Introduction

And this also had been one of the bright places of the void.

Humans never thought of space as bright, of course. Everywhere they looked, flecks of matter – the relics from that brief first flash – swirled down through a sterile, cosmic night. The dark was occasionally splashed by oases of light, but, unimaginably distant and inaccessible, these were mere embers lost amid vast interstellar deserts. Humans gazed up and saw the deep sockets of cold eternities turned everywhere towards them.

You look outside. Nothing. The blankness behind that screen could end a few inches away or it could reach out to a trillion light-years. There is no way of knowing. There are no distances anymore. It is over a septillion years since the last stellar remnants evaporated out of existence. All matter in the cosmos having already decayed and disintegrated long before that, the universe had expanded so far that most of it had receded beyond the visible horizons, carried away on the ever receding void-tides. After countless aeons of waning time, only a few particles were populating a sunless realm that had once been home to hundreds of billions of galaxies. You are now in an era humans once termed the ‘dark eternities’ and, though a septillion years old, those eternities have only just begun. But, of course, the distances that no longer exist were ones of time as well as space. Space and time have both ceased.

So humans were living in the nursery phase of creation, when spacetime was still luminous, pulsating with energy and the hiss of its own afterbirth still thrumming through the cosmos.

Is anything left from that brief flaring of humanity’s presence? What happened to all those dreams, hatreds, plans, trivialities, rivalries, passions and ambitions which used to occupy so many books, wars, conversations, poems, squabbles, songs and plays? Once humanity died out the ruins of its civilisation towered above Earth’s landscapes for a while longer but finally everything – the churches, the parliaments, the libraries, the machines – subsided into ruins and the ruins eventually into dust. And once the Earth’s corpse itself was burned and left to decompose as the solar system spiralled apart, the dust cloud itself would eventually scatter into the cosmos. Do you imagine that another, space-voyaging species, wandering one day out of that cavernous waste and happening upon the sun’s cadaver, could miraculously reassemble memories of humanity from ashes dispersed by then across inestimable trillions of miles? Humanity’s ghosts would have dissolved long before.

And what of the gods? Surely humans continue to persist inside their minds? Look through the screen again. Why would gods reside in this
entombing emptiness? Why would they choose to recall the hopeless cries of their dying children? The gods are not here because they never were.

Instead, out there, after immeasurable epochs, the last few flakes of existence drifted across a shoreless sea, ever more slowly until they, and it, were gone.

But you are here. You remember humanity. Except you do not. Because you were just a faint flickering of the dust before its final end, briefly assembled and soon gone again. As if you had never really been here at all.

The above is a translation of a note found in the papers of an academic who died some years ago, his lifetime’s work left undisturbed until recently.

You will almost certainly fail to recognize the Professor’s name. Though not immune to the delights of the modern world – Wells, Conrad, Eliot, Stapleton were particular favourites – this expert in cultural and intellectual antiquity spent most of his career wandering through chronicles on dusty shelves, through the papyri and fragments of eras long past.

Becoming cobwebbed with age he was indulged rather than admired. Most thought it bemusing that someone should waste their life trying to patch together the few scraps of writing which are all that remain of two philosophers of whom most people have never heard. The Professor’s hypothesis – that it was they and not Epicurus who were the true geniuses of the ancient world – was unprovable and anyway irrelevant. Why try to resurrect the memories of those long turned to powder? And why imagine how things might have turned out otherwise? Counterfactual history was for novelists and conspiracy theorists, not serious academics.

The Professor was therefore given what was little more than a hut to work in. Twice daily he would pass to and from the Hellenistic archive, ignoring the sardonic cheers of graduate students on the departmental balcony one hundred feet above him. To them the Professor was an ironic mascot, a living warning of what not to do with your career. One or two would even flick bits of trash at him as he strode below.

