

The background of the slide is a photograph of a classical building, likely a courthouse or government building, featuring large, fluted columns and a wide set of stone steps. The text is overlaid on this image.

# Socratic Moral Psychology in Plato's *Gorgias*

Living a Good Life  
Professor Horst



**“We live in a society whose whole policy is to excite every nerve in the human body and keep it at the highest pitch of artificial tension, to strain every human desire to the limit and to create as many new desires and synthetic passions as possible, in order to cater to them with the products of our factories and printing presses and movie studios and all the rest.”**

**— Thomas Merton**

# Individual, Sociopolitical, Economic

- Merton's quote notes one way that questions about individual well-being intersect with social, political, cultural, and economic systems.
- Implies that someone interested in well-being of individuals should also be concerned with things like politics, social justice, economics
- Not taken up much in *Gorgias* (but in *Republic*, Aristotle)

# Stephanus Numbering



# Beginning of Callicles Section of *Gorgias*

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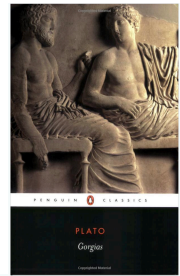
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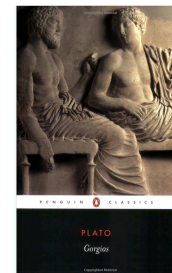
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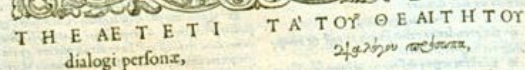
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ΕΥΚΡΑΤΗΣ, ΘΕΟΔΩ-  
ΡΟΣ, ΘΕΑΙΤΗΤΟΣ.

**M** O D O N E. Tēpō, **A**  
an dādu muret. Ter. **A**  
Saris dādum, & te quidē  
ego per forum querebās,  
& mirabar quid minime  
te possem inuenire.

**E** V. Nec enim eram in vrbe. **T**ER. Vbi  
ergo? **E** V. In portum descendēram, vbi mi  
hi fuit obitus Theæteus, qui Corintho ex  
exercitu Athenas ferebatur. Ter. Viuē  
ne an mortuū? **E** V. Viuus, sed vix acce  
pit quidem, male enim se habet & con  
vix quidem quidem nōnullis, sed fāpē alius  
corripuit popularis morbus qui in exerci  
tu vagatur. Ter. Num dytēria? **E** V. **T**ER.  
Ila. **TER**. Qualem virum memoras in pe  
riculo esse? **E** V. Bonum certe & honestū  
virum, iam verō & nōnullis modō au  
dicūm qui illius in pugna virilem constā  
tiam maxime predīcat. **T**ER. **TER**.  
Nec mirum id quidem est, magis profectō  
mirandum fuisset, nisi huiusmodi eximie  
rit. Verum quomodo hic Megaris nō di  
tuerit? **E** V. Domum festinab: quā  
& ego rogavi & eram arator vbi cō  
suetudine nō potui id ab illo impetrare.  
& quidem postquam illum in nauem de  
duximus & redēre, recordatus fuit So  
cratis, illamque fuit admiratus: quod cum  
de aliis tum de hoc quid futurum effēdi  
mus quādā ratione prōdixisset. Ille enim  
(& paulo quidem ante mortē vix mihi qui  
dem videret) in istum Theætum incide  
ad hoc adolescentulum: & cum illo fami  
liariter colloquutus, istius indolem valde  
est admiratus. Mihi verō Athenas pro  
fecto eos sermones qui inter ipsos habui  
t, commemorat, & audiū quidem  
bone dignos: vt quidem affirmare omni  
nō necesse est: iuratur vt ille in virum  
eximium celebrēque euaderet, si cō  
stantia iustitiae ætatem peruenisset.  
& rectē quidem vacinaretur. **E** V. **TER**.  
At quinam erant illi sermones tēcōne tu  
posse commemorare? **E** V. Nō illos qui  
quidem memorat: at de aliis quodam com

[illegible]

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Chaerephon offers to ask Gorgias to give a demonstration of his rhetorical skill for Socrates. (Plato, *Gorgias*, 447b)

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# Standard (Scholarly) Paginations

- Common for most classical texts
- Different numbering conventions for each one, depending on the standard scholarly edition (usually in the original language(s))
- Provide a way of identifying the source of a text uniquely
- Standard practice in scholarly works



# Framing the Polus Conversation

# Gorgias

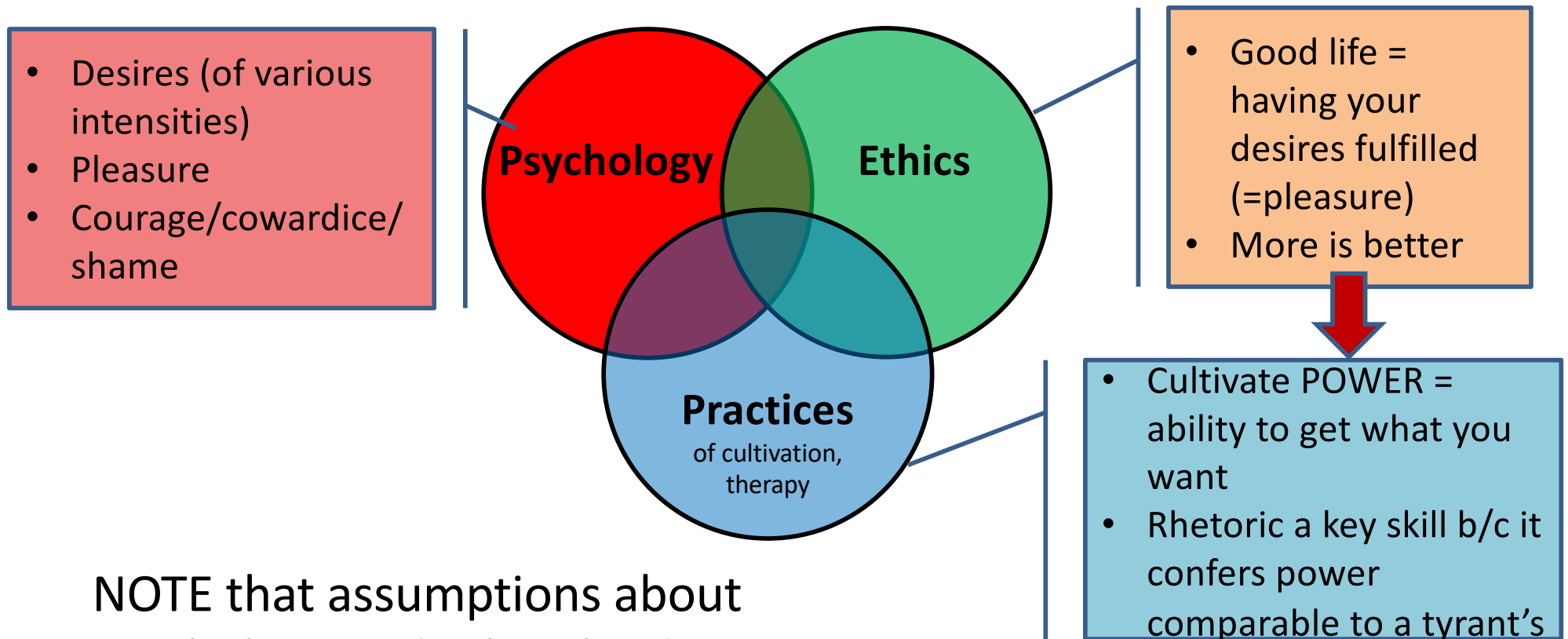
- Dialog that is framed as examining the nature of rhetoric
- Rhetoric = a technique of persuasive speech on any subject
- Does not require actual expertise on the part of the speaker
- Generally pursued for personal advancement, esp. in democratic Athens
- Taught by Gorgias, his student Polus



# Dramatis Personae

- Socrates
  - Chaerephon (friend of Socrates)
  - Gorgias
    - Polus
    - Callicles
- Practitioners, teachers,  
aficionados of Rhetoric

# Callicles' Moral Psychology



NOTE that assumptions about psychology and ethics lead to conclusions about what one ought to DO

# What is Rhetoric? Gorgias Section

- The finest of arts
  - Not a definition, just praise, doesn't tell us what it *is*, and have to know what it is to evaluate it
- The art of persuasion through speech
  - The kind that persuades by educating?
  - The kind that persuades without educating?
- What's good about it?
  - Encompasses or leashes all the other arts – you can get the doctor, engineer, general to do what you want without having to learn medicine, engineering, warfare.
- Is that really good? Can't you do harm, like a boxer who murders people?
  - Gorgias: if someone isn't virtuous, I'll teach him that too.
  - (Acknowledges virtue as a distinct topic, perhaps views rhetorical technique as morally neutral)




# Polus on Rhetoric

- Rhetoric makes one something equivalent to a tyrant – gives you the **power** so that you can get whatever you want.
  - Implicitly, Polus thinks tyrants live a good (ideal?) life!
- Definition of 'power' that Socrates and Polus agree to?
  - Ability to get what you want and benefit yourself
- Polus thinks rhetoric is the key to this
  - A big part of getting what you want is dependent on other people
  - Rhetoric is the art of getting them to do what you want
  - **Socrates:**
    - it isn't an *art* at all
    - It doesn't help the user get what s/he wants

