

The Letter to Menoecus - Translation By Cyril Bailey

Post by "Don" of December 18, 2021 at 8:33 PM

I'm getting these excerpts from my 80-page exploration of the letter to Menoikeus. It's almost ready to release as a *first draft* but I'll respond to the questions here since they're being asked:

123b begins the review of those elements of living nobly, beautifully, and virtuously.

123b. πρῶτον μὲν τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον νομίζων, ὡς ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη,

- μὲν can stand on its own, as here, in which case it can mean "so, whereas, and so" but it can also be left untranslated.
- The passage begins, appropriately enough, with πρῶτον (prōton) which literally means "first" but can also carry the idea of "primarily, foremost, most prominently, etc." So, Epicurus isn't just saying, "Okay, number one..." numerically but rather "This is important so I'm telling you this *first*!"
- The verb, νομίζων, comes last and means "believe, hold, consider." What are we to believe? We are to hold that: τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον. So, what does that mean? Let's break it down.
- θεὸν is transliterated theon and is where English gets theology and atheist. τὸν θεὸν is singular, but, singular or plural, this can refer to a god, the gods, or the divine in general. However, David Sedley in his paper "Epicurus' Theological Innatism" <https://www.academia.edu/resource/work/11365772> places significance on the singular construction. Sedley proposed each person creates their own "god" which is why he stressed the importance of the singular form. Sedley's paper is [recommended reading](#). So, where the word is singular, I will try to translate it as such as to not obscure the semantics.

τὸν θεὸν ζῶον "a god (is a) ζῶον. But what is a ζῶον?

ζῶον (zōon) is where English zoology comes from.

LSJ gives two primary definitions:

- living being, animal
- in art, figure, image, not necessarily of animals (or a sign of the Zodiac)

So, unfortunately, at this point in the Letter we can't necessarily resolve the question of what the nature of the gods (or of a god) is according to Epicurus. Some scholars think Epicurus believed the gods were material beings ("living being, animal") somehow living between the

various world-systems (cosmos) in the universe. Some think Epicurus believed the gods were mental representations or personifications of the concepts of blessedness ("figure, image, sign").

The Letter goes on to describe what kind of ζῶον a god is: ἄφθαρτον and μακάριον