

---

# The Portrayal of Socrates by Damascius

Androniki Kalogiratou  
Harokopeio University

---

## Abstract

*In this paper I propose to investigate Damascius and his relation to Socrates. Late antique Hellenistic philosophy has occasionally proven to be an area riddled with a fascinating array of syncreticism, mystery and inconsistency. My aim is to see how the image of Socrates has been preserved but also altered to fit the conceptions of the time. I started my investigation with the suspicion that Socrates would have been reduced to a puppet, a non-entity, crushed by a thousand year absence. Instead he emerged almost unscathed and re-invented: a symbol of pagan resistance against Christian oppression, a speculative philosopher, carrying the Platonic and Neoplatonic thought firmly on his shoulders, but also an exemplary teacher, mentor and exponent of practical wisdom.*

## I. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Damascius (c.460–c.539 A.D.) originated from Damascus, Syria. He was one of the last Neoplatonists and the last Platonic *diadochus* at the head of the Platonic Academy. Socrates (469–399 B.C.) was Plato's forerunner in Athens. The Platonic tradition lasted almost a thousand years between these two poles: Socrates and Damascius. Our aim is to trace down the changes that took place during this period. Socrates' portrait as it is painted by Plato,<sup>2</sup> and the difference to its execution by Damascius.

Today, only a part of Damascius' work is extant. We have access to his *Questions and Answers on First Principles (De Principiis)*, the *Philosophical History* and a *Commentary on the Parmenides*. Student notes from his lectures *On the Philebus* and the *Phaedo* are also available. He also wrote now lost commentaries *On the Republic*, the *Phaedrus*, the *Sophist*, the *Timaeus*, the *Laws*, and the *First Alcibiades*: dialogues which are classified in the middle or the mature period of Plato's work.

In order to deduce their presence and relative importance, we will seek nominal references to Socrates, Plato and other Neoplatonic philosophers (displayed in table I). In Damascius' own works there are a total of 151 references to Plato, 66 to Iamblichus, 56 to Proclus, 34 to Socrates, 24 to

Aristotle, 29 to the Chaldeans and five to Plotinus. In the lecture notes of two of his students, there are 75 references to Socrates, 40 to Plato, 28 to Proclus, 18 to Iamblichus and Aristotle, 9 to Plotinus and one to the Chaldeans. We can make two comments on these statistics.

First, the significance of references made to Socrates seems important, both in the student lecture notes, where he ranks first and in Damascius' own writings, where he holds an intermediate position. Plato is also mentioned often and this shows a gravitation of Damascius' thought towards the founders of Platonism rather than Plotinus, the later founder of Neoplatonism. However the repeated mention of Socrates does not necessarily mean that he was on a par with Plato. One might have expected in Damascius a distancing from Plato and Socrates, as late Neoplatonists showed an inclination to focus on their own interpretation of Platonism and engage in dialogue regarding (fine theological) issues that they regarded highly amongst themselves, as is testified by the high occurrence of references to Proclus (56) and Iamblichus (66) in Damascius' own works and the relatively average occurrence of references to Proclus (28) and Iamblichus (18) in Damascius' lecture notes.

References to:	Socrates	Plato	Aristotle	Plotinus	Iamblichus	Proclus	Chaldeans
In Damascius' Own Works							
<i>De Principiis</i>	15	70	8	3	35	4	11
<i>Vita Isidori (ap Sudam)</i>	6	10	3	0	3	27	4
<i>Vita Isidori (ap Photium Bibl)</i>	0	17	4	0	4	25	2
<i>In Parmenidem</i>	13	54	9	2	24	0	12
Total	34	151	24	5	66	56	29
In Damascius' Student Lecture Notes							
<i>In Philebum</i>	21	15	8	0	10	13	0
<i>In Phaedonem A</i>	51	17	7	5	8	5	0
<i>In Phaedonem B</i>	3	8	3	4	0	10	1
Total	75	40	18	9	18	28	1

