

The philosopher Socrates remains, as he was in his lifetime (469–399 B.C.E.),^[1] an enigma, an inscrutable individual who, despite having written nothing, is considered one of the handful of philosophers who forever changed how philosophy itself was to be conceived. All our information about him is second-hand and most of it vigorously disputed, but his trial and death at the hands of the Athenian democracy is nevertheless the founding myth of the academic discipline of philosophy, and his influence has been felt far beyond philosophy itself, and in every age. Because his life is widely considered paradigmatic not only for the philosophic life but, more generally, for how anyone ought to live, Socrates has been encumbered with the adulation and emulation ordinarily reserved for religious figures – strange for someone who tried so hard to make others do their own thinking and for someone convicted and executed on the charge of irreverence toward the gods. Certainly he was impressive, so impressive that many others were moved to write about him, all of whom found him strange by the conventions of fifth-century Athens: in his appearance, personality, and behavior, as well as in his views and methods.

So thorny is the difficulty of distinguishing the historical Socrates from the Socrateses of the authors of the texts in which he appears and, moreover, from the Socrateses of scores of later interpreters, that the whole contested issue is generally referred to as the Socratic problem. Each age, each intellectual turn, produces a Socrates of its own. It is no less true now that, “The ‘real’ Socrates we have not: what we have is a set of interpretations each of which represents a ‘theoretically possible’ Socrates,” as Cornelia de Vogel (1955, 28) put it. In fact, de Vogel was writing as a new analytic paradigm for interpreting Socrates was about to become standard—Gregory Vlastos’s model (§2.2), which would hold sway until the mid 1990s. Who Socrates really was is fundamental to virtually any interpretation of the philosophical dialogues of Plato because Socrates is the dominant figure in most of Plato’s dialogues.