Which is why it was surprising when that note, which seemed to have been written not long before his death, was found among the Professor’s papers; a note which imagined a cosmos in the far future when not only life but matter itself has ceased to exist. Such musings were more typical of children than of octogenarian scholars. Having been taught the essentials of Epicureanism, young children often go away to ponder the purpose of our mortal endeavours in a universe where dissolution (we now call it ‘entropy’) is inevitable and we leave no trace of ourselves.
How better to teach youngsters about life than schooling them in the ultimate fate of individuals, humanity and the cosmos itself?

So did Professor Borges, towards the end of his life, tread a similar path? Was his childlike prophecy a belated recognition that he had been wrong? An acknowledgement that we live in a world irreversibly shaped twenty-three centuries ago by Epicurus and his followers? Or did he paint too bleak a picture of a universe’s evolution that most children learn to accept? Was he still searching for perfect forms and circles in the air? Did he ever finally admit the folly of trying to resuscitate the reputations of those two philosophers, long ago fallen into disrepute and obscurity: Plato and Aristotle?

SETTING THE STAGES

Apologies if you did not realize that the above is a counterfactual history. Ours is not a world where Epicurus reigns supreme while Plato and Aristotle are neglected. In ours, almost the exact opposite is true. It is the complete works of Epicurus which slip easily into your pocket, whereas the surviving works of Plato and Aristotle bend shelves. Things could have turned out differently, though. History so often hinges upon the chance accidents that Epicureans thought were fundamental to reality itself.

It was during its infancy that those two geniuses fabricated the stage on which our civilization has been constructing its scenery, and performing its parts, for well over two millennia. For this is what Plato and Aristotle were doing in the jottings they wrote on flimsy scrolls or in the words they spoke on dull, nondescript days to crowds in the buzzing marketplace of ideas who, by turns, would have been adulatory, mocking, hostile or just plain indifferent. Yet words can have colossal reverberations. Plato would heavily influence the early Christians. If we were being discourteous we might even categorize Christianity as just one of several schools of neo-Platonism. Aristotle would disappear from Europe until his rediscovery in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, after which he would supplant Plato in late medieval and early modern thinking about science, religion and ethics.

There are others whose words would also heavily influence the infancy of the west but who do not have as much popular recognition in the modern world. Epicurus was one such and he has a strong claim to being the third genius of the era. At the very least, therefore, understanding him enables us to understand the foundations of our own past – its intellectual weaknesses and strengths – with greater scope and insight.
The fiction above can serve as an introduction of sorts to Epicureanism. Firstly, Epicureans saw reality at its most basic level as deriving from what is contingent, mutable, accidental, irregular and transitory. Things could have turned out very differently. The world as it is is not the world as it must have been. Secondly, the number of possible worlds is infinite. The world as it is is just one of many worlds that are. So though the properties of our world may be accidental, across the many cosmoses that Epicureans believed to exist, anything that can be will be, somewhere at some time. In an infinite expanse, then, our place is infinitesimally small.

So for Epicurus – unlike Plato and (though in different ways) Aristotle – there is no central, privileged position within the whole. Nor do humans necessarily occupy some pre-eminent throne. Like everything else, we are just temporary collections of atoms. There is no heavenly vault, no world of forms, no divine memory card, and no celestial dreamscape arching across the skies above us and onto which our actions are being recorded for all time.

Epicurus would not have recognized the above depiction of the void, but it captures something essential about his vision of reality. So there is the irony. Epicurus, that most modern of the ancients, has been largely forgotten by modernity.

Go out into the street now and accost some strangers. Ask them to define a cynic, a sceptic and a stoic. They may not know that these words track back to philosophical schools of the ancient world but you will get some recognition in return. Now try ‘Epicurean’.