# Socrates' Analogical Characterization of Rhetoric

	Body	Soul/State
<b>Builds Up</b>  <b>Arts</b> – based on knowledge, aim at good of patient  <b>Knacks</b> – counterfeits based on playing to taste, for benefit of practitioner	Physical Training ( <i>gymnastike</i> )  Beauty culture (cosmetics, fashion, corsetry)	
<b>Cures “Illness”</b>  <b>Arts</b> – based on knowledge, aim at good of patient  <b>Knacks</b> – counterfeits based on playing to taste, for benefit of practitioner	Medicine  Cookery (pastry chefs, confectioners)	

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<b>Cures “Illness”</b>  <b>Arts</b> – based on knowledge, aim at good of patient  <b>Knacks</b> – counterfeits based on playing to taste, for benefit of practitioner	Medicine  Cookery (pastry chefs, confectioners)	Laws (courts, punishment)  Rhetoric

# Punishment and Justice

## Polus

- Having dictatorial power and taking whatever I want is unjust – but good for me if I can do it and get away with it
- Being punished for it is bad
- One reason rhetoric is good is that it helps you act unjustly and escape punishment
  - Can persuade assembly/court to do something unjust on your behalf
  - Can argue your way out of punishment

## Socrates

- Being an unjust person is bad
- Being punished for injustice makes one less bad – can cure injustice (being unjust analogous to being sick and taking medicine)
- If rhetoric helps you escape punishment for injustice, it is an impediment to your good – keeps you “sick” or makes you worse.

# Socrates' Analogical Characterization of Rhetoric

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<b>Builds Up</b>  <div> <b>Arts</b> – based on knowledge, aim at good of patient         </div>  <div> <b>Knacks</b> – counterfeits based on playing to taste, for benefit of practitioner         </div>	Physical Training ( <i>gymnastike</i> )          Beauty culture (cosmetics, fashion, corsetry)	Statesmanship          Sophistry
<b>Cures “Illness”</b>  <div> <b>Arts</b> – based on knowledge, aim at good of patient         </div>  <div> <b>Knacks</b> – counterfeits based on playing to taste, for benefit of practitioner         </div>	Medicine          Cookery (pastry chefs, confectioners)	Laws (courts, punishment)          <div> <b>Rhetoric</b> </div>



# Socrates' Analogical Characterization of Rhetoric

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<b>Builds Up</b>		
Arts – based on knowledge, aim at good of patient	Physical Training (gymnastics)	Statesmanship
Knacks – counterfeits based on playing to taste, for benefit of practitioner	Beauty (cosmetics) Cookery	
<b>Cures "Illness"</b>		
Arts – based on knowledge, aim at good of patient	Medicine	Justice (law)
Knacks – counterfeits based on playing to taste, for benefit of practitioner	Cookery (pastry chefs, confectioners)	Rhetoric

Rhetoric not an art (*techne*) because:

- 1) Not based in knowledge of subject
- 2) Aims at good of practitioner rather than patient

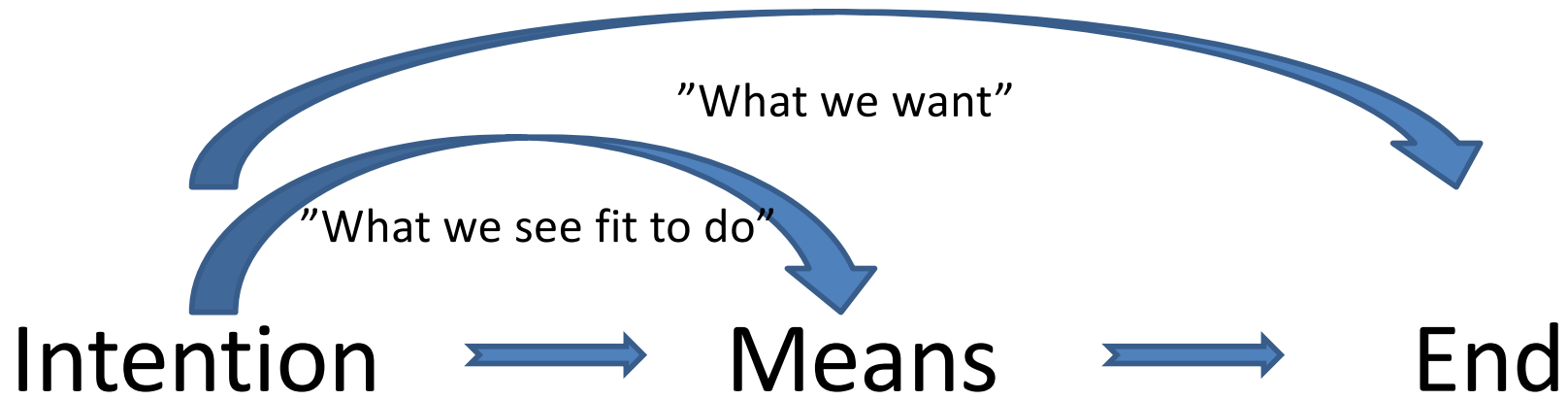
# Not an art....so what?

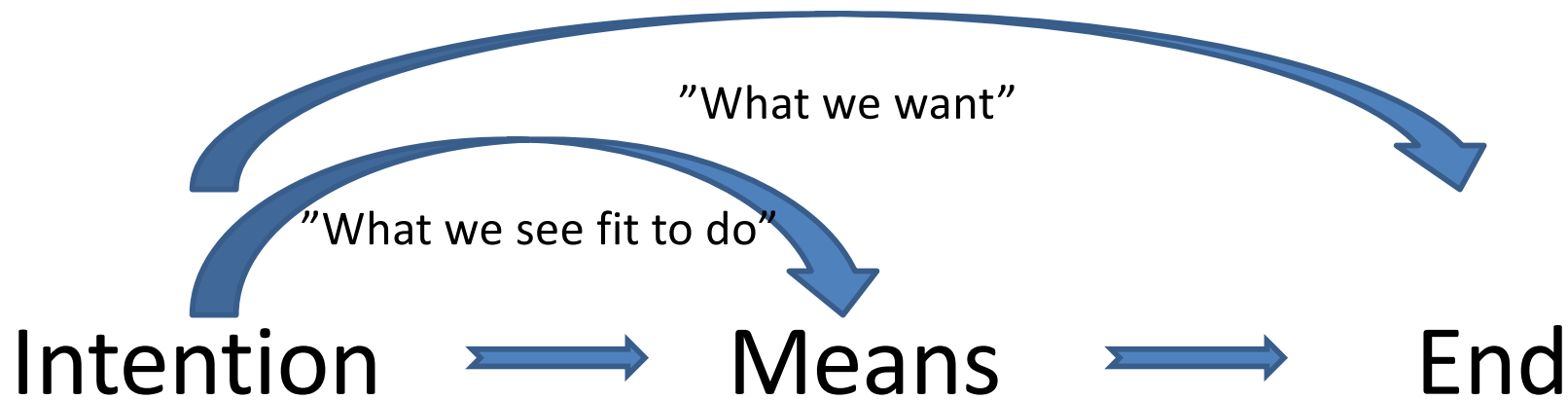
- Polus can still say:
  - Rhetoric allows a person to do/get what they want
  - This amounts to great power – in fact, power like that of a tyrant
  - Does the same things, whether it's an art or a knack: **you can do and get whatever you want!**

# Socrates' Odd Claim

- Socrates opines that tyrants and rhetoricians are able to *do what they see fit to do*, but do not *do what they want*.
  - In another translation, they do “*what they think best*” but not “what they will”
- If they don't do what they want, they don't have power
- What distinction is Socrates making here?