Secondly, the discrepancies in the ranking of various philosophers - between Damascius' own writings and the lecture notes taken by his students - show that the change in authorship signifies a change in writing style and possibly content. Damascius mentions Plato in his own works 151 times, while he mentions Socrates 34 times. On the contrary, his student lecture notes mention Plato 40 times and Socrates 75. These figures are reversed in relation to magnitude. Similar discrepancies between original texts and lecture notes are also noted regarding Aristotle, Plotinus, Proclus, Iamblichus and others as it is evident in Table I. Therefore the philosopher's own

writings may be taken to constitute a more reliable source regarding his own views, than the notes taken by his students during lectures. It is possible that a student may misunderstand a comment made by Damascius or interpret it differently (according to his own views on the matter in question) and thus record it wrongly or inaccurately. We are therefore going to rely more on Damascius' original thought, than its secondary sources.

In order to put in context Damascius' attitude towards Socrates and Plato, we can seek corresponding references in other Neoplatonists. As we see in Table II, Proclus mentions Socrates almost 1,400 times, in the totality of his works and Plato almost 1,700 times. Plotinus mentions Socrates 41 times and Plato 56. Finally Iamblichus mentions Socrates once and Plato 31 times. Comparative to these figures, Damascius' approach, who mentions Socrates 109 times and Plato 191, seems to lie closer to Proclus and Plato than Plotinus and Iamblichus.

References to:	Socrates	Plato	Origen/Origenists
By:			
Plato	1,484	3	-
Proclus	1,399	1,697	17
Damascius	109	191	30
Plotinus	41	56	0
Iamblichus	1	31	7

Having reached these conclusions, we would like to note that the method of deducing the significance of Socrates through counting nominal references is bound to some limitations. (a) One is the length and the nature of the texts in which they appear. For example, Damascius' *In Parmenidem*, where Socrates is mentioned 13 times, is by far larger (maybe two or three times) than the *In Phaedonem*, where Socrates is mentioned 54 times. So, the shorter a text is the less likely it is for a name or its repetition to occur and vice versa. (b) Also, it is in the nature of texts such as commentaries on Platonic dialogues, to repeat many times the name 'Socrates' (in cases such as 'Socrates says') for example, without bestowing any particular significance to Socrates himself. On the other hand, in an original philosophical or other work, Socrates would only be mentioned when something would be said specifically about him. This may probably explain why (in table II) there are so many instances of Proclus mentioning Socrates (whose many lengthy commentaries are extant) and so few of them in Plotinus (whose only extant work, *The Enneads*, is speculative in nature and relatively short). These are factors that cannot be accounted for in the name counts. (c) Finally, another limitation of nominal reference counts is that they do not include indirect references to a philosopher. For example, the author

of Damascius' lecture notes *On the Phaedo* often refers to Proclus as 'the commentator' or 'he'.<sup>5</sup> This means that by counting the occurrence of a philosopher's name we miss indirect references and thus can only approximately calculate his significance from the times he is mentioned. However, in spite of these limitations, we think that word counts are a reliable method of obtaining a good first impression of the matter at hand.

## II. Socrates in Damascius' Philosophy

In his speculative works Damascius, like Socrates, puts more emphasis in asking pertinent questions and giving alternative solutions, than in proposing precise answers to the problems he poses. There is an aporetic disposition in common between the two philosophers. They both feel most at ease when making alternative hypotheses, which they subsequently defeat.<sup>6</sup> It is not accidental that Damascius' only surviving speculative work is titled *Questions and Answers on First Principles*. However, contrary to Socrates, one would say that Damascius is not distinguished for his emphasis on rationalism.

In general, his philosophy is influenced by eastern mysticism. The Chaldean Oracles<sup>7</sup> and the Orphic tradition play a major exegetical role in his rendering of Hellenic philosophy. His thought is characterized by a strong metaphysical angst with religious overtones, which are reflected in the way he approaches the Platonic Socrates. Following the long tradition that started with Plotinus, Neoplatonic philosophers give to themselves the role of *exheghe*, commentator of Plato, while in the process they develop and expand their own ideas. Thus routinely, Socrates acknowledges and sanctions Damascius' ontology.<sup>8</sup> He seems to be aware that the highest intellectually accessible hypostasis is the One. It contains and produces everything in the intelligible world. Beyond the One, there exists another principle, which is not in our powers to comprehend: ineffable, inexpressible, unknowable, unmentionable,<sup>9</sup> something strongly reminiscent of a negative theology.<sup>10</sup>

