

Reasoning through the Letter to Menoecus' On the Gods

Post by “Kalosyni” of October 18, 2025 at 9:49 AM

"First of all believe that god is a being immortal and blessed, even a **the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds**, and do not assign to him anything alien to his immortality or ill-suited to his blessedness: but believe about him everything that can uphold his blessedness and immortality. **For gods there are, since the knowledge of them is by clear vision.** But they are not such as the many believe them to be: for indeed they do not consistently represent them as they believe them to be. And the impious man is not he who popularly denies the gods of the many, but he who attaches to the gods the beliefs of the many.

[124] **For the statements of the many about the gods are not conceptions derived from sensation, but false suppositions**, according to which the greatest misfortunes befall the wicked and the greatest blessings (the good) by the gift of the gods. For men being accustomed always to their own virtues welcome those like themselves, but regard all that is not of their nature as alien.

What other textual evidence do we have, from Lucretius etc.?

PD 01 doesn't use the word "gods".

Also, we'll need to cross-reference anything on the prolepsis of the gods (I'll see what I can dig up and post here soon).

Post by “Joshua” of October 18, 2025 at 12:28 PM

Bailey's translation of section 123 of the Letter to Menoecus is not to be relied upon, and I will always recommend reviewing [Don's translation and commentary](#) starting on page 29:

Quote

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](#)" 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.

So I would amend Bailey's translation for clarity in the following way;

Quote

First of all believe that [a] god is a being immortal and blessed, even as the common idea of a god is engraved on men's minds, and do not assign ~~him~~ [such a being] anything alien to ~~his~~ [its] immortality or ill-suited to ~~his~~ [its] blessedness: but believe about ~~him~~ [such a being] everything that can uphold ~~his~~ [its] blessedness and immortality.

Now, why does Epicurus use the singular here, and the plural subsequently? As Don points out, Dr. Sedley has a paper speaking to this question that I need to review. For now, I think we can look to the Letter to Herodotus for an answer:

Quote

First of all, Herodotus, we must grasp the ideas attached to words, in order that we may be able to refer to them and so to judge the inferences of opinion or problems of investigation or reflection, so that we may not either leave everything uncertain and go on explaining to infinity or use words devoid of meaning.

[38] For this purpose it is essential that the first mental image associated with each word should be regarded, and that there should be no need of explanation, if we are really to have a standard to which to refer a problem of investigation or reflection or a mental inference. And besides we must keep all our investigations in accord with our sensations, and in particular with the immediate apprehensions whether of the mind or of any one of the instruments of judgment, and likewise in accord with the feelings existing in us, in order that we may have indications whereby we may judge both the problem of sense perception and the unseen.

The "first mental image" of a god is of 'a being blessed and incorruptible', and that image is a *type*, according to one definition of that word:

Quote

2. a person or thing symbolizing or exemplifying the ideal or defining characteristics of something.

Now that we have this image in our minds, we can hold other claims, descriptors, delimiters, and representations up to it, to test whether they hold good or not. A jealous, petty, angry, vindictive god does not accord with the mental image of blessedness, and so we can disregard such a view of the gods.

Note, though, that the 'first mental image' of a thing is NOT an ideal platonic form of the class of things it represents, and it has no *being* outside of our minds. There is no perfect and unchanging realm of pure being. And our souls do not innately possess knowledge of these mental images to be 'recollected' through the study of logic and geometry; these mental images are formed as impressions by repeated exposure. They are a distillation of experience, and not something external and eternal that precedes experience.

If I've made a mistake here, I trust that [Don](#) and [Bryan](#) will correct me!

Post by “Patrikios” of October 21, 2025 at 3:50 PM

Quote

David Sedley in his paper "[Epicurus' Theological Innatism](#)" 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.

[Joshua](#) Thanks to your suggestion, I went back to re-read Sedley's paper on Innatism and the forming of a personal 'god'. This has helped to change my understanding of the basics of KD01. Sedley points to [Epicurus' Letter to Menoeceus](#) where he advises readers to "consider god" and "attach to him" certain qualities. It appears to suggest we actively construct our own conception of a 'god' rather than discovering pre-existing beings. I now see how Sedley explains that we have an innate predisposition to form these divine images, but not because gods actually exist. Rather, we naturally tend to imagine beings that represent our own ideals of happiness and tranquility.

