

Reasoning through the Letter to Menoecus' On the Gods

Post by “Don” of October 24, 2025 at 2:34 PM

I was under the impression that the gods were "incorruptible" and not "immortal." Are the gods *athanatos* in some texts? Here's my commentary to Menoikeus:

ἄφθαρτον

LSJ gives the definition of "incorruptible, eternal, immortal, uncorrupted, undecaying" and gives references to Epicurus, Philodemus, and Diogenes of Oenoanda. At its root, the word is α- "not" + φθαρτον "destructible, perishable." LSJ states φθαρτον is the opposite of αἰδιος "everlasting, eternal" (related to αἰ "ever, always") which poses an interesting question: Why did Epicurus choose to use ἄφθαρτον instead of αἰδιος or ἀθάνατος? Φθαρτον is related to θνητός "liable to death, mortal, opposite: ἀθάνατος [athanatos]" (LSJ) Φθαρτον is also connected to the verb φθείρω "destroy, pass away, cease to be, perish." It seems that Epicurus didn't want to evoke that the gods (a god?) were simply immortal or eternal but that he wanted to impress upon us the sense that they would not pass away or cease to be. This is in contrast to everything else composed of atoms and void. Everything else is subject to be φθαρτον; only the gods are ἄφθαρτον! How can this be? Could it be that they are ἄφθαρτον precisely because they are mental concepts? That's one of the reasons I find Sedley's so-called "idealist" nature of the [Epicurean gods](#) intriguing.

I have also seen arguments that the stress should not be on the "eternal," as in everlasting in time, but rather the "incorruptible," as in the state of being. A "god" is "incorruptible" or "not able to be corrupted or to decay." They are unaffected by the vicissitudes of fortune, unaffected by anger or gratitude. To me, this is an intriguing perspective and gives a possible reason why Epicurus made the decision to use ἄφθαρτον and not an alternative that evokes the "eternal in time" connotation like ἀθάνατος. From my perspective, this argument is a strong one and deserves some study and thought.