In Damascius' philosophical works such as the *De Principiis* and the *In Parmenidem*, Socrates usually appears in relation to Plato. As we can see in Table III, we often come across standard formulations such as: "the *Theaetetus* Socrates says" ("φησιν ὁ ἐν Θεαιτήτῳ Σωκράτης", *De Princ.* 1.9.21), «the *Republic* Socrates says" ("ὁ δὲ ἐν Πολιτείᾳ Σωκράτης ... φησὶ", *De Princ.* 1.66.9), "the *Philebus* Socrates shows the cause" ("αἰτιᾶται ὁ ἐν Φιλήβῳ Σωκράτης", *De Princ.* 1.64.3), "as the *Phaedrus* Socrates says" ("ὡς φησιν ὁ ἐν Φαίδρῳ Σωκράτης", *In Parm.* 94.1) and other such cases. These are not unique to Damascius. In fact Proclus uses them quite extensively. Thus, in the totality of his works we have 23 occurrences of "the

*Phaedrus Socrates*", 33 occurrences of "the *Republic Socrates*". Syrianus and Simplicius also employ them. This observation leaves us with the impression that they consist of standard formulas used by some late Neoplatonists.

Occurrence in <sup>11</sup>	Damascius	Proclus	Simplicius	Syrianus	Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Olympiodorus
The <i>Philebus Socrates</i>	1	19	0	0	0
The <i>Republic Socrates</i>	4	33	1	0	0
The <i>Theaetetus Socrates</i>	2	4	2	0	0
The <i>Phaedo Socrates</i>	1	7	4	0	0
The <i>Cratylus Socrates</i>	2	3	0	0	0
The <i>Phaedrus Socrates</i>	4	23	1	1	0

So what do such formulations entail regarding Socrates, given the fact that they do not appear in the context of commentaries? Reading these passages one assumes that Damascius and his contemporaries did not think of Socrates in the middle and late Platonic dialogues as a soulless *dramatis persona*. A caricature placed strategically by Plato in order to stimulate dramatic action and voice the views of its author. If that was the case, it would suffice to say "Plato in the *Theaetetus*", "Plato in the *Republic*" and so on. On the other hand, Socrates was not regarded as a philosopher in his own right either.

As those formulations make it clear, he was regarded as an amalgam of both Platonic and Socratic thought, being constantly defined in relation to the Platonic works in which he featured. Two factors must account for this treatment: Socrates had shaped Plato's way of thinking, by being his mentor. Plato had shaped the future generations' way of thinking about Socrates, by preserving (together with Xenophon) his philosophy in his opus - Socrates having left no written testimony. It seems reasonable to assume that late Neoplatonists saw the Platonic Socrates in this light. In Damascius' *De Principiis* some other passages reinforce this view. During an analysis of the theory of Ideas, he explains that

the human species is characterized by common attributes, even though each and every one of us has their own personal attributes that make him or her unique; so one cannot append to all human beings the Idea of Socrates, while one can append the Idea of Human Being to Socrates, Plato and all other humans (*De Princ.* 208.14-23).

Then he cursorily mentions that "Socrates is no different to Plato" ("οὐκ ἄρα ἕτερος Σωκράτης Πλάτωνος", *De Princ.* 208.9). Does this reinforce a previously

stated suspicion that Socrates is nothing more than Plato's mouthpiece, the empty shell of a *dramatis persona*? In another passage Damascius wonders:

"the rational soul doesn't get educated by absorbing the lessons of its teacher? The Pythagorean does not become philosophising? Nor Platonic? Socrates said: how can one know the state of mind of someone else, if they don't have anything in common?" (*De Princ.* II.3.23-25).

