken emphasis on developmental theories of Plato's ideas.

# A Scientific/Probabilistic Approach to the Evidence

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- A BRIEF SIDE EXCURSION (5 SLIDES)
- TECHNICAL DETAILS NOT IMPORTANT
- (OKAY TO SKIP)
- MAIN POINT: DISTINGUISH *TWO KINDS* OF EVIDENCE
- FULL DETAILS IN UEBERSAX (2015)

# A Framework for Evaluating Evidence

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- We can apply explicit probabilistic reasoning to this question.
- Specifically, we can use *Bayesian probability theory*



Thomas Bayes (1701–1761)

$$p(H | E) = \frac{p(E | H) p(H)}{p(E)}$$

# Benefits of Probabilistic Approach

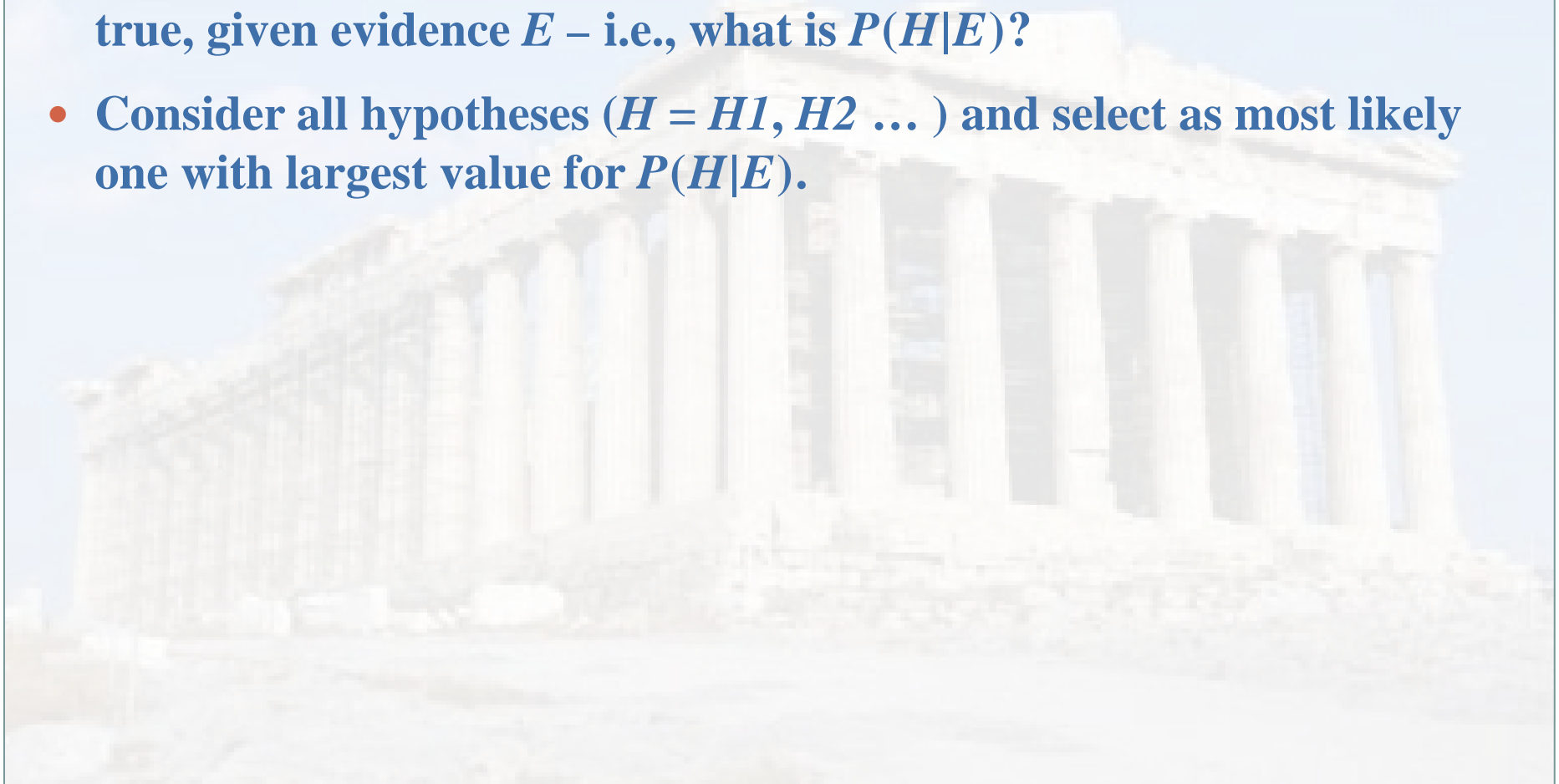
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- Accumulate and evaluate *all* evidence.
- Updatable as new evidence emerges
- Means of grading evidence by value
- Breaks question into smaller parts
- Heuristic (shortcut) rules
- Accepts uncertain evidence/conclusions

# Bayesian 1

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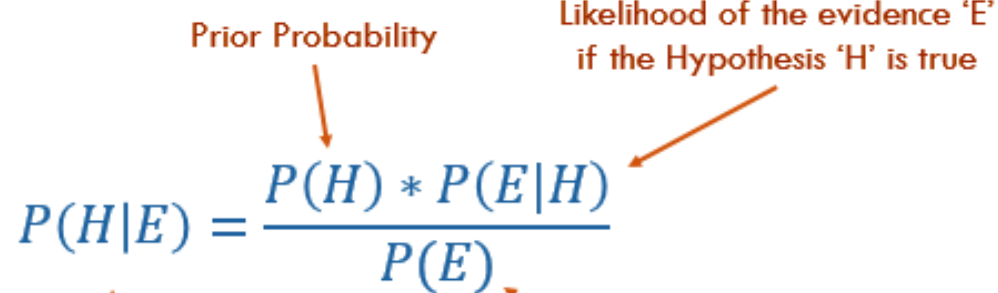
- Bayesian analysis asks, What is the probability that Hypothesis  $H$  is true, given evidence  $E$  – i.e., what is  $P(H|E)$ ?
- Consider all hypotheses ( $H = H1, H2 \dots$ ) and select as most likely one with largest value for  $P(H|E)$ .



