

PLATONIC* CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRACY: THE CASE OF DONALD TRUMP

AMER AMER

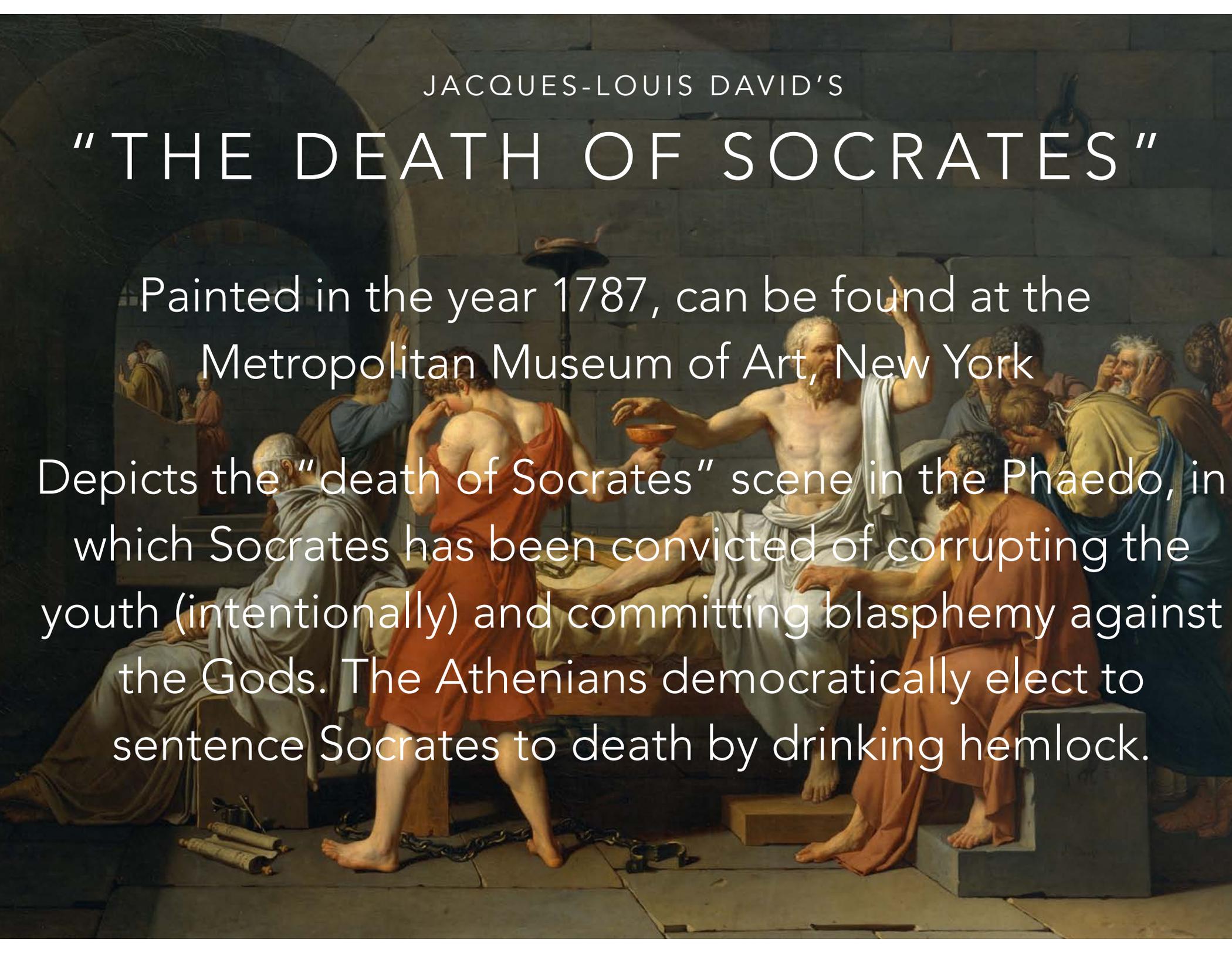


JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID'S

"THE DEATH OF SOCRATES"

Painted in the year 1787, can be found at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Depicts the "death of Socrates" scene in the Phaedo, in which Socrates has been convicted of corrupting the youth (intentionally) and committing blasphemy against the Gods. The Athenians democratically elect to sentence Socrates to death by drinking hemlock.