It can be deduced from this and the previous passages that Socrates and Plato are not different, because Plato is a student of Socrates and they have common characteristics of the soul. This identification represents more a merger of teacher-student views and less a merger at the level of a *dramatis persona* with its author. Damascius then sees the Socrates of the Platonic dialogues expressing opinions that he would have voiced in real life and which Plato as an authentic pupil could conjure and transcribe in his works with accuracy.

### III. Socrates in Damascius' Historiography

In the historiographic work "*Philosophical History*" or "*Life of Isidorus*"<sup>12</sup> Damascius recreates the atmosphere of late Roman antiquity and paints a vivid portrait of the Athenian and Alexandrian pagan communities of his era. He mentions Socrates in various contexts, in relation to people and situations that he describes. Through these references Socrates is portrayed as a teacher, proponent of the oral tradition<sup>13</sup> and the personification of practical wisdom. Socrates in this instance is the counterpart of Plato, who comes across as representing intellectual wisdom.

Damascius expounds in his commentary *On the Phaedo* three alternative ways of approaching the Good or the One: a) practical virtue, through occupation with politics and external pursuits, b) intellectual wisdom, through the practice of philosophy c) theurgy, through purification of the soul.<sup>14</sup> The ultimate principle's ineffable nature is such that it cannot be intellectually fathomed.<sup>15</sup> It can be approximated through an experience of the void and lack of words to express it.<sup>16</sup> Such is the result of the separation of the soul from matter and the sensible world, a separation that can be perfected by death of the material body.<sup>17</sup>

In the *Philosophical History*, Damascius testifies to the great reverence of his mentor Isidore for Socrates, mentioning that "when defending Socrates, Isidore spoke too profoundly for his pupils' understanding" (*PH* 37B). Further on, he explains that "leaving to others the graceful display of words, [Isidore] occupied himself with revealing the thing itself, pronouncing concepts rather than words, or rather, not even concepts as he brought to light the very essence of the things themselves" (*PH* 37D).<sup>18</sup> This condescending attitude towards the spoken and written word is due to the

remoteness of the highest principles from the sensible world and is reflected by other Neoplatonic philosophers. Porphyry relates that Plotinus composed his works in a state of inward contemplation and hardly ever read what he had written. It was left to him to correct and decipher his teacher's unintelligible scribbles.<sup>19</sup> However Socrates did not seem to fall in that category. Theosebius' teacher, Hierocles, who was "an adornment to the Alexandrian scholastic scene" and "an accomplished Platonic commentator" (PH 45A) "once likened the words of Socrates to dice: however they fall, they fall rightly" (PH 45B). Thus Damascius draws a line between his own contemporaries and Plato or Socrates whose eloquence exceeded even their own expectations.

Elsewhere Socrates is paralleled with the Alexandrian Theosebius, who was not a great theorist but a virtuous man with a talent in the interpretation of Platonic dialogues. He was thought to live a public existence with the aim of perfecting his inner wisdom and practical virtue. He was tending to his inner spiritual polis ("τὴν ἑαυτοῦ καὶ ἐν ἑαυτῷ πολιτείαν διακοσμῶν" (PH 46D), rather than the one grasped through the senses, the outward public one ("εἰ μὴ γὰρ καὶ τὸν δημόσιον ἐπολιτεύσατο τρόπον, ἀλλὰ τὸν ἴδιον" (PH 46D).

[Theosebius] had a natural inclination towards the life of virtue (εὐζωΐαν) rather than towards intellectual pursuit<sup>20</sup> (ἐπισητήμην); though this "life of virtue" was by no means a quiet one, exerted only in imaginary labors (φαντασίαις γυμναζομένην) ... he did not lead a public existence but a private one, such as that led by Socrates and by Epictetus and by everyone who is in his right mind (εὐφρονῶν), regulating his outward way of life and the life within. (PH 46D).

Another role bestowed upon Socrates in Damascius' writings is that of the proponent of freedom of thought. He had been transformed to an icon, a symbol of resistance for the pagans of late antiquity, against the religious oppression instigated by Byzantium. This symbolism is remarkable, given the special circumstances in which Damascius and his contemporaries lived and taught philosophy. In Athens, Proclus had to suspend teaching for a year, when his worship of pagan gods started to offend the Christian authorities and Horapollo was persecuted. Pagan persecution was escalating in Alexandria too with incidents such as the murder of the female Neoplatonist Hypatia in 415 AD by an enraged Christian mob.<sup>21</sup> Similarly Socrates was a restless spirit, the gadfly of Athens, who was accused of impiety and ultimately paid with his life the price of asking uncomfortable questions.