# Bayesian 2

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- Boils down to evaluating two kinds of data: (1) *a priori* evidence and (2) new findings.



Prior Probability

Likelihood of the evidence 'E'  
if the Hypothesis 'H' is true

$$P(H|E) = \frac{P(H) * P(E|H)}{P(E)}$$

The diagram shows the Bayesian formula with two red arrows. One arrow points from the text 'Prior Probability' to the term  $P(H)$  in the numerator. The other arrow points from the text 'Likelihood of the evidence 'E' if the Hypothesis 'H' is true' to the term  $P(E|H)$  in the numerator. There are also small red arrows pointing to the asterisk and the denominator  $P(E)$ .

$P(H)$  = *A priori* (background) considerations: e.g., How likely in general is it that Plato wanted to write about psychology, not politics?

$P(E|H)$  = New (textual) evidence: e.g., How consistent is a passage with hypothesis  $H$  that *Republic* is psychological allegory?

# Bayesian Approach: Bottom Line

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- In the end, Bayesian approach simply proves what we *already know* by common sense:
  - If a passage makes *more* sense allegorically than literally, interpret it allegorically.
- But it's good to know we can *prove* this.

# *A Priori Considerations*

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**NEXT 10 SLIDES**

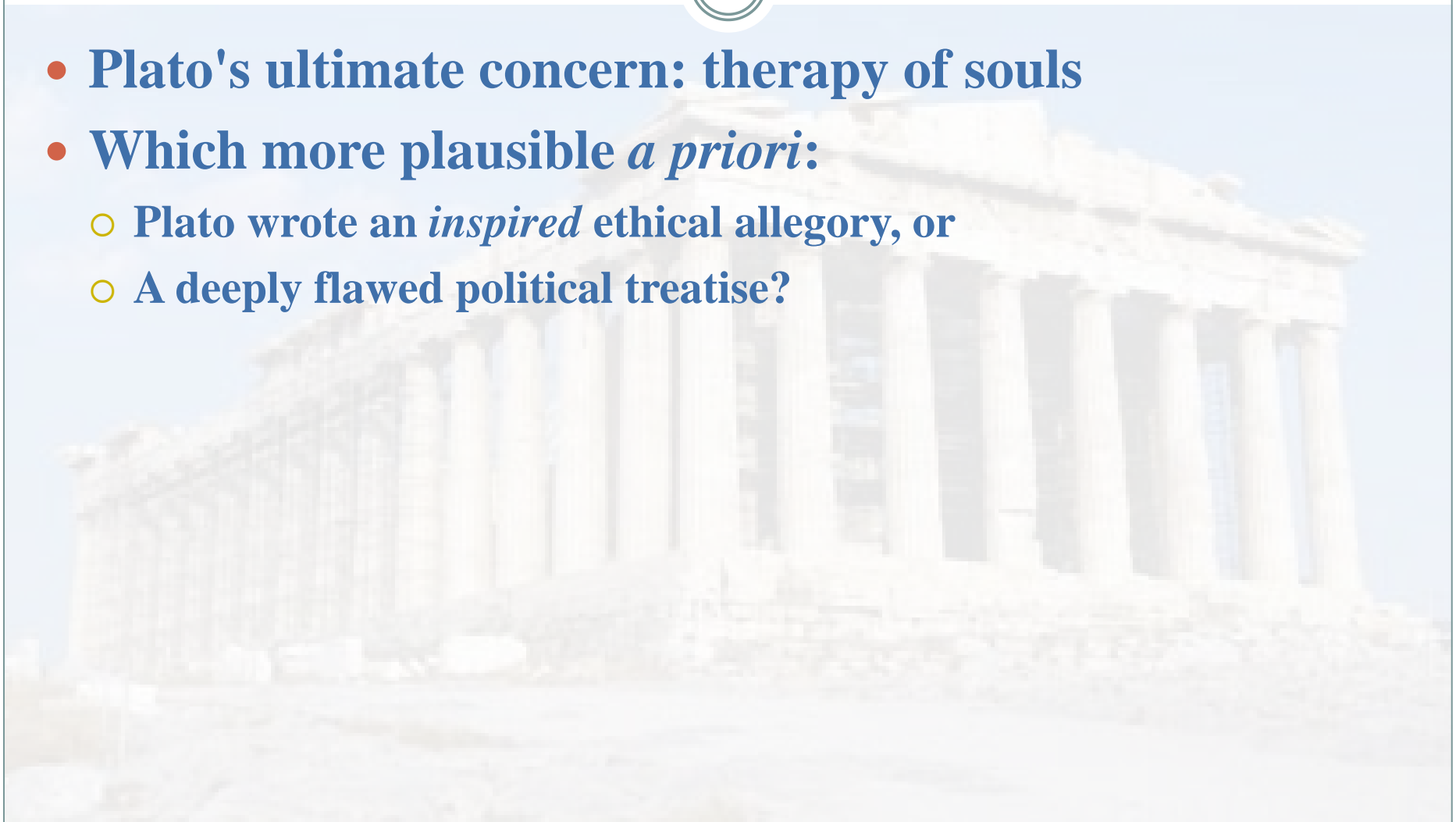




# Plato's Overriding Purpose

16

- Plato's ultimate concern: therapy of souls
- Which more plausible *a priori*:
  - Plato wrote an *inspired* ethical allegory, or
  - A deeply flawed political treatise?