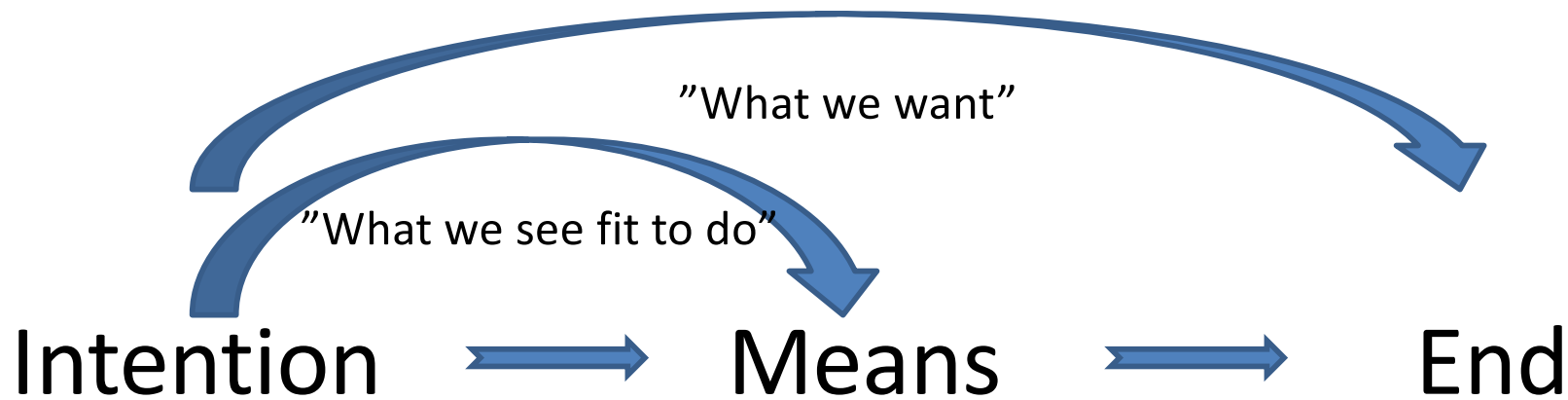






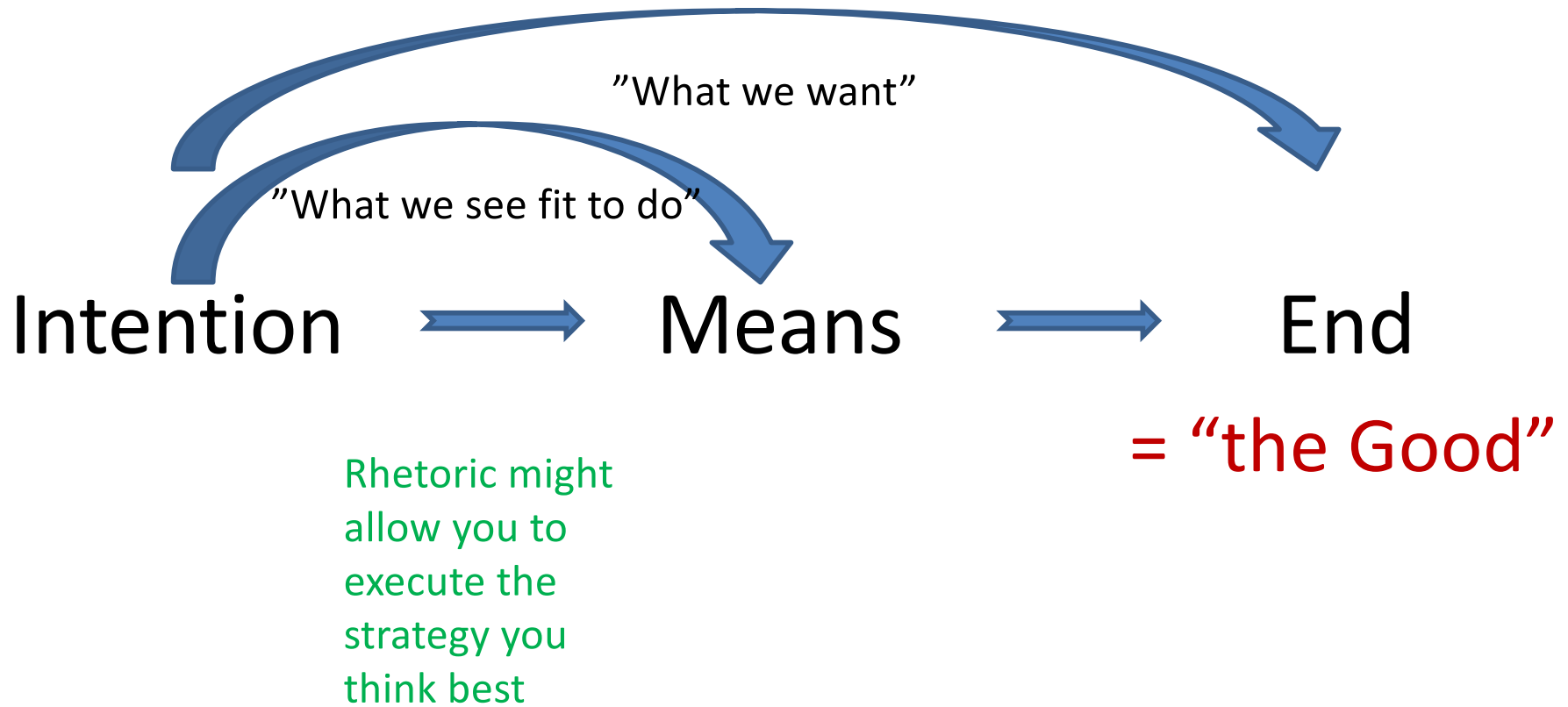
Rhetoric (or tyranny)  
might allow you to  
execute the strategy you  
think best (Polus: taking  
enemies' property,  
putting them to death)

But if those means don't  
really bring about the good  
end – if you've miscalculated  
the best means – it doesn't  
get you the good you  
wanted, and might even do  
harm

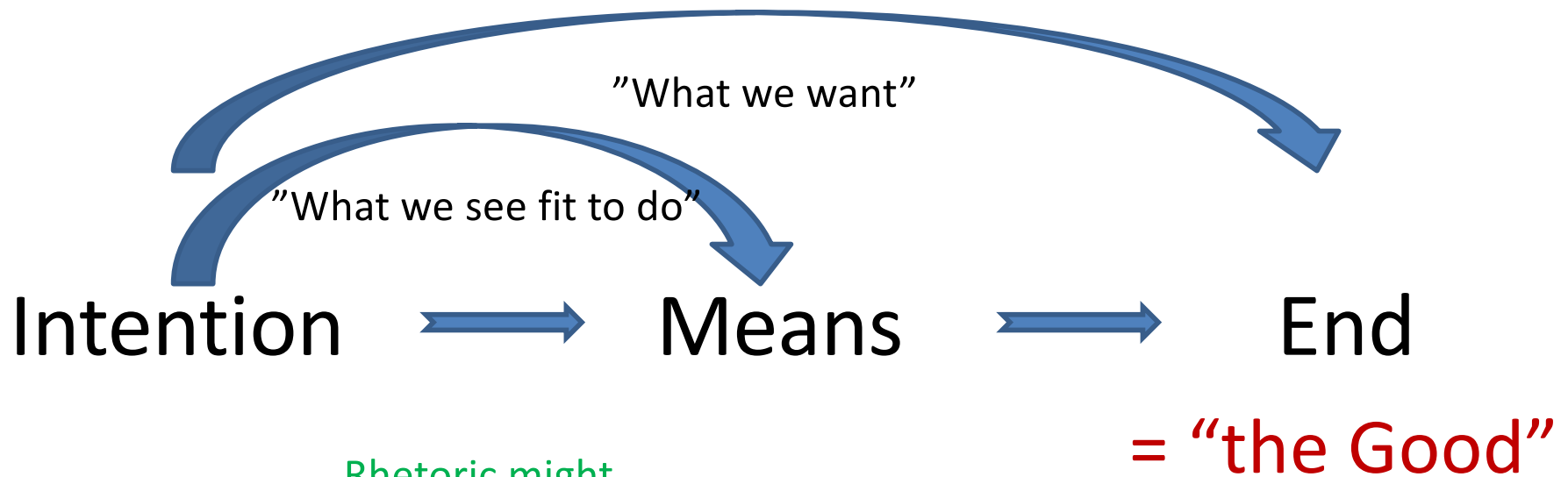


Rhetoric (or tyranny)  
might allow you to  
execute the strategy you  
think best (Polus: taking  
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putting them to death)

Socrates speaks of  
something that *all* our  
actions aim at – perhaps  
a **final end**







Rhetoric might  
allow you to  
execute the  
strategy you  
think best

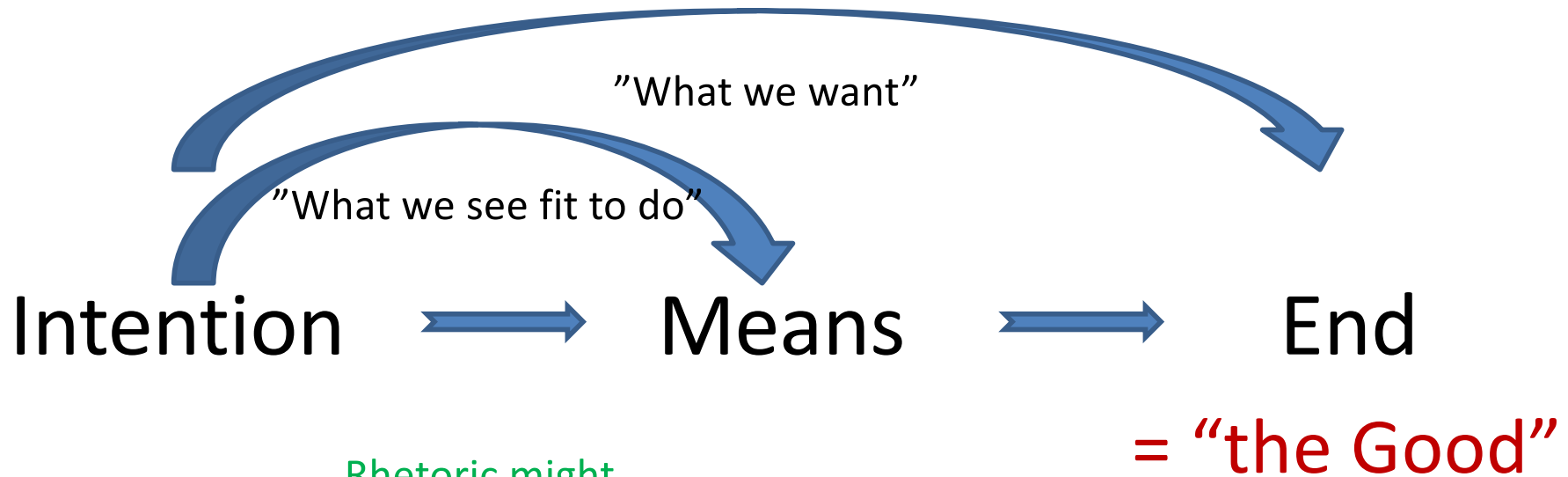
- No real elaboration on what this means in *Gorgias*
- Probably should not assume things from later Platonic dialogs like *Republic*
- Perhaps just "whatever will truly benefit oneself, whatever that might turn out to be"

