

# PD01 - Gratitude and Weakness (Especially In Relation to the Gods)

Post by "Don" of May 9, 2023 at 1:53 PM

Here's a section from my Menoikeus translation:

Quote from Don

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 ("figure, image, sign") of blessedness.

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

These are the exact words used in the first of the [Principal Doctrines](#) (Κυριαὶ Δοξαί): Τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον "One who is blessed and imperishable." (Note, these are again singular.) The words held the first spot in the [Principal Doctrines](#), and Epicurus chooses this as the first element of noble living of which to remind Menoikeus. Πρώτον, indeed! Epicurus obviously placed a great deal of importance on this topic so it behooves us to study it in-depth, to engage in some μελέτη.

μακάριον

This word is often translated as "blessed, fortunate, wealthy, 'well-off.'" There appears to be no certain etymology of the root [makar] or the longer form [makarios/on]. It appears to possibly have something to do with being wealthy, either literally or figuratively. Taking Ancient Mythology Economically by Morris Silver has a very interesting section on the origins of the word. This is yet another example of the inadequacy of using one word to translate from one language to another.

## 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 αἰεί "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. For now, let's move on to see if there are more clues.

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