# Political Motivation Likely?

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- **Democracy, oligarchy, monarchy *all* failed in Athens.**
- **Socrates and Plato avoided public office.**
- **Virtuous *inner city* a necessary (and sufficient?) condition for just civil government**
- **Might anarchic *first city* (*Rep.* 2.372) reveal Plato's true political beliefs?**

# Other Political Works?

18

- ***Laws***: a psychological allegory like *Republic*?
- ***Statesman***: enigmatic; hard to interpret at any level; its myth is psychological (Uebersax 2014c).
- ***Seventh Letter***: apocryphal?
- **Conclusion**: These have little direct evidential value here.

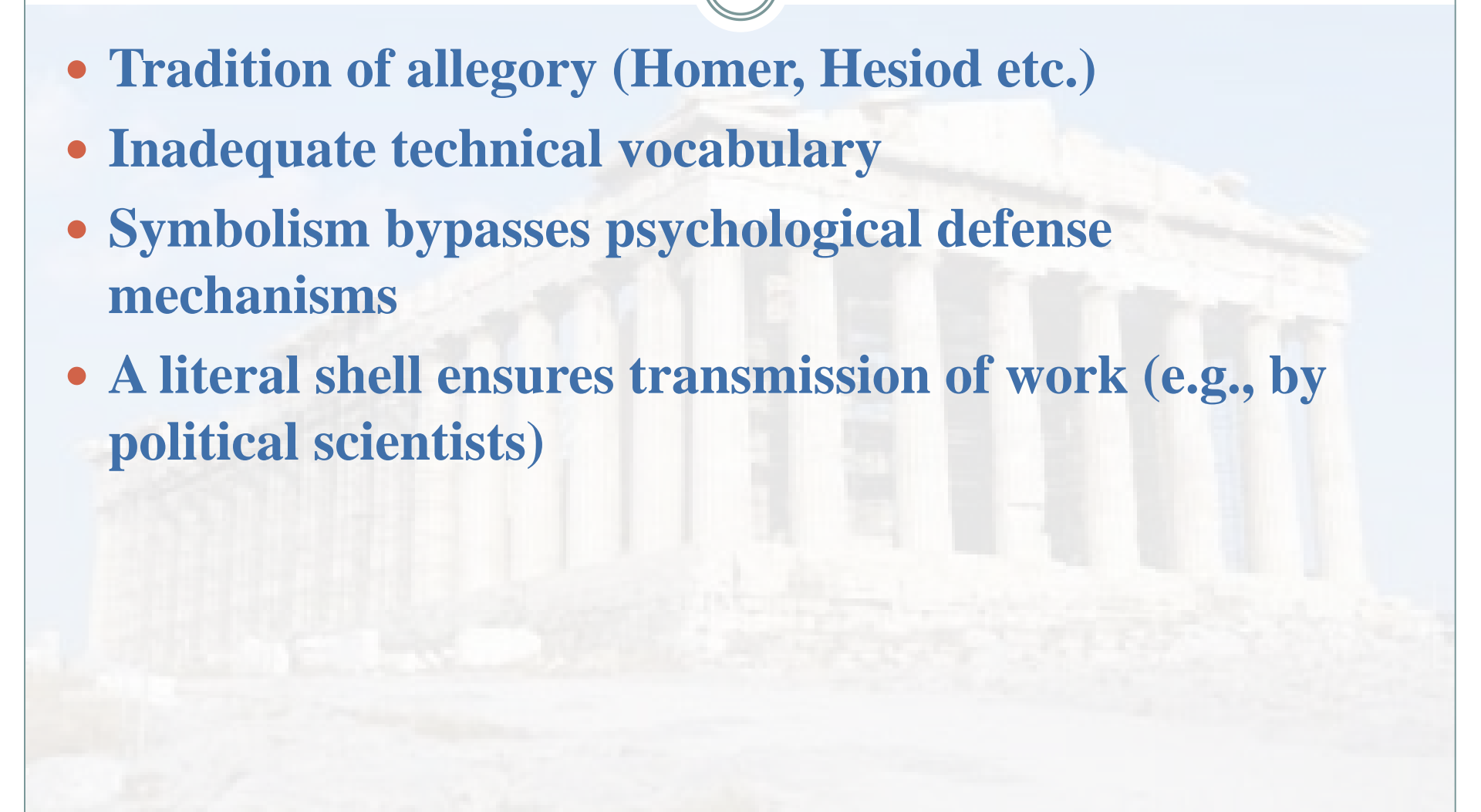
# Plato's Literary Strategy

19

- **Denigrated written doctrines**
- **Aimed for individual *anamnesis***
- **Anamnesis relates to psychological and moral insights**
- **Political science *not* a matter of personal anamnesis**
- **Conclusion: Unlikely Plato wanted to present political doctrines**

# Reasons for Allegorizing Message

20

- **Tradition of allegory (Homer, Hesiod etc.)**
  - **Inadequate technical vocabulary**
  - **Symbolism bypasses psychological defense mechanisms**
  - **A literal shell ensures transmission of work (e.g., by political scientists)**
- 

# Literary Genius Has Exceptional Coherence

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- Plato a creative genius of the highest order
- *Republic* a work of art
- Works of genius are *uncannily* unitary and coherent.
- Genius is consistent *across* works:

