

Athens and the Open Library

Post by "Joshua" of October 20, 2019 at 6:18 PM

I recently learned of a remote location in New Mexico called Trementina Base. In that high barren desert east of the Colorado Plateau, the scriptures of L. Ron Hubbard have been for several decades carefully engraved on steel plates and filed away in titanium vaults for preservation, "to create and maintain an archive of Scientology scripture for future generations."

Setting aside for a moment how undeniably *cool* that is, the story touches on two issues relevant to the school of Epicurus. The first point is a trifle self-congratulatory, but I don't mind stating the case anyway:

It occurred to me when I realized that these texts were not *really* being preserved for future generations in the sense we commonly mean. The National Parks are "preserved for future generations", and this means that anyone is free to use and enjoy them at any time; they're open to the public, not generally on the basis of membership and an aggressively litigated initiation fee.

Exorbitantly expensive secret texts are not new to the world. The Vatican ruthlessly stomped out early efforts to translate the bible into the vulgar tongue of the people. Muslims generally believe even today that the only Quran is the Arabic Quran; "a translation can never be the Quran". Joseph Smith threatened with death anyone who tried to glimpse his mythical gold plates. Abraham, too, had tablets from God until he shattered them.

How different the intellectual life of the Greeks! Books were piled high not in vaults, or in an inner Sanctum, but in the warm light of day. They changed hands in the agora, and circulated through the gymnasia. They were read over meals and debated in the streets.

And how different still the Epicureans, for whom sex or class or condition were no obstacle to the fraternity of the scholars! It is a marvel in the annals of the world.

The second point is one of permanence. Everyone here knows how lucky we are to have even fragments. What are we going to do to ensure that future generations will be able to read them?

In a Buddhist temple in South Korea there are 81,258 wooden blocks from the 13th century painstakingly carved with the entire corpus of Buddhist scripture. When I began to think of myself as a Buddhist this pleased me immensely. Frankly, it still does. Buddhists, like Epicureans, know that all composite things are impermanent. Civilizations rise and fall, temples crumble, and libraries burn. How do we plant a seed that grows through the ages?

Happy twentieth 😊

Joshua