Is this a correct understanding of how to interpret how Epicurus referred to 'god(s)'?

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 21, 2025 at 4:08 PM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

we have an innate predisposition to form these divine images, but not because gods actually exist.

Is this a correct understanding of how to interpret how Epicurus referred to 'god(s)'?

In general, and from my humble perspective, I think this is right on the money.

I also think this creates coherence for Epíkouros to use both the plural ("deities") and the masculine, accusative, singular pronoun ("him") in the same paragraph. Each of us can create our own "him", so to speak, and the collection of our "hims" are the "they". I then think that the appearance of each of "them" can be conceived of as a reflection of "it" ("the divine nature").

I don't want to distract from your point because I think that you nailed it, but I'd add the caveat that I think ancient Epicureans would say that the gods *are* real, they just aren't massive animals.

This also provides coherence with the idea that the gods are infinite, not necessarily because the universe is physically infinite and there are infinite god-animals in infinite void, but because there are infinite animals capable of each conceiving of their own deity or collection of deities.

I'm also, personally coming to the conclusion that, internally, in Epicurean documents written from one Epicurean to another, within the context of their own, frank speech, when they wrote *theos* ("deity"), they may have always implied *theon morphes* ("the **form** of a deity") even if they didn't spell out "form" each time. If it were the case that they meant "the appearance of animal-beings" and not "literal super-animals", writing "form" may have been rhetorically redundant for them.

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 21, 2025 at 4:17 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

Each of us can create our own "him"

Or "her", or a smaller group of "they".

Post by “Don” of October 21, 2025 at 7:01 PM

[Quote from Patrikios](#)

Is this a correct understanding of how to interpret how Epicurus referred to 'god(s)'?

That's my understanding, but certainly not the universal understanding here in our little virtual Garden.

Post by “TauPhi” of October 22, 2025 at 11:46 AM

My current understanding of the issue is as follows. Feel free to point out any problems you see with my line of thinking.

Non-evident things must be proved by means of apparent things. To do this, confirmatory testimony and lack of contrary testimony is required to claim that something is true. The lack of confirmatory testimony and contradictory testimony indicate that something is false. That's, in a nutshell, an Epicurean theory of knowledge for non-evident phenomena.

Epicureans, as far as I'm aware, claimed that gods existed because:

- 1) images of gods could be detected directly by human mind
- 2) principle of isonomia
- 3) pre-conceptions of gods were incorporated into human nature

To Ancient Epicureans these were confirmatory testimonies of non-evident gods and these testimonies were not contradicted in ancient times (at least not contradicted according to Epicureans).

If "*we actively construct our own conception of a 'god' rather than discovering pre-existing beings.*" and "*we naturally tend to imagine beings that represent our own ideals of happiness and tranquility*", Epicureans wouldn't be able to epistemologically claim that gods existed. Actively constructed subjective imagination cannot be confirmed nor contradicted. 'I imagined it therefore it is', is not compatible with Epicurean system.

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 22, 2025 at 11:52 AM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Actively constructed subjective imagination cannot be confirmed nor contradicted. 'I imagined it therefore it is', is not compatible with Epicurean system.

I think it can. Dreams are real. We don't choose our dreams, they just happen.

There is a categorical difference when I say, "Last night, I had a dream about X, Y, and Z" versus me completely fabricating a lie and saying "Last night, I had a dream..." when I **didn't** have a dream.

In one scenario, the dream-forms *really* happened in my mind. In one, I'm lying to prove a point.

Same thing on drugs. If I'm tripping on acid, and I report back to you later, I could lie to you, and make up images that the serotonin-flooded brain did not actually produce, when in reality, if you hooked some futuristic visual-cortex-reproducing machine to see what my inner-eye is seeing, you'd be able to confirm that I'm subjectively experiencing exactly what my brain is producing.