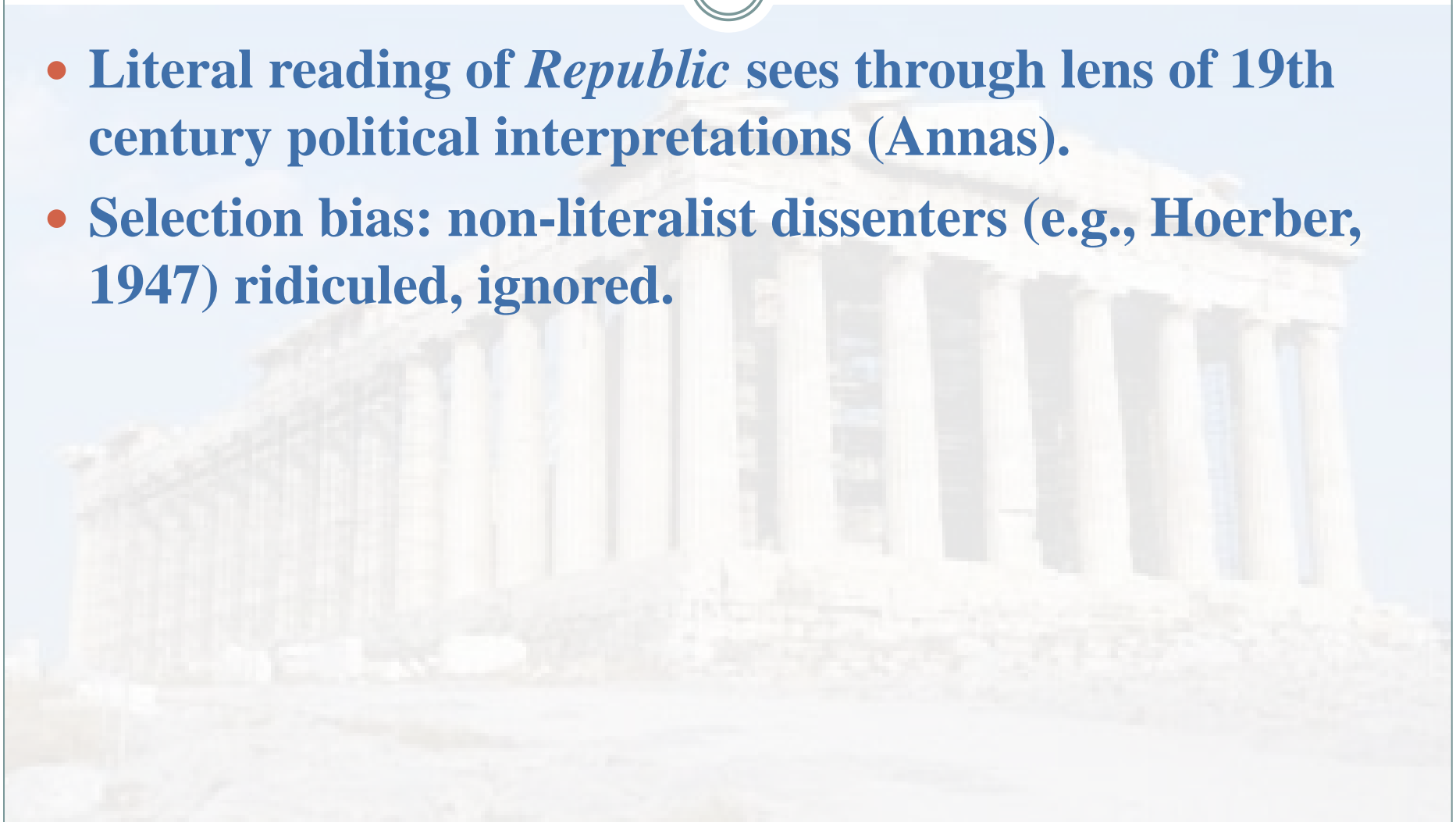
*“the main moral argument of the Republic should be seen in the light of other dialogues, as a form of ethical theory which does not have political claims as an essential part of it.”*

*~ Annas (2000, 326)*

# Historical Considerations

22

- **Literal reading of *Republic* sees through lens of 19th century political interpretations (Annas).**
- **Selection bias: non-literalist dissenters (e.g., Hoerber, 1947) ridiculed, ignored.**



# Aristotle

23

- Criticizes *Republic's* political details in *Politics* 2:1–6
- Polemical tone: “surprisingly crass and literal-minded” (Annas, 1981)
- “Cannot be acquitted of very culpable carelessness” (Susemihl & Hicks p. 241)
- Uses mainly as vehicle to push his own views
- Conclusion: Limited value for deciding present question

*“I do not agree with Plato, but if anything could make me do so, it would be Aristotle’s arguments against him.”*

*~ Bertrand Russell*



# Titles

24

- Per Thrasyllus (fl. c. 30 BC), title is *Politeia*, subtitle is *Peri dikaiou* (DL 3.60)
- Some sources say *Politeiai* (plural; Tarrant, 2012)
- *Politeia(i)* = *Commonwealth(s)*, *Polity (Polities)* or *Regime(s)* — all compatible with political or psychological meaning
- *Peri dikaiou* = *On the Righteous Man* — implies psychological theme
- Thrasyllus' subtitles typically identify theme (e.g., *Laches: On Courage*).