Not that Epicurus is entirely ignored. Indeed, a few centuries ago, during the dawn of the scientific Enlightenment, it was Epicurus who spoke most powerfully to the secularists and materialists who were now rearranging the scenery and scripting the future. As his reputation flared, it was Plato and Aristotle who faded into shadows, appearing tired and dated. And until fairly recently, when a classical education was still

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1 Russell (1946: 184), no fan of Aristotle, interpreted him as saying that in seeking virtue the rational part of the soul will ‘partake in the divine, which is immortal’. More sympathetic commentators agree that Aristotle potentially saw virtuous, contemplative humans as acquiring Godlike qualities (Nussbaum, 2001: 373–7) or as becoming ‘temporarily identical to that truly immortalizing being’ (Reeve, 2014: 342). Attempts by his followers to deify Epicurus (with his apparent approval) rather undercuts the point I am making unless, like Whitmarsh (2016: 182–3), we see this as a subversive irony: atheists subversively mocking theists, where what the latter take to be a metaphysical truth (gods exist) is really just a human-made metaphor.
valued (if only to acquaint people distantly with names and titles), many would have known that history’s most famous Epicurean, Lucretius, had composed one of the great poems of the Roman era in homage to the long dead sage.

But the foot-soldiers for religious orthodoxy were busy too. The more notorious elements of his reputation were resurrected from two millennia before. Epicurus the atheist. Epicurus the egomaniac. Epicurus the glutton. And that is more or less where things remain. Epicurus would help scientists and philosophers reposition Earth’s place in the heavens, so the sun’s light and warmth would shine on and inspire the birth of modernity, but Epicurus himself would remain as a shade.

Hence, our amnesia regarding Epicurus may be more than an accident of history. Epicureans challenged the comforting orthodoxies of Roman and, later, Christian thinking to a greater extent than their contemporaries. Greenblatt (2011) traces the extent to which the last remaining copy of Lucretius’ poem came close to rotting away and being lost forever. Is it therefore a coincidence that Epicureanism spent a millennium and a half being neglected and would be neglected again after its brief, early modern renaissance?

Perhaps this question is too conspiratorial. In truth, so much of the ancient world failed to survive because, like the average teenager, humanity is terrible at picking up after itself and tidying things away. Time and the elements do the rest. Atheist writings may have suffered disproportionately yet this could be neglect rather than intrigue (Whitmarsh, 2016). Helpfully, the literature on Epicurus and the philosophy he founded has been building again recently.

PHILOSOPHY IN MOTION

A literature of interest only to philosophers and, with regard to Lucretius, literary critics? Possibly. Yet for the ancients, philosophy was not an intellectual indulgence. It was meant to be acted and lived. Philosophy was not just about concepts but about social organization, everyday behaviour and political reform. Therefore, confining our inquiry to abstractions would be not only to misunderstand the foundations of the west but to neglect the pulses which have surged through the columns, temples, shrines, galleries, hallways, monuments, castles and towers of its development ever since – the legacy which they bequeathed to us and which in many respects is us. So what if attendance to Epicureanism allows us not just to rethink our past but to reimagine our future? Does it suggest how to redesign the scenery, and why?
This book will therefore debate Epicurean ethics, but always with one topic in mind: the means by which society intervenes in and reorganizes itself.

Yet the recent literature I mentioned almost entirely ignores the implications of Epicureanism for social and political reform. There is a good reason for this. Epicurus himself almost entirely ignored the implications of his thinking for social and political reform (Nussbaum, 1994: 138–9)! From the few fragments of his work which have survived we can be sure that he did not talk about anything we moderns call ‘society’ – other than valuing friendship and communities of friends. And though he does not recommend complete abstention from political life (Fowler, 2007: 404–26), he saw disengagement as the norm. It is unlikely that the many volumes Epicurus is thought to have written, and which are irretrievably lost to us, would have contradicted this picture of an asocial, apolitical philosopher.

So, why risk wasting my time (and yours) exploring the social and political implications of Epicureanism?

REFORMING THE SOCIAL

 Debates in this field can often be fraught. What do people need, for instance? Firstly, there are physiological and social needs: food, water, shelter, medicine, education, security. Secondly, there are more psychological and existential needs: companionship, status, self-respect and self-affirmation, purpose, community. This latter category implies a need for meaningful activities, for participative belonging and a sense that in mattering to others each of us can matter to themselves. At first glance, these needs may seem rarefied yet they are as basic as the physiological ones. The need to be needed, to recognize those who recognize us; to search for those passengers who will make the journey easier.