# Moral Psychology



# Moral Psychology of The *Gorgias*

1. **What we want is the good**
2. We do what we see fit/think best – i.e., what we believe to be the best means to achieve the good
  - So what differentiates the good and bad person, the person who does or does not achieve the good they set out to get?
  - Whether they have the right beliefs about what will really bring about the good – *knowledge* of the good
  - **“Virtue is knowledge of the good”**
  - Relevance given the characterization of rhetoric?
  - Supposed to not require *knowledge* – a way to pursue what you *think best*, but whether it achieves its end depends on whether you were right



Rhetoric might  
help you here –  
executing the  
means

- But not here
- What you need is knowledge of what will really bring about the good end



# Moral Psychology of The *Gorgias*

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A claim about what motivates us – determines how we act:

ONLY OUR BELIEF/CALCULATION of what will bring about the good.

An “intellectualist” psychology (no non-rational forces like appetites, emotions – unless these can be reconstrued as beliefs)

# Belief-Desire Psychology

- People's actions can be understood in terms of
  - What they believe
  - What they want
- E.g., “Mary went to the refrigerator because she **wanted** a soda and **believed** there was soda in the fridge”

# Belief-Desire Psychology

- People's actions can be understood in terms of
  - What they believe
  - What they want
- Prominent type of action theory in
  - Philosophy of Mind
  - Economics
  - Decision Theory/Game Theory

# Moral Psychology of the *Gorgias*

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Note: treats desires as beliefs about what is good (or what will lead to the good)

So a peculiar subclass of belief/desire psychology, or indeed belief-only psychology (except in irreducible wanting of the good)

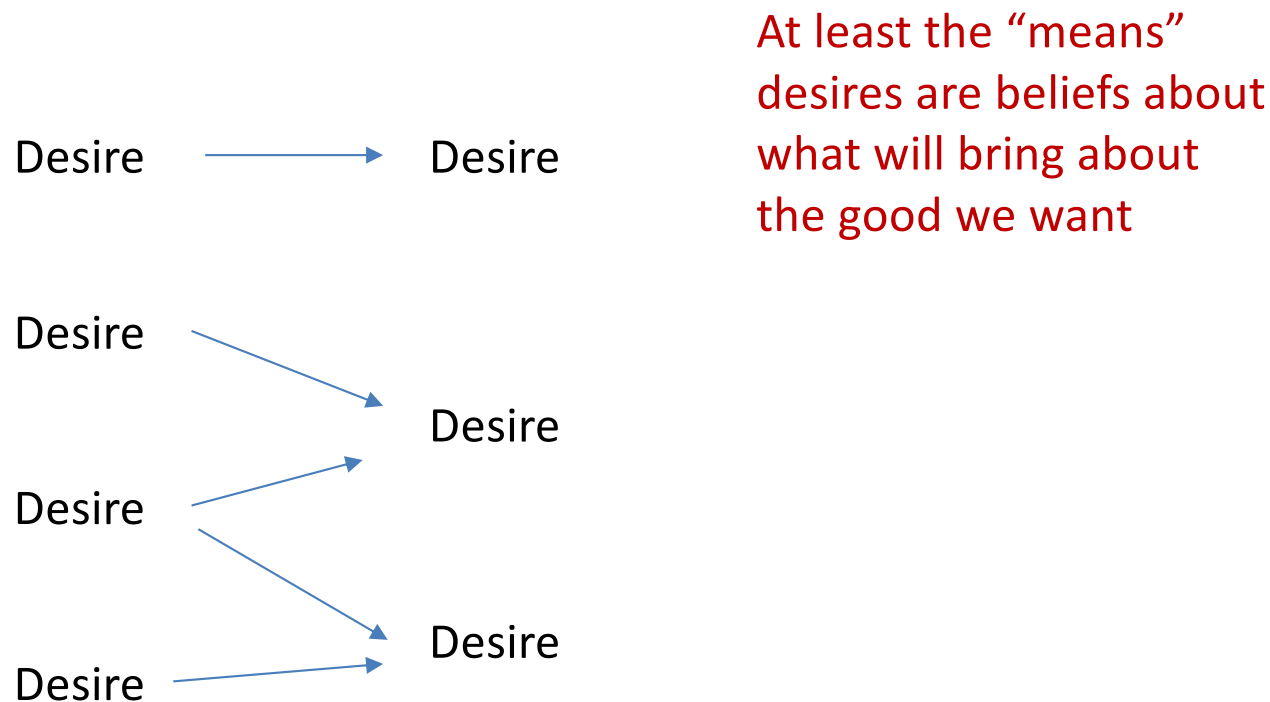
# Moral Psychology of the *Gorgias*

## Ambiguous:

- What we want is the good
  - We do what we see fit/think best – i.e., what we believe to be the best means to achieve the good
  - So what differentiates the good and bad person, the person who does or does not achieve the good they set out to get?
  - Whether they have the right beliefs about what will really bring about the good – *knowledge* of the good
  - “Virtue is knowledge of the good”
  - Relevance given the characterization of rhetoric?
  - Supposed to not require *knowledge* – a way to pursue what you *think best*, but whether it achieves its end depends on whether you were right
- 1) Particular things we take to be good (e.g., health or wealth) – but could we be wrong about these being good as well?
  - 2) “The Good” in some abstract ideal sense – we always aim at “the Good”
    - 1) What is really good for oneself?
    - 2) A more inclusive moral good?
    - 3) An ideal standard (as in later Plato)



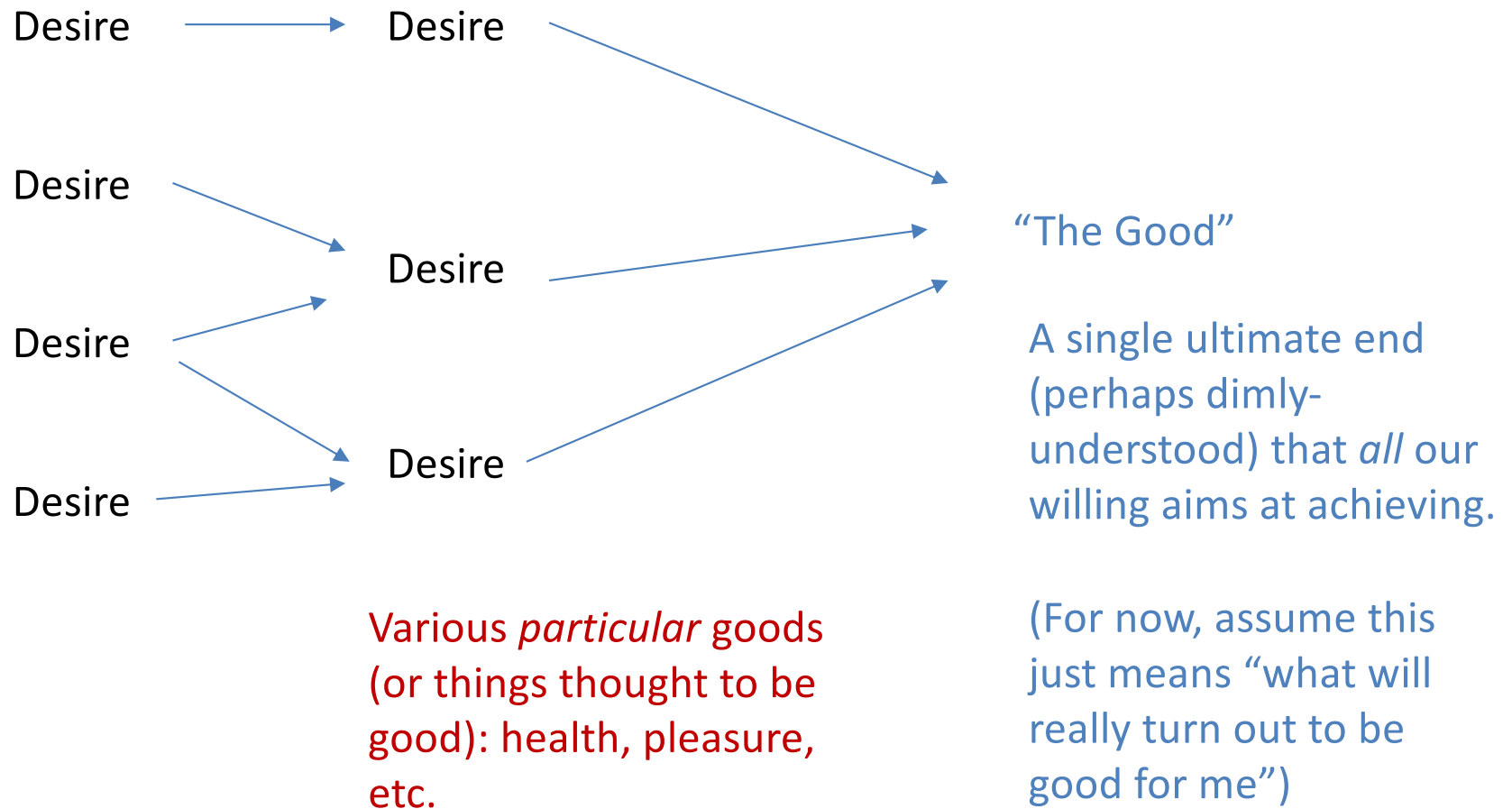
# In terms of desire-mapping



At least the “means”  
desires are beliefs about  
what will bring about  
the good we want

Various *particular* goods  
(or things thought to be  
good): health, wealth,  
honor, pleasure, etc.