# *Textual Evidence*

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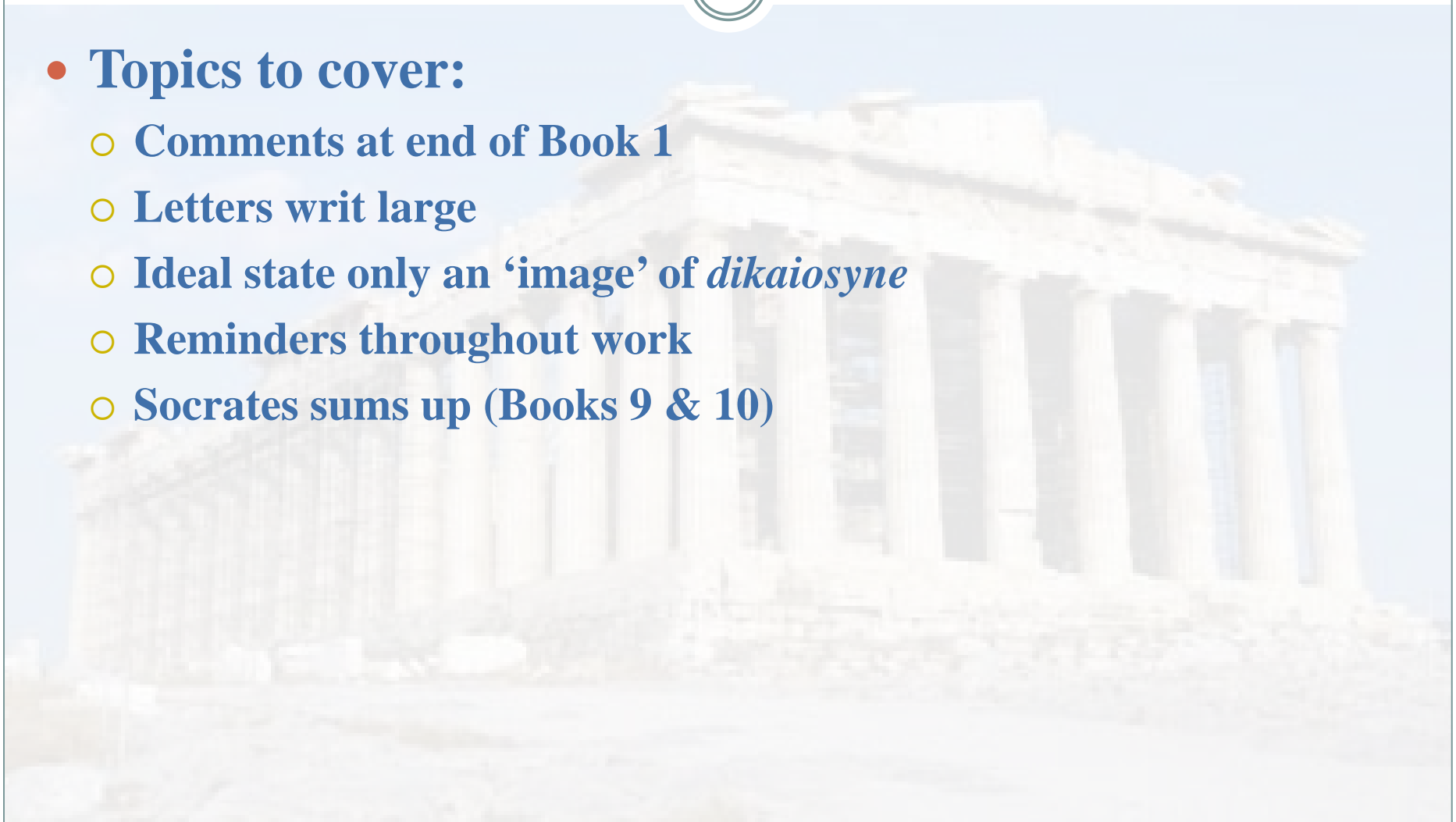
**NEXT 10 SLIDES**



# Socrates' Statements of Purpose

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- **Topics to cover:**
  - Comments at end of Book 1
  - Letters writ large
  - Ideal state only an 'image' of *dikaiosyne*
  - Reminders throughout work
  - Socrates sums up (Books 9 & 10)



# Comments at End of Book 1

27

- At end of Book 1 (1.354a-c) Socrates states two leading questions:
  - “So that for me the present outcome of the discussion is that I know nothing. For if I don't know (1) *what the just (dikaion) is*, I shall hardly know whether it is a virtue or not, and (2) *whether its possessor is or is not happy (eudaimon)*.”
- Cities do not feel *eudaimonia*.

# Letters writ large

28

- **As Book 2 begins, Socrates proposes to consider a *hypothetical city as a means to investigate personal righteousness:***

**“We should employ the method of search that we should use if we, with not very keen vision, were bidden to read small letters from a distance, and then someone had observed that these same letters exist elsewhere larger and on a larger surface. ... Is not the city larger than the man?” (Rep. 2.368d-e)**

# Kallipolis Only an Image of Righteousness

29

- In 4.443b–444a, justice in the hypothetical city is merely a shadow (εἶδωλον) of *righteousness*, which is found in the soul.

*But the civic principle that every one should do his own work only is a mere image or shadow of Justice. The virtue of righteousness is concerned with the inner man and produces spiritual unity.*

~ James Adam (paraphrase)

# Personal Righteousness the *sine qua non*

30

“And having ... *made of himself a unit, one man instead of many, self-controlled and in unison, he should then and then only turn to practice if he find aught to do either in the getting of wealth or the tendance of the body or it may be in political action ... in all such doings believing and naming the just and honorable action to be that which *preserves and helps to produce this condition of soul.*”*

~ *Republic 4.443e; Shorey; italics added*

# Reminders

31

- **Socrates gives constant reminders of the analogical nature of the hypothetical city.**
- **Partial lists in Waterfield (xvii), Maguire (n146), Guthrie (n434)**
- **Examples:**
  - 351e, 358c-d, 361b-d, 367b ff., 368e f., 371e, 372e, 376c, 420b, 427d, 432b, 434d f., 441c, 445a ff., 472c-d, 541b, 543d–544a, 577b–588a, 588b,e ff., 605b, 608a-b, 612c ff.