Inspired by Socrates, Damascius reports that his mentor Isidore did not interrupt philosophic activity in spite of the Byzantine emperor's prohibitions. He was "no less than Socrates in the search for truth; for he too was not able to obey the command of the Thirty Tyrants who had ordered him not to hold discourse" (PH 116). Another pagan philosopher, Agapius, located in

Alexandria, was under investigation from the Byzantine authorities, after some informers gave his practices away (PH 127A-B). He did not succumb to the Christian persecution. According to Damascius,

patiently standing up to those who opposed him, he proved the truth of the maxim which Xenophon<sup>22</sup> quotes Socrates as addressing to Ischomachus, that it is possible for the virtuous man to derive benefit even from those who attempt to harm him (PH 127C).

This attitude of resistance can be better explained by a strong inclination for introspection. Following the advice of Socrates, Damascius maintains that philosophy cannot perish from external but only from internal evil. Commenting on the fate of Diomedes, one of his fellow Athenian pagans, he notes that:

His mind was corrupted by flatterers, gifted though he was in philosophy - and of course philosophy cannot be harmed or damaged by any external evil, but only by the evil within, as Socrates said - this is why the downfall of philosophy [in Diomedes] was caused by disgrace from within ... a hedonistic mentality (PH 146E)

No external evil, such as the Christian persecution can harm philosophy. Only internal passions and turmoil can destroy it. A hedonistic mentality was often given as a reason for the downfall of the Roman Empire. However the esoteric view of philosophy that had prevailed in Damascius' era, created the foundations for the safe removal of the last pagan philosophic school from Athens, wishing to forfeit the fate of Socrates almost a thousand years after his demise. The edict issued by the Byzantine emperor Justinian in 529 A.D. forbidding the teaching of philosophy in the Byzantine Empire, only put the seal to an otherwise decided fate. Damascius relocated the Platonic Academy to Persia and eventually returned to his motherland Syria.<sup>23</sup>

---

## Bibliography

- Athanassiadi, P. 1993. "Persecution & Response in Late Paganism: The Evidence of Damascius" in *Journal of Hellenic Studies* CXIII:1-29.
- Athanassiadi P. & Frede M. ed., 1999. *Pagan Monotheism*. Clarendon Press, Oxford.
- Cameron, A. 1969. "The Last Days of the Academy at Athens", *Proceedings of the Cambridge Philological Society* 15:7-29.
- Damascius, 1959. *Lectures on the Philebus wrongly attributed to Olympiodorus*. Edited & translated by Westerink L.G., Amsterdam.
- Damascius, 1977. *Commentary on the Phaedo* in *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, Vol. II, *Damascius*. Edited & translated by Westerink, L.G. North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam.
- Damascius, 1986. 1989. 1991. *Traité des Premiers Principes*, Vols. I-III. Edited by Westerink L.G. & translated by Combès J. Les Belles Lettres, Paris.



- Damascius, 1997. 1997. 2002. 2003. *Commentaire du Parménide de Platon*, Vols I-IV. Edited by Westerink L.G. & translated by Combès J. Les Belles Lettres, Paris.
- Damascius, 1999. *The Philosophical History*. Edited & translated by Athanassiadi P. Apameia, Athens.
- Plotinus, 1993. *The Enneads*, tr. Armstrong A.H. Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press.
- 