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 22, 2025 at 12:02 PM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

2) principle of isonomia

I also want to bring up that in the extant texts, I've only ever found Epíkouros employing *isonomia* when discussing physical cosmology as the ideal ratio of matter-to-void. I have not come across texts where *isonomia* and *theos* are discussed as being related concepts. That's just my own study.

To be honest, I think, properly, I'll have to go back through Philódēmos' texts to reinforce this, because there are so many. I went through Epíkouros' texts before and came to that conclusion.

We *do* find those words correlated by an Epicurean opponent, *though*, several hundred years later. And, on this, I respectfully think Cicero left the Garden before he properly understood Zeno.

Post by “TauPhi” of October 23, 2025 at 11:35 AM

[Quote from TauPhi](#)

Actively constructed subjective imagination cannot be confirmed nor contradicted. 'I imagined it therefore it is', is not compatible with Epicurean system.

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

I think it can. Dreams are real. We don't choose our dreams, they just happen.

Dreams are real in the sense that they happen to us but what we dream about does not automatically become true in Epicurean system. 'I imagined it therefore it is' is not compatible because it's a simplification that can easily produce errors. For Epicureans, the claim that we create our own gods to represent our ideals therefore such gods are real would fail under the scrutiny of their theory of knowledge. Epicurus explicitly talks about this here: (*Letter to Herodotus, section 51, Yonge's translation*)

Quote

In fact the representations which intelligence reflects like a mirror, whether one perceives them in a dream or by any other conceptions of the intellect, or of any other of the criteria, can never resemble the objects that one calls real and true, unless there were objects of this kind perceived directly. And, on the other side, error could not be possible, if we did not receive some other motion also, a sort of initiative of intelligence connected, it is true, with direct representation, but going beyond that representative. These conceptions being connected with direct perception which produces the representation, but going beyond it, in consequence of a motion peculiar to the individual thought, produces error when it is not confirmed by evidence, or when it is contradicted by evidence; but when it is confirmed, or when it is not contradicted by evidence, then it produces truth.

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 23, 2025 at 3:33 PM

Here's how I read *Herodotus* — all images are "real", because all images are made of particles, and all particles have a source in nature. I read this to mean that we cannot imagine an image that has not been impressed upon or apprehended by us. We cannot apprehend the ultraviolet

colors of flowers like bees. Our mind is limited to compatible physical interactions. Like an artist, the mind is not a metaphysical *creator*, just a *creative* re-arranger of pre-existing elements loaned from nature.

So, if we **can** conceive of it, or retrieve it from memory, or play with it in imagination, then the particles **must** have come from an existing thing (or things) outside of the subjective mind. If you tell me you believe in centaurs, regardless of your fantasy, I know for a fact that you have experienced both the form of a human, and the form of a horse, both of which were real. A centaur is a *real*, sublimated image in the mind that so happens to not correspond with a tall, chunky creature.

The same is true of *individual* gods. Mental images of gods exist, like centaurs, as compound unities of particles that travelled from external objects, into the mind, and were sublimated together to form a new image that does not directly correspond 1:1 with an external object. As I read *On Piety*, the gods only exist in the mind as compounds made from, specifically, [1] the preconception of blessedness, [2] the concept of immortality, [3] the visual form of a human. Now, if you want to name a specific deity, you're expanding on the sublimation. Aphrodite has [4] sex or love (etc.).

This is why Epíkouros writes that the gods are only "*reached*" through "*contemplation*". You can't find a god as anything but a mental image or a physical representation crafted by a human artist because you need a human imagination to sublimate together several different concepts. Without the tool of the imagination (or the hand of the visual artist, making the contents of the mind become chunky), the components of a "god-image" are incapable of properly bonding by themselves.

Post by "Eikadistes" of October 24, 2025 at 9:52 AM

One problem I also seen with the notion that the gods exist, by themselves, independent of the human mind, is that they are "eternal", whereas humans had a release date. If the human-shaped gods are "eternal" as things that exist independent of the human mind, and independent of the planet Earth, then that would imply that the *human form*, itself, somehow existed in the metakosmos *prior* to the evolution of the human animal on Earth, and that contradicts his rejection of *Platonic Forms*. Human *forms* cannot exist before witnessing human animals.