# End of Book 9: Supreme Importance of Soul

32

- **By end of Book 9, Socrates stops mentioning city at all.**

“The entire soul, returning to its nature at the best, attains to a much more precious condition in acquiring sobriety and righteousness together with wisdom, than the body does when it gains strength and beauty conjoined with health, even as the *soul is more precious than the body.*”

~ *Republic 9.591b* (Shorey; italics added)

- **This decisive *soul benefit* has no counterpart in civil states, which are merely physical.**

# Concluding Remarks: Book 10

- “Then the wise man *will bend all his endeavors* to this end throughout his life; he will, to begin with, prize the studies that will *give this quality to his soul* and disprize the others.” (Rep. 9.591c)
- “He will rather,” I said, “keep his *eyes fixed on the constitution in his soul.*” (Rep. 9.591e)
- “We have proved that justice in itself is the best thing *for the soul itself.*” (Rep. 10.612b)

# Decisive Benefits are Religious

34

- Cities cannot be “likened unto god.” (10.613a-b)
- Concluding paragraph of dialogue:

“But if we are guided by me ... we shall *hold ever to the upward way* and pursue righteousness with wisdom always and ever, that we may be dear to ourselves and to the gods both during our sojourn here *and when we receive our reward.*” (Rep. 10.621c-d)

- Civil states don't have immortal souls!

# Literal Implausibility Implies Allegory

35

- **Implausible literal details imply allegorism.**
- **Waterfield's examples:**
  - **Citizens do only one thing (370b): "discrete mental faculties."**
  - **Healthcare denied unproductive workers (407a): "would one foster within one's mind an aspect of it which did one no good?"**
  - **Only rulers can think beyond self-interest (428d): "psychological make-up consists of three parts, only one of which is capable of reasoning about the good of the whole."**
  - **Infanticide (460c): = "rejection of unwanted ideas."**

# Demos' Argument *Against Allegorism*

36

1. An allegorical model should have no feature unless paralleled by something in the original.
2. If no plausible allegorical meaning, take literally
3. Plato's ideal city has features without mental analogs (examples: communism, eugenics)

**“Measured by this test, our hypothesis [that *Republic* is about psychology] fails decisively.”**  
~ Raphael Demos (1958; p. 306)

# New Psychological Theories Expand Possibilities

37

- **Refutation of Demos: We can maintain allegorical hypothesis by expanding psychological theories.**

*We're going to need a bigger psychological theory...*

# Modern Theories of Psychic Pluralism

38

**SUBPERSONALITY THEORY AND THE  
'COMMUNITY OF SELVES'**



# Psychic Pluralism

39

- Massive evidence that human mind operates like a community of *subselves*, *subegos*, *subpersonalities*, etc.
- Dozens of modern psychological theories say basically same thing.
- Intuitively and empirically obvious concept.



*“A man is as many people as he has cares.”*

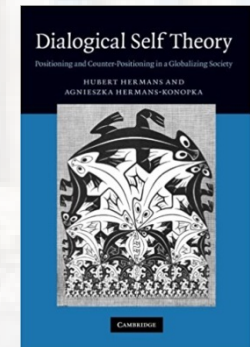
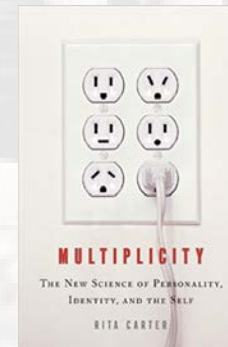
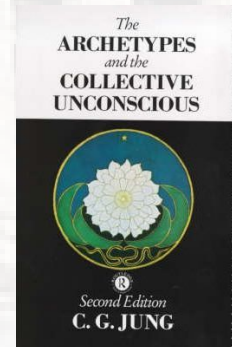
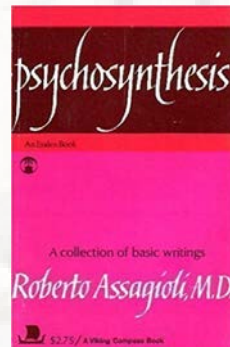
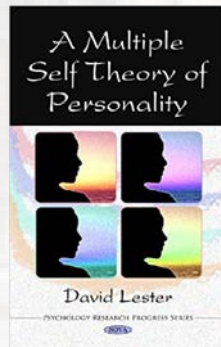
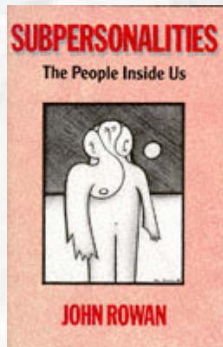
*~ Francisco Osuna*



# ‘Community of Self’

40

- Major reviews by Rowan (1990) and Lester (2010)
- Vast literature includes many well-known figures: James, Freud, Jung, Adler, Assagioli, Kelly, Berne, Watkins, Minsky, Schwartz, Rowan, Lester, Hermans – dozens more.
- Integration of *psyche* explicit desideratum of virtually all modern personality theories.