## Endnotes

1. A shorter version of this paper was presented in July 2005 at the conference "Socrates and Socratic Schools" held in Olympia, Greece by the Olympic Center for Philosophy and Culture.
  2. In the early Platonic dialogues Socrates appears to be the father and main exponent of the aporetic method. In the middle and late Platonic periods he becomes the main advocate of the theory of Forms.
  3. These references were counted in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG)*. The keywords used to search for Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Iamblichus, Proclus and the Chaldean Oracles were respectively Σωκράτ, Πλάτων, Ἀριστοτέλ, Πλωτιν, Ιαμβλιχ, Πρόκλ, χαλδ.
  4. These references were counted in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG)*. The keywords used to search for Socrates, Plato, and the Chaldean Oracles were respectively Σωκράτ, Πλάτων, χαλδ.
  5. See L.G.Westerink's comments in Damascius, 1977, *The Greek Commentaries on Plato's Phaedo*, vol. II, North Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam, p.16.
  6. See Damascius' treatment of various *aporiai* in the *De Principiis*. E.g. the section titled "Three questions and answers" in *De Princ.* I.16-18.
  7. On the Chaldean Oracles particularly illuminating is: P. Athanassiadi, "The Chaldean Oracles: Theology and Theurgy" in *Pagan Monotheism* edd. P. Athanassiadi & M. Frede (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1999) pp. 181-182. See also pp. 149-183 regarding the provenance of the Chaldean Oracles as well as their use by Damascius and his contemporaries.
  8. *De Princ.* I.64.10-25; I.66.11-15.
  9. Translations of passages from the *De Principiis* are mine.
  10. *De Princ.* I. 11. 21-12. 4; I. 6. 23-I. 7. 3; I. 10. 22-11. 3; I. 6. 7-16; I.9.8-14.
  11. These references were counted in the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae (TLG)*. The keywords used to search for "The Philebus Socrates", "The Republic Socrates", "The Theaetetus Socrates", "The Phaedo Socrates", "The Cratylus Socrates", "The Phaedrus Socrates" were respectively "ἐν Φιλήβῳ Σωκράτ", "ἐν Πολιτείᾳ Σωκράτ", "ἐν Θεαιτήτῳ Σωκράτ", "ἐν Φαίδῳ Σωκράτ", "ἐν Κρατύλῳ Σωκράτ", "ἐν Φαίδρῳ Σωκράτ".
  12. Henceforth referred to as *PH*.
  13. Athanassiadi in Damascius (1999) p. 117.
  14. *In Phaed.*, I.74, 119.
-

15. The philosopher who ventures beyond the One in search of the ultimate principle will discover that the most simple and comprehensive of all principles lies beyond conjecture and conception and its value lies in its simplicity.

16. "But, if the One is cause of the All and if it embraces all, which will be our way of climbing beyond it? For maybe we walk into the emptiness, strongly inclined towards nothingness itself; in fact, that which is not One, that is nothing in all justice." (*De Princ.* I.5.18-23). In a way Damascius is telling us that the philosopher who might experience this kind of inability to grasp pure nothingness is the one standing more closely to the truth: "And if that [the Ineffable] is nothing, let us say that the nothing is of two kinds, that which is better than the One and that which is beyond; and if we are walking on the void saying those things, then there are two ways of walking on the void (κενεμβατεῖν), one is by falling into the unpronounceable (ἄρρητον), the other into that which does not exist in any way; for this one is unpronounceable, as Plato says too, but it is according to the worse, while that one is according to the best" (*De Princ.* I.7.23-I.8.5).

17. *In Phaed.*, I.126-127.

18. Damascius had to edit his mentor's hymns to the gods. Isidore was deficient in versification and "he allowed" Damascius "to amend their metrical defects and whatever went against the correct rhythm" (*PH* 48A).

19. "In writing he did not form the letters with any regard to appearance or divide his syllables correctly, and he paid no attention to spelling. He was wholly concerned with thought; and, which surprised us all, he went on in this way right up to the end.", Porphyry, *Vita Plotini* 8.

20. My translation.

21. Hypatia's eyes were removed from their sockets, thus imparting major spiritual pollution to the city. The incident is described in detail in the *Philosophical History* (43E), even though it took place at least 50 years before Damascius' time.

22. Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* I.15.

23. There is a debate about whether Byzantine imperial decrees were enforced at the time and whether Damascius and his collaborators were forced to flee or took a decision of their own *apropos*. See Athanassiadi (1993) and Cameron (1969).