# In terms of desire-mapping



## Argument that Virtue is Knowledge (of the Good)

1. We always want the good
2. We always do what we see fit/think best (believe what will bring about the good for ourselves)
3. **Therefore**, If a person knows what is really good (what she thinks best corresponds to what really is best), she will do it (1 and 2)
4. **Therefore**, If a person does not do what is good, it is because she had mistaken beliefs about what is good (lacked knowledge of it). (1 and 2)
5. Virtue is whatever personal trait makes a person good.
6. **Therefore, virtue consists in knowledge of what is really good (3,4,5)**

# First Written Assignment

- Reconstruct in your own words:
  - What Socrates means by distinction between “what we want” and “what we see fit”
  - The implied account of action/psychology
  - How, based on this, he can make a case that virtue is knowledge of the good and that no one does what is bad willingly.
  - Zeyl translation of kakos as evil is suspect. Better “what is bad for oneself”

# Socrates' Moral Psychology



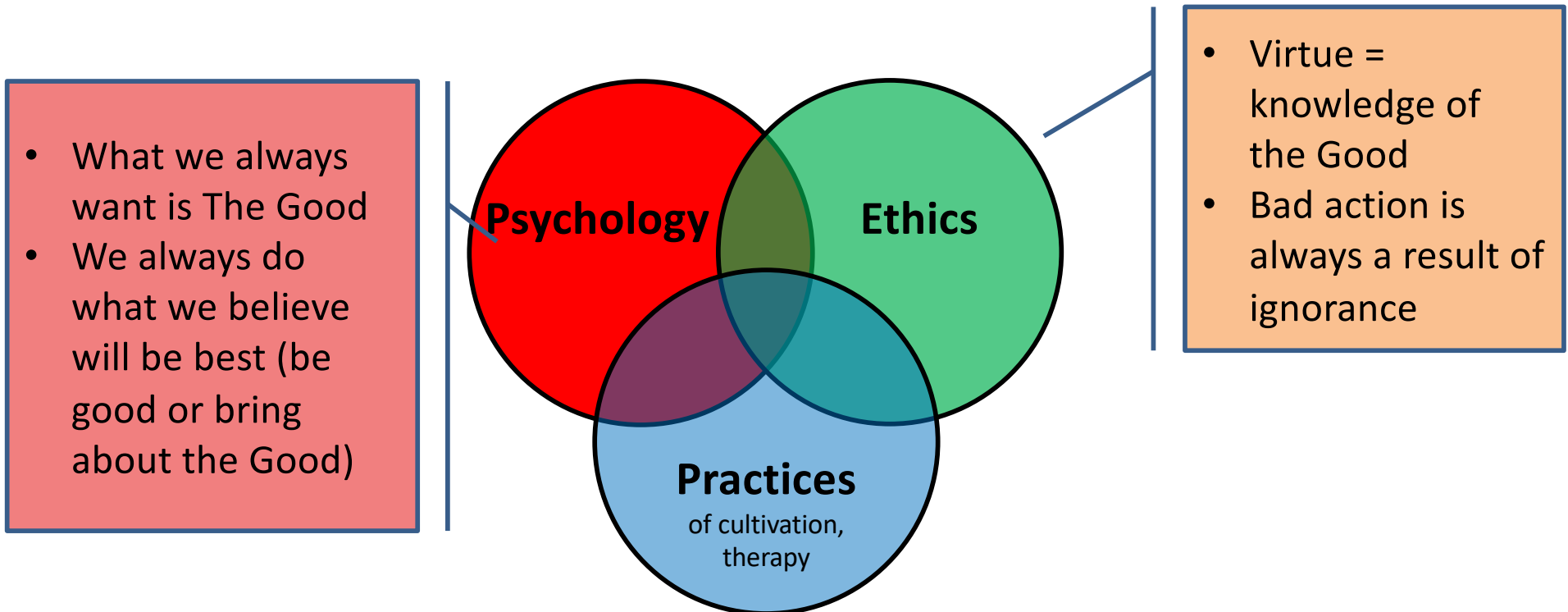


# Socrates' Moral Psychology

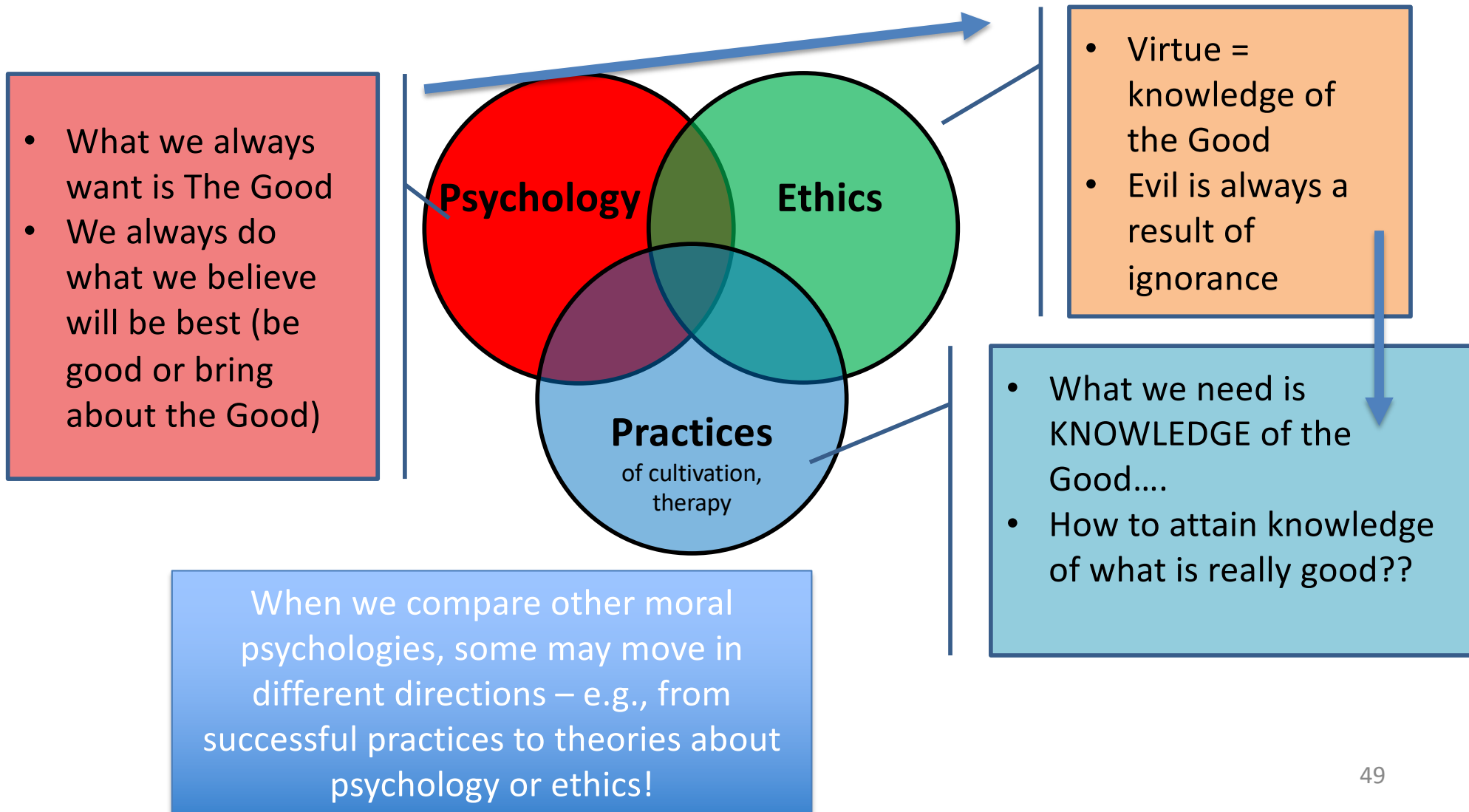
- What we always want is The Good
- We always do what we believe will be best (be good or bring about the Good)