Of course, when attending to people’s needs government occupies much of its time with the physiological and the social. Government is why most of us wake up in the mornings and go securely to bed at nights with full stomachs and in warm rooms. As such, philosophy can seem like an extravagance, something that receives an impatient, barely tolerable sigh from the number-crunchers and others hawking their wares as ‘real social science’. Interesting, no doubt, if you like that kind of thing, but what has it got to do with jobs, wages and healthcare, with having enough food on the table or enough cash to pay next month’s bills?
Yet what if this gets matters the wrong way round? If a lot of contemporary government activity resembles service delivery and economic management, might that suggest we have confined ourselves to a single district of a much wider metropolis, confusing ‘organization’ with just one of our proper, collective responsibilities? These questions are now less controversial than they would once have been.

The 1990s breathed a self-congratulatory atmosphere, given the defeat of communism, the triumph of liberal democracies, the rise of free market global capitalism, the emergence of the Internet and mobile technologies, the digitization of the economy. But the mood would change in the early twenty-first century, punctuated by 9/11, counter-productive and divisive strategies towards religious radicalism, widespread alienation from mainstream politics, the crash of 2007–08, the widening divisions which have characterized that crash’s aftermath, climate breakdown, and intensifying evidence that inequalities undermine social cohesion.

To an extent not witnessed since the 1960s, then, many commentators became driven by a desire to reinvestigate basic ideas, underpinned by a suspicion that something had gone awry. Is this a simple – albeit serious – mismatch between our principles and our practices? Or, ominously, have the principles themselves been found wanting?

With that shift in mood many commentators resurrected concepts that seemed obsolete as recently as the 1970s and 1980s, including the ‘good society’, the ‘good life’, well-being and happiness. Antiquity became fashionable again. Why? The public spaces in which Plato and Aristotle shouted for attention would have been raucous not only with everyday crowds but with labourers digging drains, laying bricks and repairing thoroughfares. To the ancients, both forms of activity – intellectual and social, abstract and practical – were crucial to their community’s sense of itself.

Whether we are rediscovering a similar path cannot be determined yet. There is no sign of a Socratic economics or a Pythagorean education policy. There are, revealingly, plenty of books about the ancients which veer toward self-help manuals. Indeed, with its asocial, apolitical stance, its view that philosophy is therapeutic, Epicureanism is ripe for that kind of treatment (De Botton, 2001: Ch. 2; Klein, 2013).

If Epicurus is to be saved from that fate and reclaim his place at the centre of public debate there is a need not only to unearth the social and political dimensions of his thought but also to expand it by erecting appropriate additional wings and annexes. We need to modify him, in short.

Scholars of classical philosophy and literature should now either skip down or else hold their breath. While I have read and studied Epicurus,
Lucretius and many of the commentaries on both, this book uses them as ingredients in a recipe I will call a ‘new Epicureanism’. I have not based my arguments on how this line in the Letter to Menoeceus relates to that line by Diogenes of Oinoanda. I have been more of a scavenger than that, a dumpster-diver feeding off the leftovers of worthier scholars than myself. This book tries to cook something new with the scraps and does not examine the DNA of the food. I start with the classical Epicureans, but use them increasingly as a jumping-off point for our explorations. This is true of Chapters 4–7, in particular.

A NEW EPICUREANISM?

What are those modifications, then?

Epicureans saw pleasure and happiness as the principal drivers of human behaviour. We seek a satisfied belly rather than hunger, shelter rather than exposure to the elements, groupings and associations rather than isolation, security rather than insecurity. It is our pleasure-seeking which connects us, as material beings, to the rest of the material world where we are all made of the same basic stuff.