Epíkouros (in Book 12 of *On Nature*, so Philódēmos writes) provides a historical description of early humans beings, and the ways in which they "arrived" at conceptions of the gods. So the notion of the forms of the gods as humans see them, according to Epíkouros, has a genesis in

history. That seems to reinforce the notion that human gods are not more ancient than human beings.

He further describes that the ways in which we arrive at the gods has slightly changed.

As I see it, after modern humans appeared on the scene, it didn't take us too long to develop art and invent story-telling ... set on *low heat* for a few dozen millennia... and *voilà!* You get paleolithic, limestone statues like the Venus of Willendorf, and other "Mother Goddess" depictions. After that point, I consider that (with increasing frequency) new, human children were being born into cultures that were littered with visual depictions of the forms of those beings we call "the gods". Neither you nor I invented them. Those chunky statues were waiting for us, like everything else.

That's a bit of a difference, when we're discussing how we apprehend images of the gods. Prehistoric children weren't born into cultures with god-art. We're all stuck in it.

So we're situated in this colorful place in history where no living person remembers a period of time on Earth when there were *no* visual depictions of gods. This period has lasted for millennia, and, so long as humans continue existing, we're going to continue to be "inundated" with god-images.

I couldn't even walk through the Advent hospital in Orlando without seeing paintings on the wall of a long-haired, white-robed, bearded hippie, holding the hands of surgeons in the operating room. For some reason, a larger-than-lifesize mural of Adam and Eve was waiting for me at the bottom of the escalator. Pictures of smiling, winged humans were abundant. Truly, "knowledge of the gods is evident" because you can't even get medical care without running into pictures of them.

And this, I think, is where I see practical coherence with the word "immortal". Friendship is also described as "immortal", and it has a definite beginning. It's not immortal both ways, it's only immortal going forward, into the future. Likewise, "the gods" don't need to have existed infinitely from the past. Their forms just need to have the possibility of being reproduced after the deaths of those who contemplate them. Visual art provides us (I think) with a great analogy: the form of Aphrodite is "immortal" in this regard, because even though individual marble constructions can be broken, the form can be reproduced forever. That's why we have busts on our desks.

So, if we distance ourselves from the idea that "immortal" means "going back forever", then that puts less necessity on the idea that "human-forms *must* have existed somewhere beyond the stars, over billions and billions of years ago, living life as would future-humans-on-Earth". Their mental forms are eternally-reproducible by new people imagining them, and their new forms are made of particles in new minds (just like casting new busts with new plaster to reproduce old designs).

Sorry, that was a roundabout way to make my point about "immortal". 😊

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.

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 24, 2025 at 3:59 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

Are the gods *athanatos* in some texts?

They sure are!

Philódēmos employs the word **καθανατοις** (*kathanatois*) in lines 69-70 of *On Piety*.

In line 1139, he refers to **ἀθάνασιαν** (*athanasian*) or "immortality".

[Quote from Don](#)

I was under the impression that the gods were "incorruptible" and not "immortal."

On Piety gives us at least three alternatives to ἄφθαρτον (*aphtharton*).

He quotes Epíkouros as writing "...that it is possible even for **many eternal** and **immortal** gods to exist" (lines 65-70). Obbink translates "**eternal**" from [2] **αἰδιος** (*áidios*). Then, in line 693, he uses the word [3] **διαινωια** (*diainōia*), from "δια-" and "**αινωια**", roughly, "for forever".

Though, they **are** also "incorruptible" as per KD1 and the *Epistle to Menoikeus*.

Post by “DaveT” of October 24, 2025 at 4:21 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

He quotes Epíkouros as writing "...that it is possible even for many eternal and immortal gods to exist"

"Possible" does not remotely approach probable, or likely, or certainly. To me, that word is similar to saying, "I don't know, maybe, maybe not, and it doesn't matter to me one way or the other."