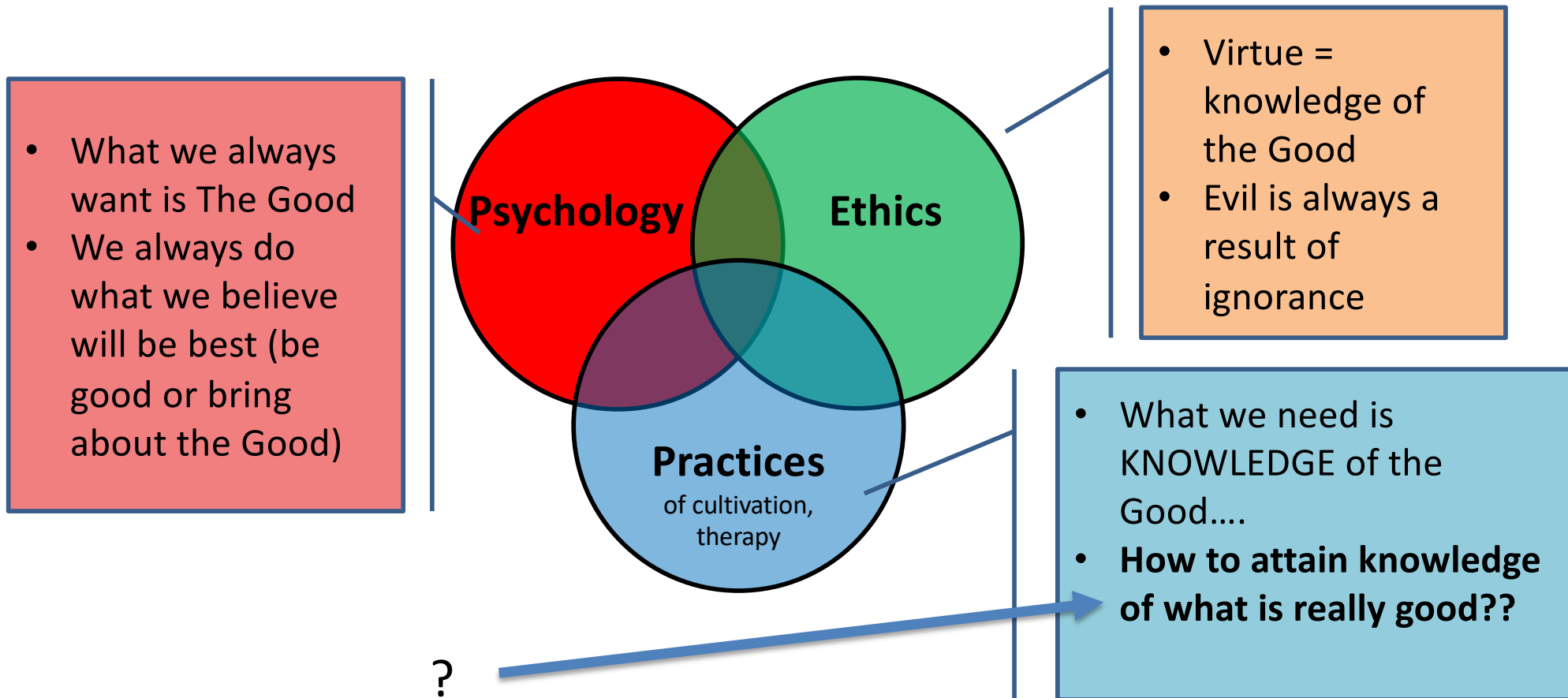
# Socrates' Moral Psychology



# Socrates' Moral Psychology



# Socrates' Moral Psychology





Ask Socrates?