# Community of Self 2

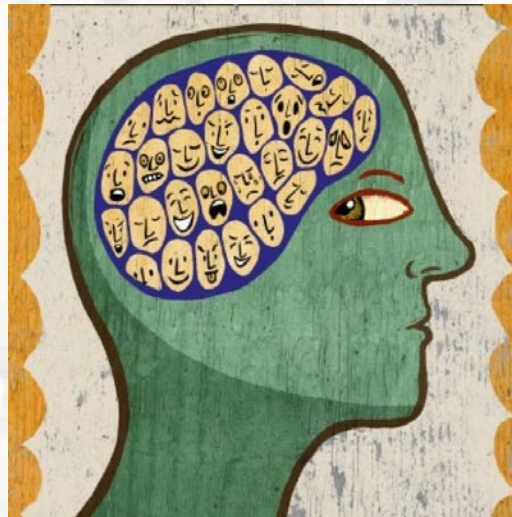
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- **Alternative terms:**
  - Subegos, subpersonalities, subselfs, complexes, part-egos, voices, schemas, *streams of thought*, agents, possible selves, narratives, self-concepts, scripts, identity states ...
- **Sources:**
  - Social roles, instincts, organ systems, *archetypes*, conflicts, traumas, identifications ...
- **Conscious, subconscious, unconscious (autonomous?)**
- **From partial fragments to complete alter-egos**

# Caveats

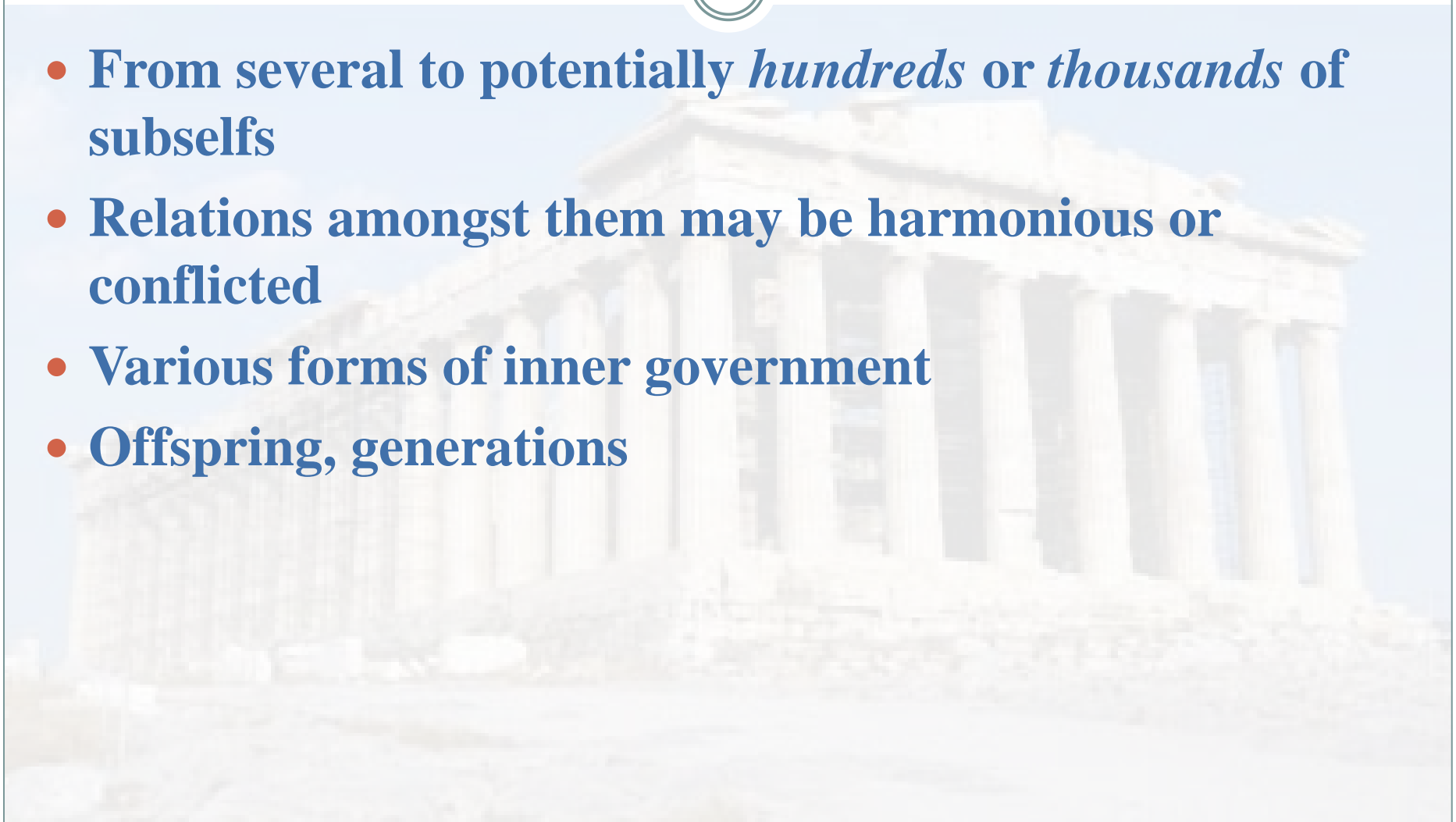
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- Subpersonality theory is a model or *metaphor*, not necessarily objective reality.
- Not *only* way to see things
- Doesn't preclude a *unitary self*