The painting depicts the philosopher Socrates in the center, lying on a stone slab and drinking hemlock from a bowl. He is surrounded by his disciples, some of whom are in various states of grief and contemplation. The scene is set in a classical architectural space with arches and a stone wall. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting Socrates and the figures around him.

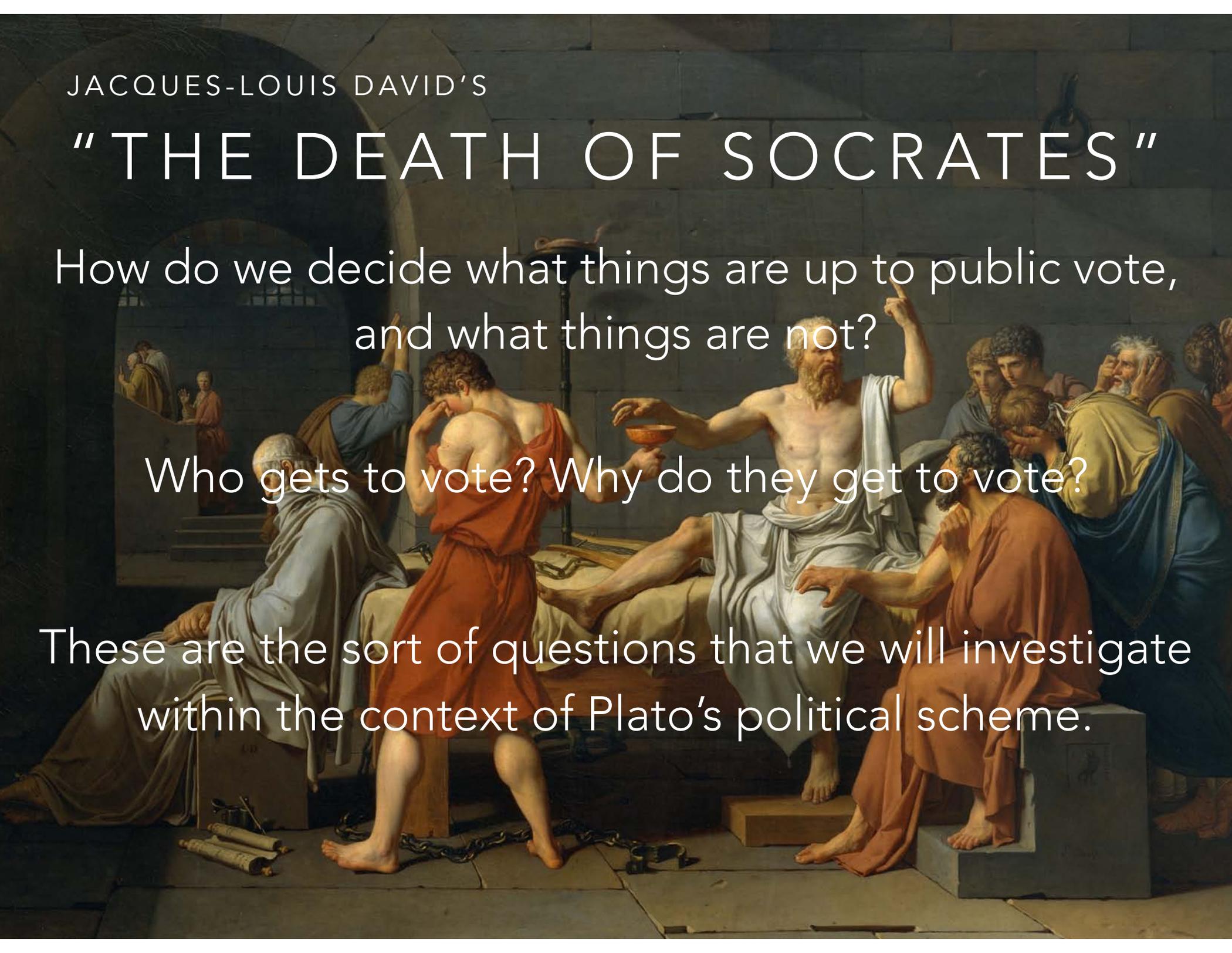
JACQUES-LOUIS DAVID'S

"THE DEATH OF SOCRATES"

How do we decide what things are up to public vote, and what things are not?