However, they added, we ought not to seek just any form of pleasure and happiness, but whatever assists peace of mind and freedom from anxiety. The wise person knows that pleasures are transitory but, instead of abandoning an ethic of hedonism, we should refine it, strip it down to its essentials. In short, Epicureans advocated hedonism plus wisdom by advocating a simple life.

Furthermore, although they pointed out the importance of friendship (since those with friends will typically be happier than those without), and although we should be wary of making casual comparisons between modernity and antiquity, Epicureans were individualists, committed to autonomy, self-governance and self-sufficiency. I feel pleasure when

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2 I will use the terms interchangeably. Pleasure could be thought of as more ephemeral than happiness, where the former denotes sensations and the latter a longer-term condition or state. However, such distinctions are not crucial to the aim of this book.

3 Nussbaum (1994: 131–6) argues that Epicureans equated education to instruction rather than the fostering of critical autonomy. Nussbaum is too harsh, however. The essentials of Epicureanism (conquer fears, seek simple pleasures) hardly make it the ancient equivalent of Dotheboys Hall. Erler (2011: 22–6) finds that so long as followers ‘adhered to Epicurus’ rules concerning consistency and coherence’ a large degree of diversity, flexibility and originality was permitted. If so, Epicureans were no more dogmatic than any other philosophical school.
my friend experiences happiness $y$. But the $x$ is mine in a way it cannot be hers; and the $y$ is hers in a way it cannot be mine. In other words, happiness is about subjective mental states. I have access to my enjoyment of cheeseburgers that no-one else can have. I can report the enjoyment to you but the gratification itself is always an interior event. Epicureanism therefore starts with the subjective ego and works outwards.

So, hedonism plus egoism. What we will sometimes call ‘hedonic egoism’ for short. Neither of those elements is irrelevant to a new Epicureanism, but we will dilute the strong versions which classical Epicureans seem to favour. Two reasons for doing so can suffice for now.

Firstly, with respect to happiness Aristotle was arguably on more solid ground. The accumulation and exercise of virtues will invariably involve pleasure, he noted, but virtue does not exist for the sake of pleasure. On those occasions when doing what is good implies doing what is painful, or likely to cause unhappiness, doing the good should prevail. Virtue arguably has an intrinsic value-in-itself that is not dependent on the hedonic and should not be compromised.

Furthermore, secondly, we will also query whether the strong egoism favoured by Epicureans locks the self within subjective (and perhaps also cultural and social) walls. There is a question to be asked about whether your Epicurean friend became so merely in order to make himself happier. Yes, your happiness may increase his happiness too, but if the former is a mere means to the latter, is your friend really valuing you for yourself? Doesn’t sincere friendship involve self-sacrifice, even to the severe detriment of oneself? If egoism is not to imply selfishness – for how selfish can genuinely wise people be? – then we may need an account of the self which points outwards from the outset by being ‘other-regarding’.

It is critiques such as these which will enable us to modify Epicureanism so that rather than seeing politics and public life as that which threatens the integrity of the happiness-seeking self, a conception of the self is enabled which is consistent with building political communities organized around principles of social justice. In this way, we will also see there are several lessons Epicureanism has to contribute to modern debates about social reform.

The main aim of the book is therefore to address the following questions:

- what modifications to classical Epicurean ideas should we make?
- what contribution could that new Epicureanism make to debates about social reform?
Yet it is important to appreciate that since what is left of the Epicurean philosophy resembles a derelict citadel, abandoned and exposed to the elements long ago, its stone walls crumbling and disjointed and dripping with moss, so readers should not expect that our account of a new Epicureanism will form a solid, coherent blueprint either for reconstruction or for an entirely fresh building. We will be identifying and compiling the foundation stones of a modified, updated Epicureanism which speaks to contemporary debates and concerns, but nothing more ambitious than that. Sometimes we will infer and extrapolate; sometimes we will fly off in speculative flights, adding modern layers to Epicureanism that the ancients would not have recognized.

