

Introductory Video on Epicurean Gods and the Three Responses

Post by "Don" of October 29, 2020 at 7:17 PM

Okay, so here's the first draft of my notes on the section of Menoikeus to which I was referring. I apologize for the length! 123 refers to Diogenes's Book X:123.:

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

μὲν can stand in its own, as here, in which case it might mean "so, whereas, and so" but it can also be left untranslated.

The passage begins, appropriately enough, with **πρῶτον** = prōton "first."

The verb comes last - **νομίζων** = nomizōn - which means "believe, hold, consider." What are we to believe? That **τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον**.

τὸν θεὸν ζῶον ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον = ton theon zōon aphtharton kai makarion

τὸν θεὸν is singular, but, singular or plural, this *could* refer to a god, the gods, the divine. However, Sedley in "Epicurus' theological innatism" places some significance on the singular construction. So, where the word is singular, I will translate it as such as to not obscure the semantics.

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

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 were according to Epicurus. Some scholars think Epicurus believed the gods were material beings ("living being, animal"). 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 the god is: ἄφθαρτον καὶ μακάριον

These are the exact words used in the first Principal Doctrine (Κυριαὶ Δοξαί): **Τὸ μακάριον καὶ ἄφθαρτον** = To makarion kai aphtharton "One who is blessed and imperishable." (Note, this is again singular.) The words held primary place in the [Principal Doctrines](#), and Epicurus chooses this as the first element of which to remind Menoikeus. Epicurus obviously placed a great deal

of importance on this topic so it may behoove us to study it in-depth or to engage in some μελέτα.

μακάριον = makarion

The meaning of this word is "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 had a very interesting section on the origins of the word. See <https://books.google.com/books?id=sPCww...ymology&f=false> . This is yet another example of the inadequacy of using one word to translate from one language to another.

ἄφθαρτον = aphtharton

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 = aidios "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 = thnētos "liable to death, mortal, opposite: ἀθάνατος [athanatos]" (LSJ) φθαρτον is connected to the verb φθεῖρω = phtheirō "destroy, pass away, cease to be, perish." It seems that Epicurus didn't want to evoke that the gods 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 perceptions, because we do have a Prolepsis of them (More on this difficult term later!) For now, let's move on to see if there are more clues.

123b.ii: ὡς ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις ὑπεγράφη... = hōs hē koinē tou theou noēsis hypegraphē,...

ὡς introduces similes or qualifies statements and so a good translation is something like "like, as, such as, so far as."

ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις = hē koinē "the common, the general understanding of the god" Note that this is also why we speak of the later evolution of the Greek language as "koine Greek" "the common Greek, the Greek spoken by a wide population across the Greek-speaking world." Is Epicurus talking here about the general understanding of Greeks among the general population? Or is he talking about the common understanding of the god among Epicureans? He does specifically talk about the wrong understanding of the "hoi polloi" below. Epicurus is writing to a fellow Epicurean. So, if he's referring to just ἡ κοινὴ τοῦ θεοῦ νόησις among Epicureans, how are we then to take that word ζῶον?

ὑπεγράφη "has been outlined, traced"

Epicurus is using the image of outlining or tracing an image to be filled in by another. The image of letters indicated by a teacher by an outline or tracing for the student to then follow. So the idea that the gods are imperishable and blessed is, basically, how the gods are commonly understood to be -- that is the general indication of the nature of the gods. Whether that is the general indication among just Epicureans or the general public remains a question.

123c. μηθὲν μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον αὐτῷ πρόσαπτε:

After μηθὲν = mēthen "one, not even one, nobody", we find another μήτε... μήτε...:

μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον

μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον

τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον = tēs aphtharsias allotrion

μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον "neither the incorruption or immortality (is) foreign or strange"

μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον = mēte tēs makariotētos anoikeion "nor (is) the 'blessedness' foreign to or incongruous with"

ἀνοίκειον literally means "not of the family" or "not of the household" where οἶκος is the house or domestic sphere. Related to 123b.ii and the "common" understanding, ἀνοίκειον *could* refer to the "house/family" of Epicurus.

This line then finishes with αὐτῷ πρόσαπτε: = autō "(dative) to itself"

prosapte "You attribute to! You attach to, You fasten upon." (Imperative)

123c. μηθὲν μήτε τῆς ἀφθαρσίας ἀλλότριον μήτε τῆς μακαριότητος ἀνοίκειον αὐτῷ πρόσαπτε:

"Do not attribute anything foreign to the incorruptibility or incongruous with the blessedness of the gods!"