Who gets to vote? Why do they get to vote?

These are the sort of questions that we will investigate within the context of Plato's political scheme.



PREAMBLE

BEFORE THE ARGUMENT

1. In your lifetime, how many of you intend to contribute to society or improve the lives of others, generally?
2. How many of you can recall a situation where someone had the good intention of helping but ended up making matters worse?

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Deal with it.

By Michael Scherer

According to Plato, it is due to a flaw in the design of Democracy that such a candidate is allowed to be a legitimate political option. Today, we will investigate why he thought this, its important.

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TWO THINGS TO RECOGNIZE

1. Many people actually want him to be president. Here, **we must ask**, what informs their beliefs about his fitness to govern? Should these people be allowed to have what they want?
2. He might actually believe that what he wants to do is what is best for society. Here, **we must ask**, how do we know the truth about what he believes and why he believes it?

THE *APOLOGY*

MORAL EDUCATION

Its not enough to want to help, we have to know what what being helpful is. A particular kind of education is needed: **Moral education.**

Socrates in the *Apology* states a subtle but astute observation: Everyone has an idea of what "good" is. This doesn't need to be a full life plan, but merely some standard upon which we evaluate our interests. Something we think is "best".

THE *APOLOGY*

MORAL EDUCATION

As we just saw, sometimes we as individuals take something to be 'good for us' when in actuality it turns out to be harmful.

Its not enough that we **think** or **believe** that something is good for us, for it to actually be good for us. We must **know** that it is, in order for our decisions about how to live best and not be prone to error.

THE *APOLOGY*

MORAL EDUCATION

In the Platonic sense, moral education is specifically the pursuit of the necessary knowledge that is required for attaining the best and most excellent life possible.

But what is a “best life”?

THE *SYMPOSIUM*

A BEAUTIFUL ANSWER

“Suppose someone changes the question, putting ‘good’ in place of ‘beautiful,’ and asks you this: ‘Tell me, Socrates, a lover of good things has a desire; what does he desire?’”

“That they become his own,”

“And what will he have, when the good things he wants have become his own?”

“This time it’s easier to come up with the answer...He’ll have **happiness.**” (*Symposium*, 204E-205E)

THE *APOLOGY*

SLEIGHT OF HAND

Its all about happiness.

Now, we are able understand that the pursuit of "higher knowledge" and moral education, as prescribed in the *Apology*, is for the sake of happiness and our pursuit of happiness. Nobody is satisfied with the "apparent good", but desire what is truly good.

Everyone desires to possess that which is truly Beautiful and Good, because everybody wants to be **happy**.

THE *APOLOGY*

WHEN DOES HARM OCCUR?

Harm occurs when someone has misidentified the Good. Holding a false belief is what justified the action.

So, harm is always a result of ignorance. Specifically, ignorance of what is important for happiness.

Even the willingly ignorant are such because they deem it "good" to be that way. Someone like Trump, for example.

THE *APOLOGY*

SO WHY IS "THE UNEXAMINED LIFE IS
NOT WORTH LIVING"?

The unexamined life is an **unhappy** life.
Unless you happen to stumble across knowledge of
what happiness is, which Plato thought to be
unlikely. You might disagree.

THE *APOLOGY*

WHY "THE UNEXAMINED LIFE IS NOT WORTH LIVING"

Thinking about what makes certain things good is pertinent to making correct decisions about how to live your life best, especially if you're concerned with making sure others are also living happy lives.

Internal reflection about one's motives combined with knowledge of reality is necessary for success in both public and private life.