# Features of Inner Community

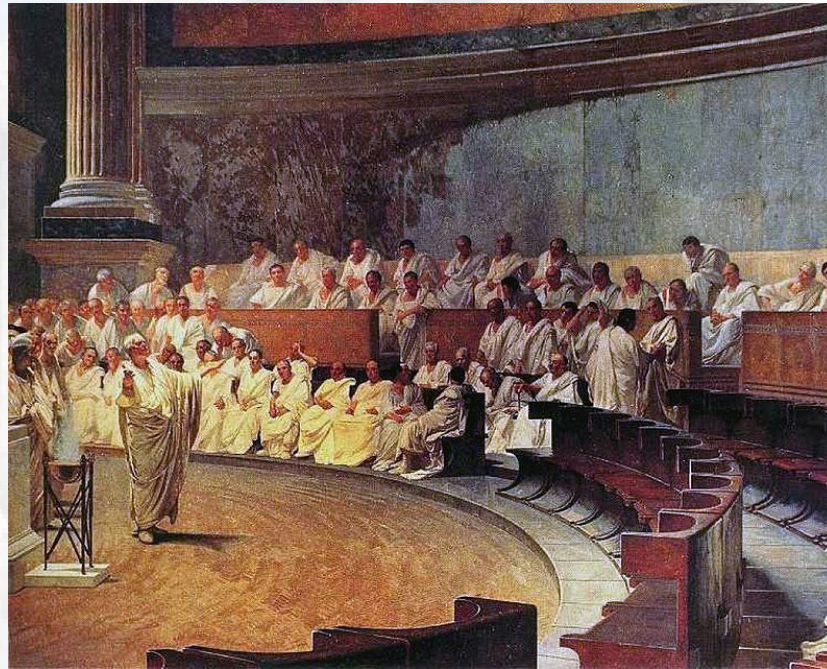
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- From several to potentially *hundreds or thousands* of subselfs
  - Relations amongst them may be harmonious or conflicted
  - Various forms of inner government
  - Offspring, generations
- 

# Inner Government 1

44

- Styles of *inner government*: monarchy, oligarchy, tyranny, pluralism, anarchism, mob rule ....
- Usually one subself has *executive control* at any given time



# Inner Government 2

45

- *Psychomachia*: conflict amongst parts of *psyche*
  - Factions, alliances, confederations
  - Regime changes, coups, rebellions all common



# Harmonization and Integration

46

- One subself may seek to integrate and harmonize others “analogous to *conductor* of an orchestra.” (Lester; cf. Assagioli)
- Isn't that Plato's goal for each of us in the *Republic*?



# Demos' Objection Revisited

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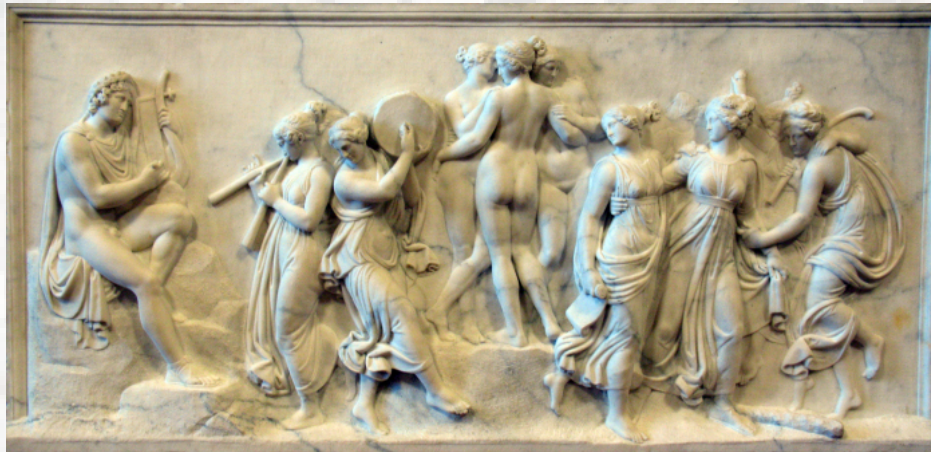
- **Subpersonality theory provides new allegorical possibilities for interpreting *Republic*.**
- **Examples considered here:**
  - Races and Eugenics
  - Return to Cave
  - Banishment of Poets



# Example 1. Races and Eugenics

48

- **Subselves have descendants**
- **Male (intellectual) and female (emotional) subselves**
- **For inner Golden Age, encourage reproduction of *noble* subselves!**
- **Mental life has cycles: some times favor birth of noble subselves**



# Example 2. Philosopher's Return to Cave

49

- **Plato's possible meaning:**
  - Develop a new philosopher subself
  - This *inner philosopher* tasked with teaching/ennobling other subselfs.
  - Attain moral excellence and personality integration one subself at a time.



# Example 3. Banishment of Poets

50

- **Subselves often delude us with false narratives**
- **Imagined futures, flattering fictions**
- **Plato's meaning: banish/suppress these?**



# Lesson

51

- **Demos: “*Republic* is about politics, because so many details have no (obvious) psychological meanings.”**
- **Our Response:**
  - If a feature of Kallipolis lacks an obvious psychological analog:
  - Examine more closely
  - Perhaps it points to subtle or new psychological principle.
  - Subpersonality theory explains problematic passages of *Republic* better than literal political interpretation

# Overall Conclusions

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- Republic is *about* individual morals
- The ideal city is a *didactic device*
- Political details are *fully subordinated* to psycho-moral purpose.
- Look for psychological meanings in implausible political sections.
- Subpersonality theory valuable tool for exegesis

# Implications

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- **Aim new efforts to reveal moral depth-psychology of *Republic*.**
- **Work may require several generations**
- **Psychologists: read Plato!**
- **Also major opportunities for political philosophers:**
  - **How can civil institutions promote (or not oppose) personal moral growth and internal harmony?**

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