*“The only true **wisdom** is in **knowing** you know **nothing**.”*

Socrates

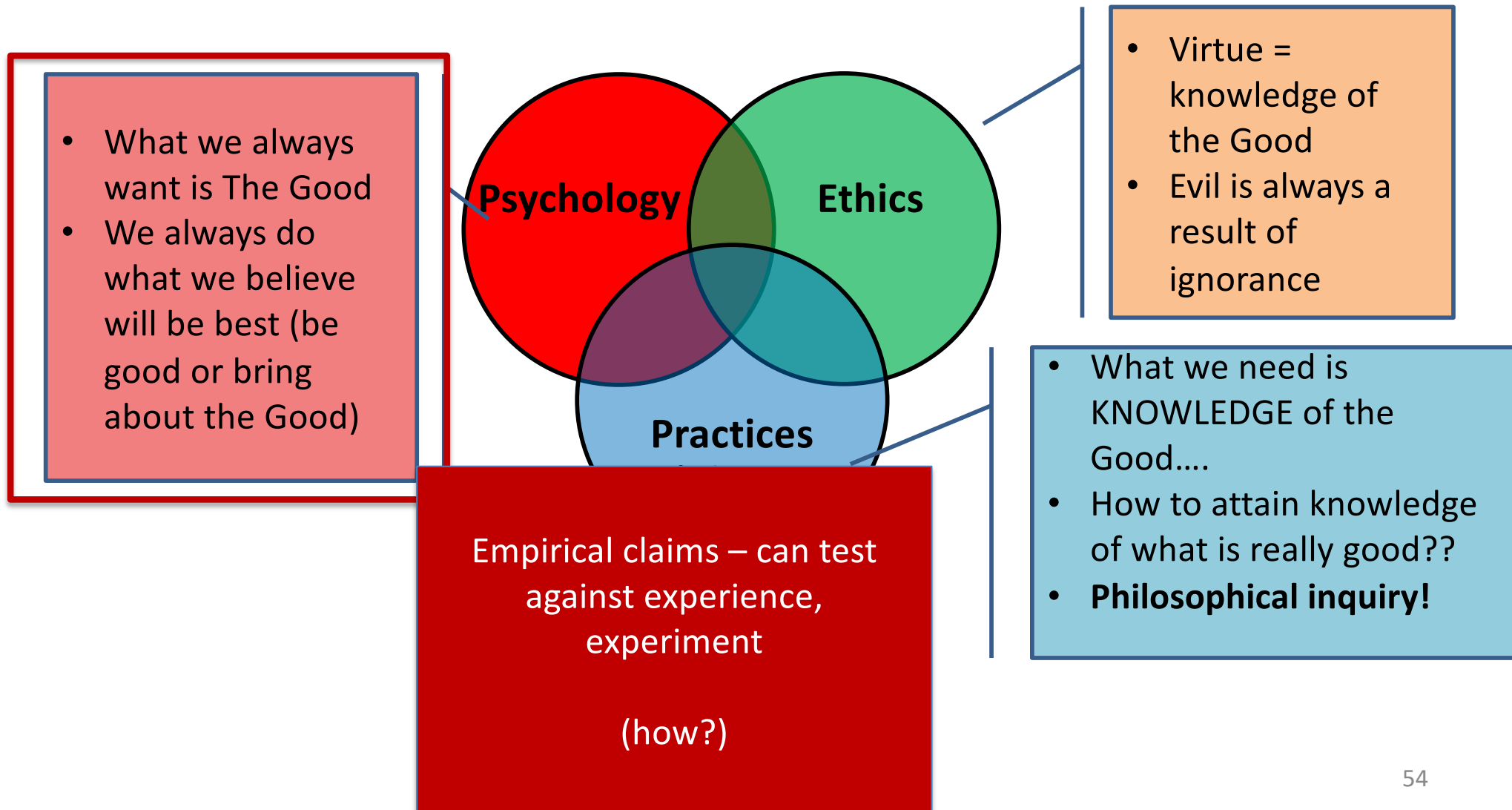
Goalcast



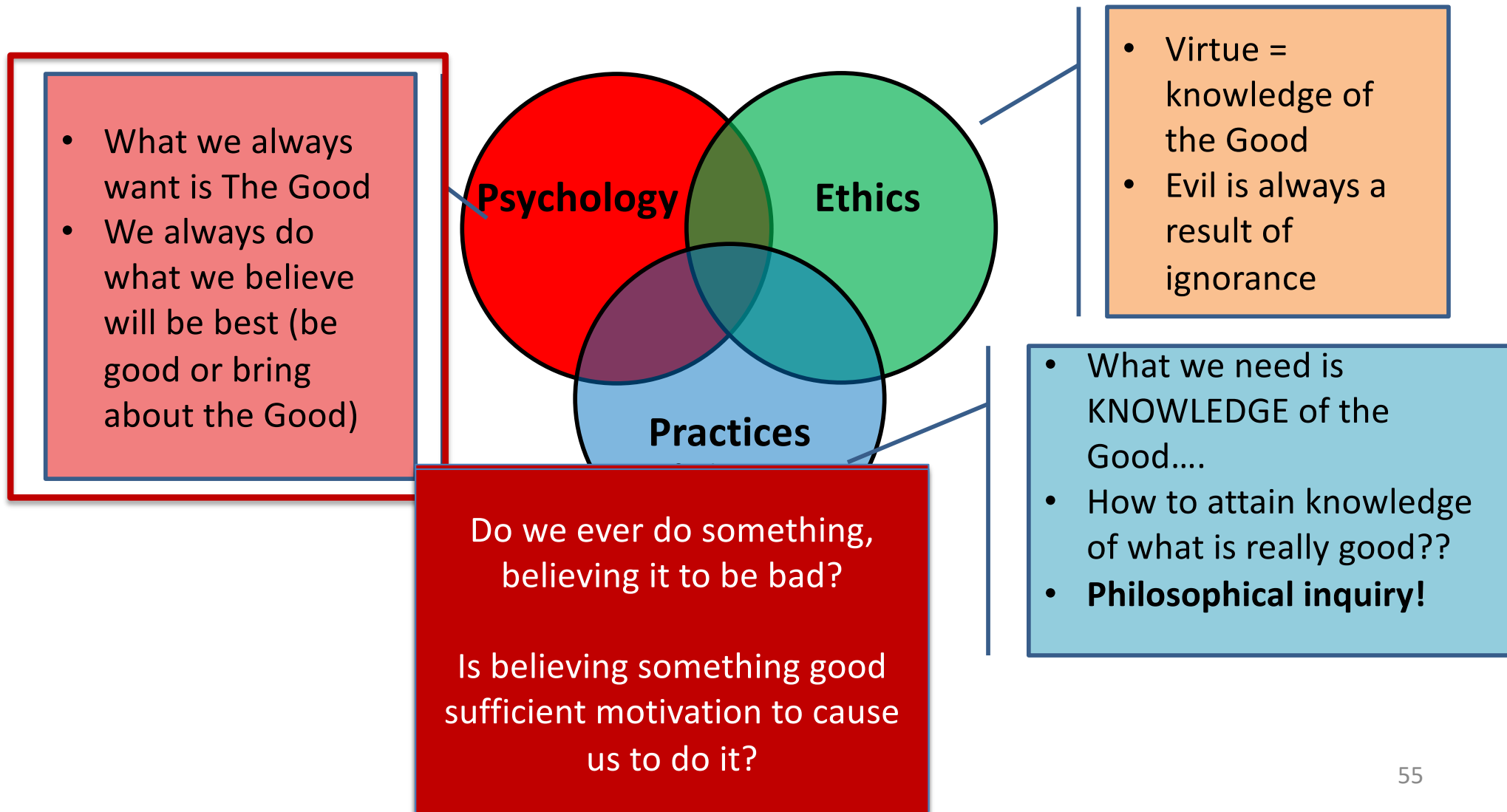
# Socratic Method

- Socrates
  - Claims to have no knowledge of his own
  - Describes himself as a “midwife” of ideas in others
    - *elenchus*
- Elenctic discussion
  - *Might* find someone who knows (but still need to test it to see if it is really sound)
  - Best means we have to develop, test our ideas about how to live, hence most important thing to do. (Why Socrates is always doing it!)