BUT WHAT DOES THIS HAVE
ANYTHING TO DO WITH POLITICS?

THE *REPUBLIC*

CRAFT ANALOGIES

We've seen various analogies in which the philosopher is likened to a Doctor, Ruler, House Builder, Ship's Captain, etc.

In each of these cases, there is a specific knowledge set that is required for the craft to be performed well.

Likewise, the craft or activity of "politics" must be understood in a similar way.

THE CRAFT OF POLITICS

Politics, as presented in the Platonic Dialogues, is the craft of governing a *Polis* or City-State in such a way that it produces excellent (and thus, happy*) citizens.

If the decision makers of a political-regime are insufficiently informed, then there is a chance for error in the decision making process.

In the case of Democracy, Plato's Socrates is critical of the vote of the majority because having a majority vote does not guarantee that the vote is informed in the way that the craft of politics requires.

THE *CRITO*

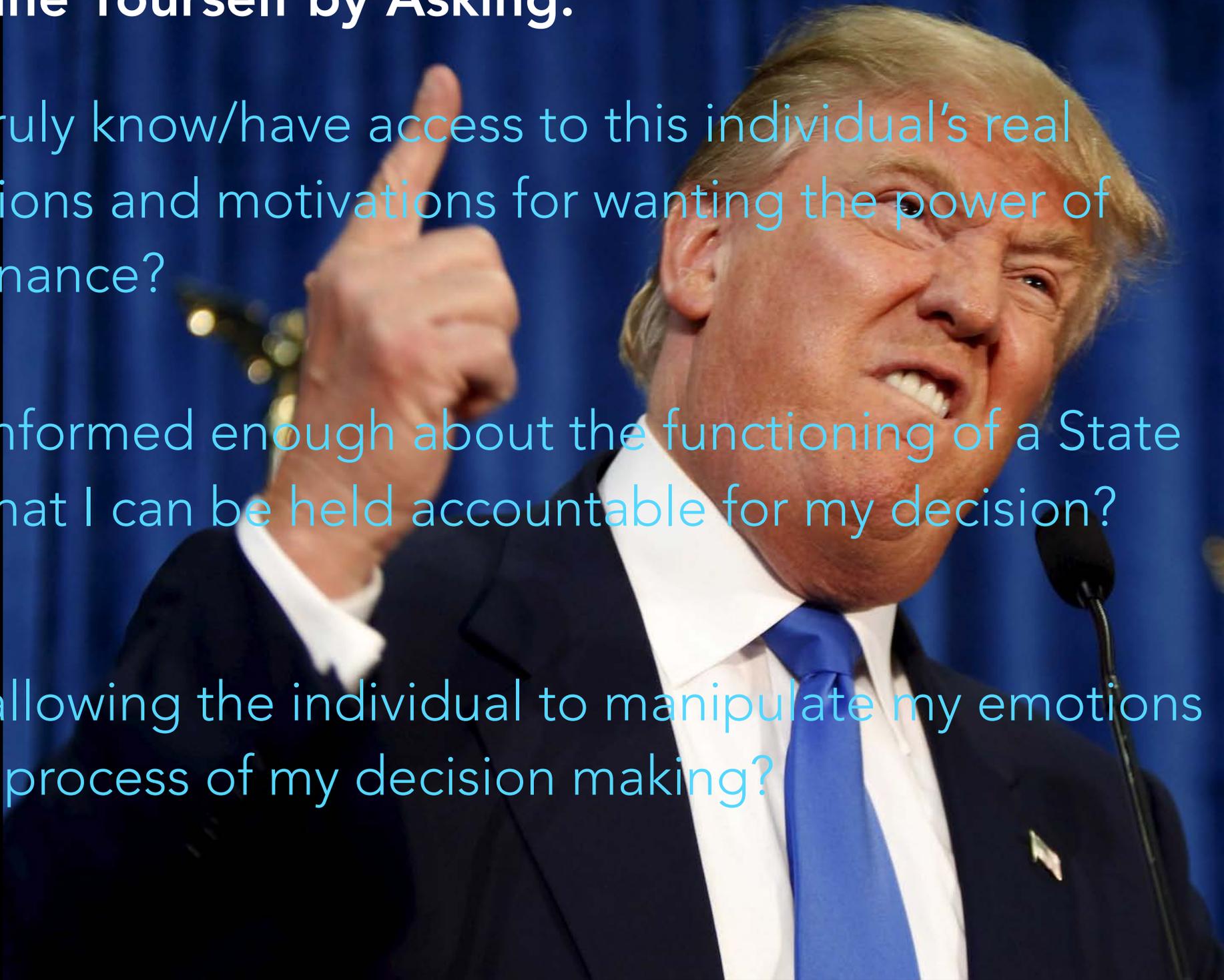
"I am the kind of man who listens to nothing within me but the argument that on reflection seems best to me...We should not think so much of what the majority will say about us, but what he will say who understands justice and injustice and the truth itself" - Socrates, *Crito* 46 A-E