This general topic of who, or what gods may exist and what they do seems pretty vaguely written, and perhaps intentionally. For example, in *De Rerum Natura*, Lucretius begins by asking Venus to help him out as he writes the poem. Another example might be the one raised briefly in earlier posts here, relating to matter and void. If there is only matter and void in his world view, how can transcendent gods even possibly exist if they are not flesh and blood? I wonder how important the existence of gods was to Epicurus anyway, since his foundation was to simply not fear the gods (if they even possibly exist?) He certainly never, that I have seen, propounded on where they came from and why they exist at all, did he?

Post by “Eikadistes” of October 24, 2025 at 5:02 PM

[Quote from DaveT](#)

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

He quotes Epíkouros as writing "...that it is possible even for many eternal and immortal gods to exist"

"Possible" does not remotely approach

Just for the record, since I've been parsing through the Greek, he writes ἐξεῖναι (*exeínai*), the present, active infinitive of ἔξεσσι meaning "to be possible" or also "to be allowed", so, that's a fair translation. I think he's just saying that "eternal god" concept is coherent with Epicurean physics ... so long as any given "eternal god" only exists as a formation in the minds of people.

[Quote from DaveT](#)

This general topic of who, or what gods may exist and what they do seems pretty vaguely written

I don't read it as quite "vague" in [On Piety](#), or with the description of *eidola* in *Herodotos*.

They take us through a moment-by-moment procession of the means by which different bundles of particles coalesce to form mental images. This corresponds with Epíkouros' description in the *Epistle to Herodotos* of "impulses" that "sequentially" travel through a kind of "relay" in the soul to then "sublimate" together to form "images" which are then "apprehended by the intellect".

[Quote from DaveT](#)

If there is only matter and void in his world view, how can transcendent gods

Definitely no transcendent *thing* exists or transcends bodies and void — no doubt about that.

I purport that the natural gods (*natural* simply meaning "made of particles") can exist as images in the mind that coalesce together *from different streams of compatible images*.

[Quote from DaveT](#)

I wonder how important the existence of gods was to Epicurus anyway, since his foundation was to simply not fear the gods (if they even possibly exist?)

This is a great point, and *I agree*, if by "existence of gods" you mean "the presence of chunky lifeforms living beyond the stars", and I think it reinforces the notion that gods are appearances in the mind. Suppose there are **not** *gods-as-extraordinary-lifeforms-beyond-the-stars*: this in no

way impacts Epicurean piety, prayer, or practice. The entire process of engaging piety only requires deities to exist as deeply inspiring icons and idols. If they aren't "'really' out there", no big deal.

[Quote from DaveT](#)

He certainly never, that I have seen, propounded on where they came from and why they exist at all, did he?

I think we can take the description from the *Epistle to Herodotos* as a reliable description of the formation of the mental appearance of gods. As Obbink translates in *On Piety*, there is a further delineation of two kinds of mental images, some bundles of particles that all come from the "same" source, and some bundles of "similar" particles that come together from multiple sources; the gods, as I read it, are identified as images of the latter, a mixture of bundles from different sources.

Nonetheless, you might appreciate the following, because after going on-and-on about all of the above in *On Piety*, Philódēmos (if we accept Obbink's reconstruction) concedes that "no one has been prolific in finding convincing demonstrations for the existences of **the gods**; nevertheless all men, with the exception of some [...] worship them, as do we" (οὐδεὶς εἰκνουμένης περὶ τ[οῦ **Θ]εοῦς ὑπάρχει[ν τὰς ἀπο]δείξεις εὐπ[όρησ]εν· ὁμῶς δε [σέβ]ονται πάντε[ς εἰ μὴ παρ]άκοποί τινε[ς αὐτούς, *On Piety*, Col. 23, 13-17), so I think your previous point, if I'm reading you correctly, is true, that the hard, chunky, massive, physical existence of animal-like-beings, beyond-the-stars is unnecessary for the Epicurean understanding of theology and practice of piety to still be true.**