# Socrates' Moral Psychology

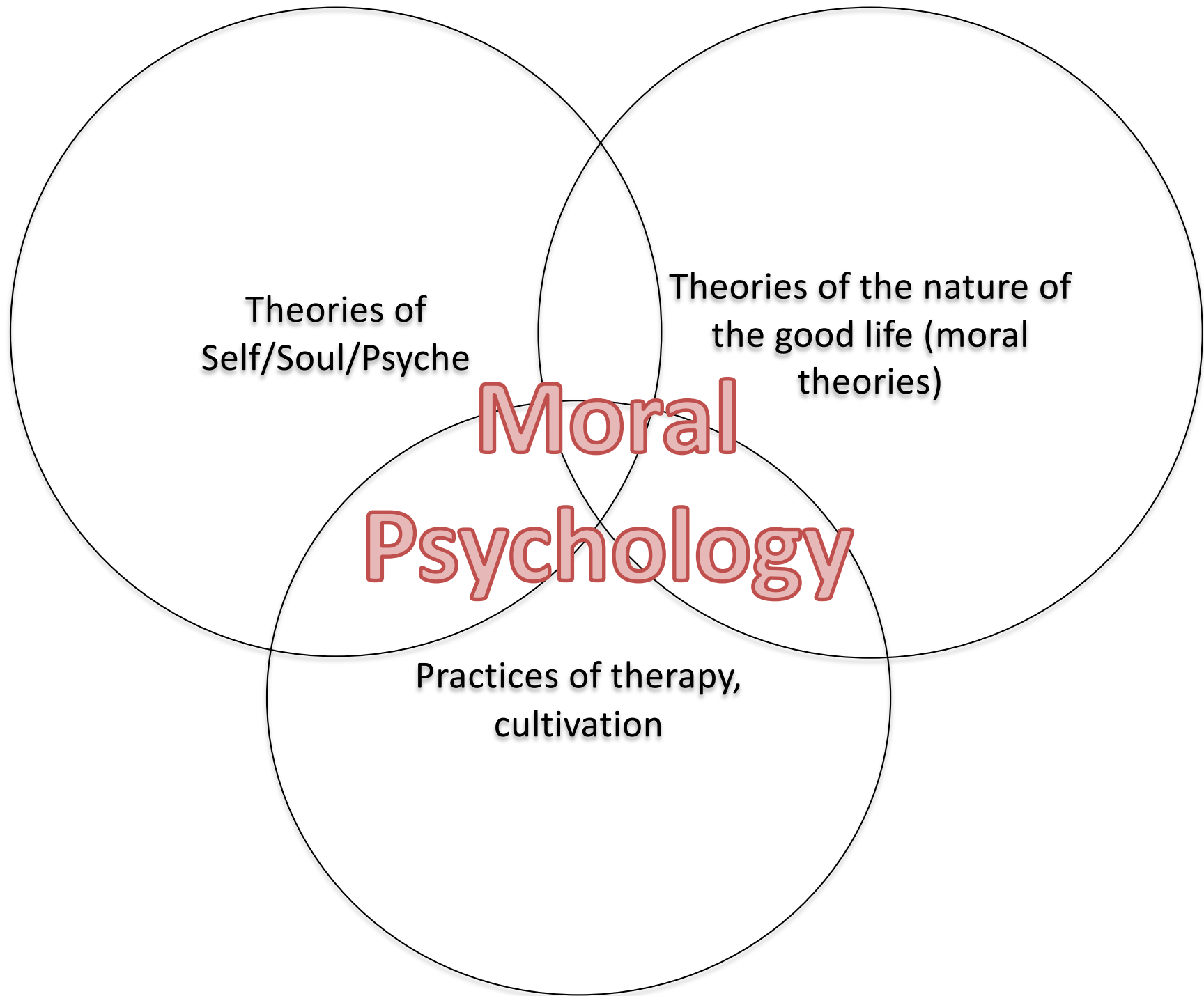


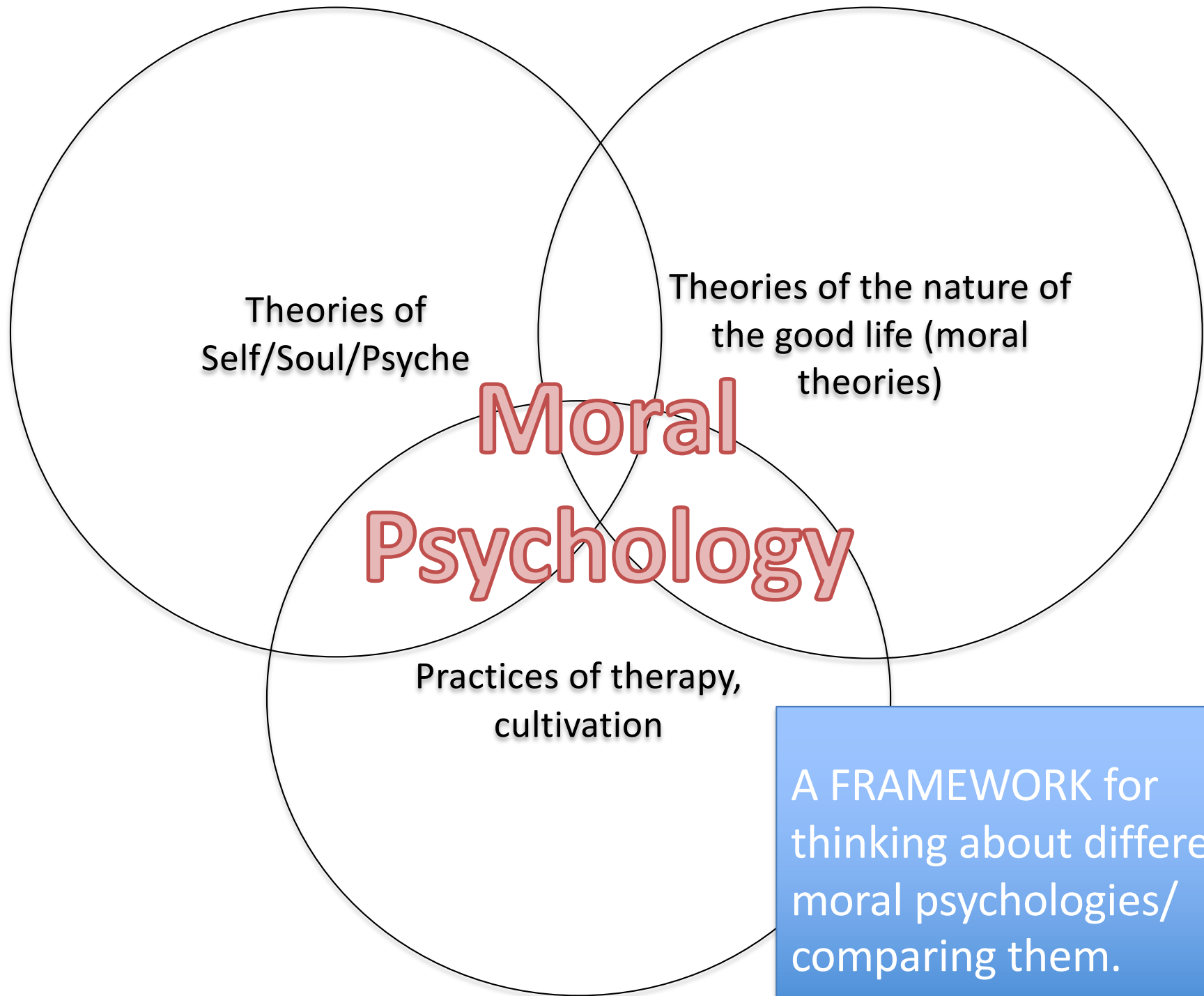
# Socrates' Moral Psychology



# Exercise

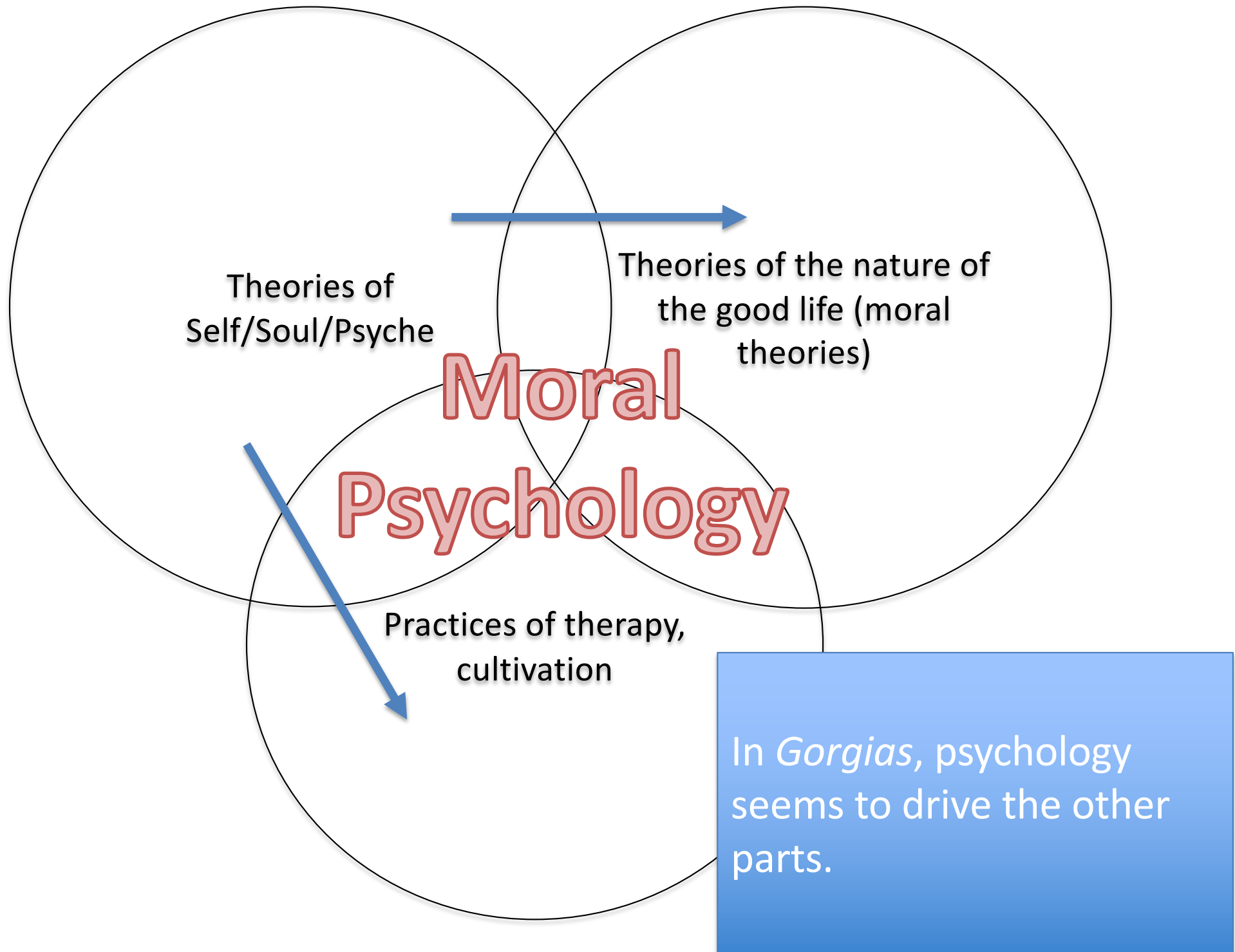
- Reflect and jot down for yourself one or more of the following:
  1. Have you ever done something, believing it to be bad/wrong?
  2. Have you ever believed something good, yet not done it? Found yourself unable to make yourself do it?
  3. Are there things on your desire list that you do not in fact consider good?

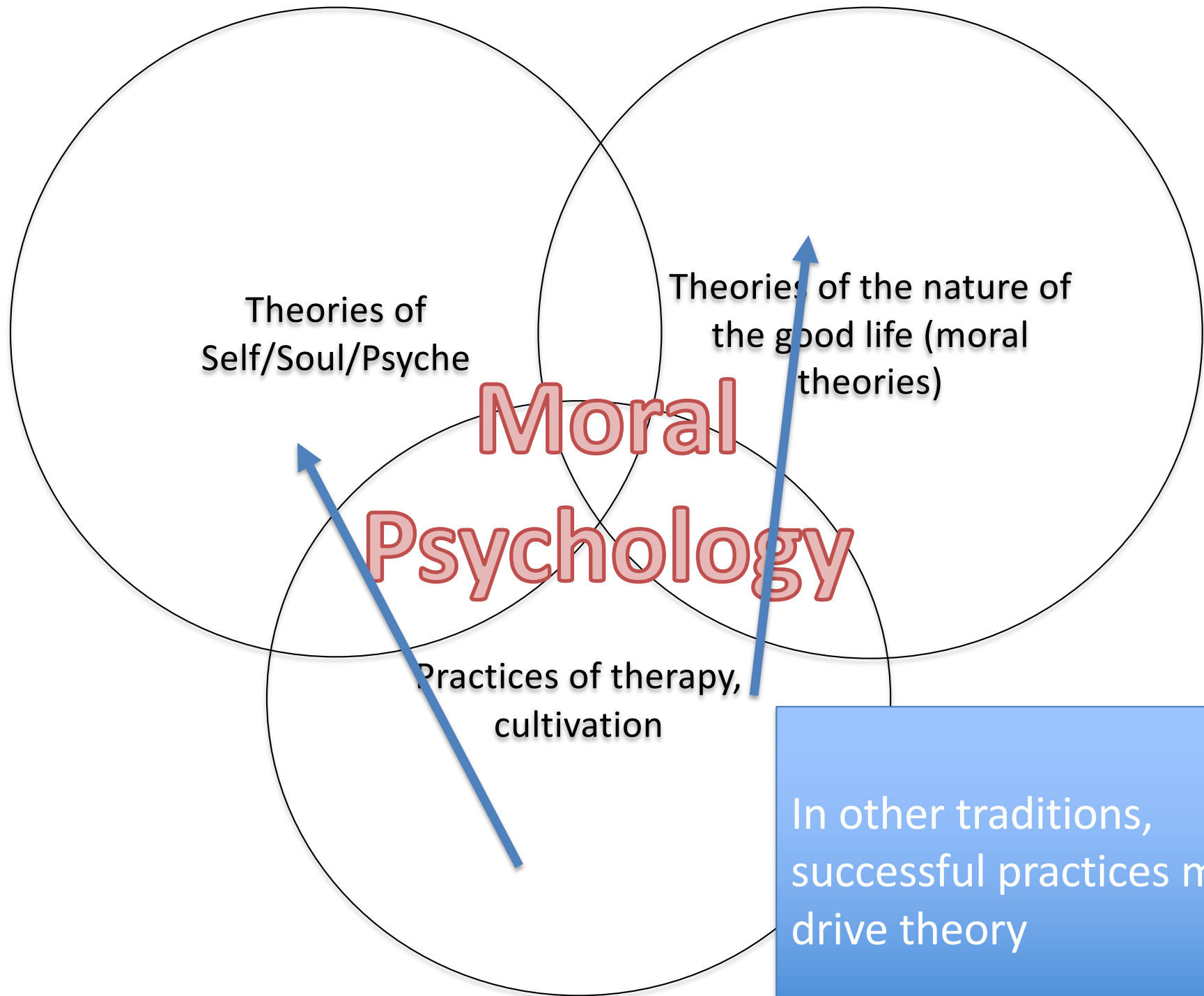




A FRAMEWORK for thinking about different moral psychologies/ comparing them.







In other traditions,  
successful practices may  
drive theory