Examine Yourself by Asking:

Do I truly know/have access to this individual's real intentions and motivations for wanting the power of governance?

Am I informed enough about the functioning of a State such that I can be held accountable for my decision?

Am I allowing the individual to manipulate my emotions in the process of my decision making?



THE *REPUBLIC*

THE *KALLIPOLIS**

For Plato, being 'good' is simply existing 'correctly', according to one's nature.

For example, what makes a good knife 'good' is its ability to cut through things well. If you have a dull knife, its deficiency is in correlation to its failing in its function.

In the case of a City (*Polis*), insofar as Politics is the craft of producing harmonious societies (and so the production of excellent citizens), then the craft presupposes that there is a correct organization to begin with.

THE *REPUBLIC*

THE KALLIPOLIS

And what is an excellent citizen? Bringing it back to the claims of the *Apology*, **the excellent citizen is the examined/happy citizen**. The republic is a tool for the realization of happiness through the knowledge that only a moral expert can have, a "Philosopher-king".

Then, we can understand Socrates' disappointment with the Poets and Politicians of Athens in the *Apology* as a claim about the lack of moral experts.

The *Republic* presupposes - as a stipulation of its argument - the presence of such moral experts. People with the know-how.

THE *REPUBLIC*

POLITICS AND HAPPINESS

If philosophy is necessary for living an “examined life”, a happy life, then politics might be the means of introducing philosophy into the lives of all members of society, even if indirectly.

We see Plato’s desire to be practical (in this world!), he recognizes that not everyone is going to be a philosopher. He suggests a way for philosophy to be present regardless.

THE *APOLOGY*

THE IMPORTANCE OF EDUCATION

“Plato” is a nickname meaning “broad shoulders”, given to the man whose real name was *Aristocles*, who was a *wrestler* - and he didn't just wrestle with Forms!

Aristocles was in a position to enter politics, due to coming from a wealthy aristocratic family. Instead, he decided that a more worthwhile life for him is one dedicated to the education of citizens. Those who will go on to be politicians, and **experts** of all other fields.

IS EDUCATION AS THE SOLUTION TO THE CRITIQUE OF DEMOCRACY?

Plato might think that not everyone can be a Philosopher-King, but maybe given how much our understanding of politics has changes over the past 2500 years, perhaps we don't need to be.

