A Quick Introduction to Plato's Socratic Dialogues

The three most important Ancient Greek philosophers are Socrates (469–399 B.C.E.), Plato (429–347 B.C.E.), and Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.). And, as it worked out, Socrates was the teacher of Plato, and Plato was the teacher of Aristotle. Our interest here is, first, with Plato because he is the author of the *Apology* and *Crito*. But we must also think about Socrates because he is the main character in most of Plato's works. These works are dialogues (which are sort of like plays), and in them Socrates converses with, usually, just one other person.

Socrates himself wrote nothing, and so we have no works by Socrates. Thus, we can only glean what he thought based on what others, primarily Plato, wrote about him. There is some disagreement about how faithfully Plato represents Socrates' ideas—although almost everyone agrees that, at some point, Plato switched from writing about Socrates' ideas to writing about ideas that were completely his own. The resulting confusion, however, means that there is the *historical Socrates*, the actual person, and the *character Socrates*, the character in Plato's dialogues (or we might call this latter one *Plato's Socrates*); and we don't always know how to separate the two.

For our purposes, we should follow what is said in G.M.A Grube's introduction to the *Apology* and assume that the *Apology* is a fairly accurate account of what Socrates said at his trial—the trial is an actual event that happened in 399 B.C.E. For the other dialogue, the *Crito*, we can take the attitude that we're not sure. Obviously, the character Socrates is in the dialogue. But we don't know how similar that character is to the real person (the historical Socrates).

Read the introduction that is provided for each dialogue. The *Apology* and *Crito* relate events that happen consecutively, although the *Apology* is the only one that is describing an event that is known to have specifically occurred. Nonetheless, the historical Socrates did engage in the kind of discussion that is described in the *Crito* (especially the first half of that dialogue). And, although that is just one short example, that sort of questioning and investigation is basically the reason why he was put on trial. [1]

[1] A feature that is sometimes included in the translations of Plato's works is the numbering and lettering in the margins (e.g., 3, 3b, 3c, 3d, etc.). This refers to the page numbering used in a 16th century translation of Plato's works (the number is the page and then the letters were evenly spaced down the page). Even though the numbers don't correspond to the pages in most of the translations that people read today, the system is often retained because it makes it easy to find a specific place in the text.