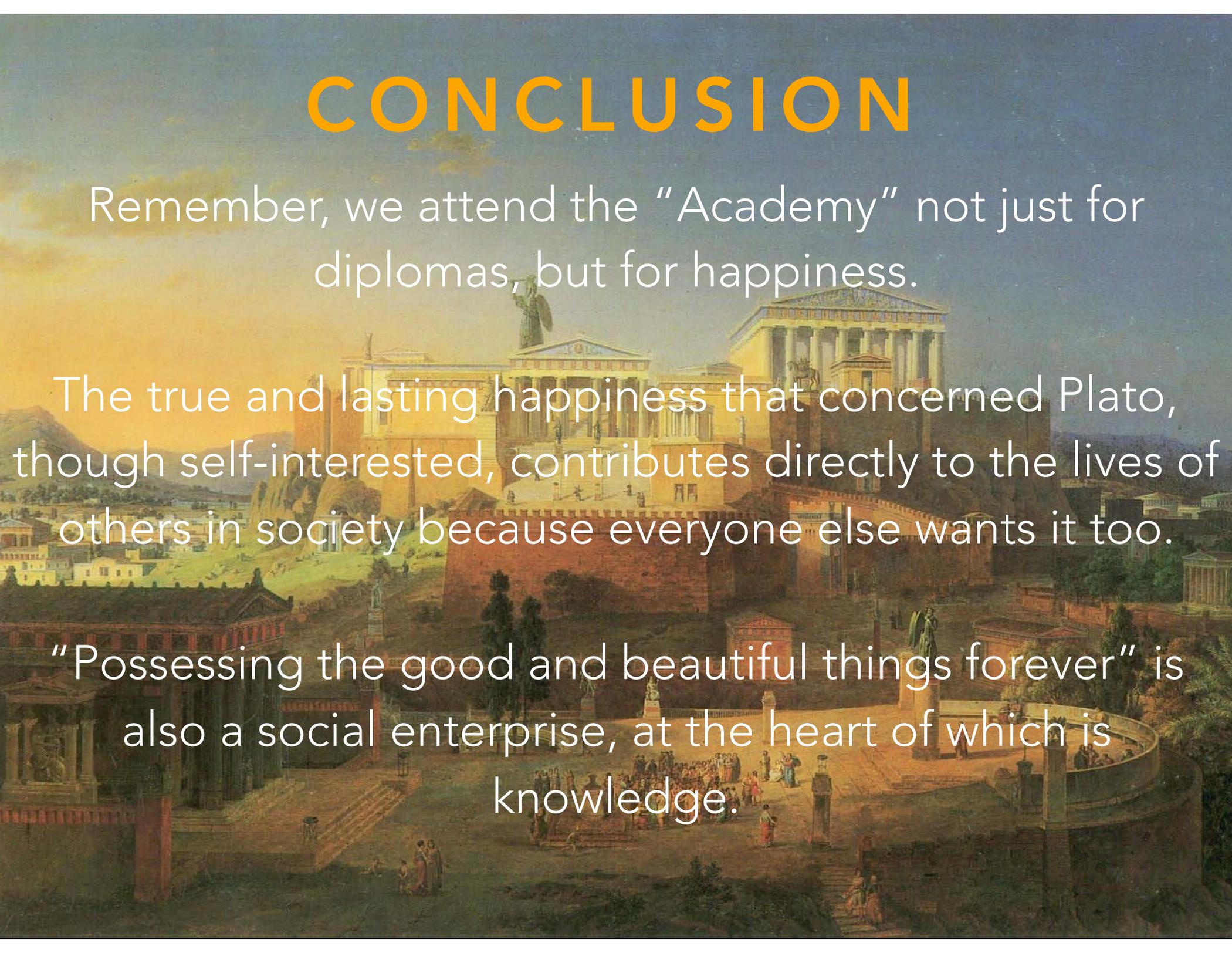
Maybe, guaranteeing a structurally-sound moral education as a right of all people is a way of securing democracy as a form of governance. The skill of critical self-reflection is the key.

CONSIDERATION

But how can Plato's Socrates claim both that we should live examined lives, but that we should also live under the rule of a *Philosopher-King*? These two ideas appear contradictory!

I've done most of my research on this topic. I believe that there is in fact no inconsistency, these two claims are entirely compatible. But I will leave this as an open question for your own consideration. :)

CONCLUSION



Remember, we attend the "Academy" not just for diplomas, but for happiness.

The true and lasting happiness that concerned Plato, though self-interested, contributes directly to the lives of others in society because everyone else wants it too.

"Possessing the good and beautiful things forever" is also a social enterprise, at the heart of which is knowledge.

BE HAPPY :)

Whatever you endeavour, ground it in knowledge.

If you are certain about your foundation, success will entail.

If something goes wrong along the way, then you know where to go back, revise, and try again...

...others might depend on your success (even if indirectly)!