FINAL THOUGHTS

So, a new Epicureanism is located at the confluence of some recent trends: early twenty-first-century debates about social and political problems, the revival of interest in ancient philosophy, questions relating to well-being, the good life and the good society. Let me say a few more words about such developments.

As indicated above, in recent years philosophers, social commentators and even many politicians have taken an increasing interest in well-being and happiness as social and political concepts. Developed societies have never been richer economically, yet levels of ill-health (both physical and mental), the thinning of social solidarities and a general malaise seems to characterize us. Our individualism has turned us into defensive isolationists.

Incentivized by market forces to struggle for decades towards the top of a narrow precipice, other climbers become our competitors on steep slopes and along perilous ridges where the slightest stumble can send us and our dependants tumbling towards an awful fate, e.g. poverty. And even those fortunate enough to reach the summit find that because the ledge is so constricted there is simply no room to enjoy the view. We are always at risk of being supplanted and must spend our time building defences against new arrivals who would usurp us.

The new ‘politics of happiness’ has therefore been positive in so far as it has raised awareness of mental health, the importance of counselling, and so forth. But even at best it has had little impact on our economies and, at worst, has been advanced as an alternative to social and economic justice. Your organization setting up a webpage advising on how to cope with stress is no real substitute for family-friendly policies (including childcare) enabling a work–life balance.
It might therefore appear that Epicureanism – in its individualistic concern with subjective hedonism – is part of the problem rather than a solution. Does its commitment to peace of mind and the simple life rescue it from such accusations? Actually no, but that’s fine too. This book works with the assumption that we have as much to learn from Epicureanism’s weaknesses as its strengths.

It is also the case (to a greater extent than in previous decades) that those of us not exclusively committed to one of the Big Three moral philosophies – Utilitarianism, Kant, Aristotle – seek a more peripatetic, nomadic, malleable way of thinking about moral and social issues (see Fitzpatrick, 2008a). This century does not seem to be one which rewards inflexible thinking and expectations. Instead, we must be transgressive, seeking insurgencies in our reasoning if our reasoning is not to be outpaced and undone by the tumultuous events swirling around us. Though it has its own dogmas to deal with, Epicureanism offers one such resource. It potentially casts quite a wide net, one which, as we shall see, extends as far as environmentalism (see also Fitzpatrick, 2014a).

At the very least it arguably has an elasticity which encompasses the concepts of well-being and happiness to an extent not managed by other philosophies.

The problem with Bentham’s Utilitarianism is that it equates the former with the latter: being well equals being happy, such that whatever makes you happier raises your level of well-being. Aristotelians, we noted above, observe how crude this is. Sometimes being well might have to involve becoming less personally happy than before, so long as the common good or the moral community are served. However, it could be said that Aristotle’s version of happiness as ‘flourishing’ is rather too grand. Bentham salutes the pleasure you get from playing football with a dog or enjoying a pint. For an Aristotelian we should tick these activities, or not, on a checklist of the virtues.

Though I will not labour this point in the chapters to come, Epicurus gives us recourse to both perspectives. Aristotle was correct. Happiness has to imply reference to how one’s life is going as a whole, with some forms of happiness and virtue more conducive to well-being than others. We need wisdom, yet the wisdom we need is one that cannot be quantifiable. But Bentham was correct too. Epicurus allows you to be ‘in the moment’ and not judge everything according to its contribution to an ideal of moral excellence. If the pursuit of Aristotle’s virtues creates anxiety and disturbance, we can imagine Epicurus advising gleefully, then by all means abandon it. Subjective pleasures have value in their own right too.
Chapter 1 provides a quick tour of Epicureanism in all its facets, from its atomism, to epistemology, to psychology and finally to its ethics (including discussions of pleasure, religion, death, friendship). It also offers a brief history of Epicureanism over the last twenty centuries or so. Throughout, we identify a series of ‘puzzles’ which will form the basis of our later critique.

Those puzzles are explored at greater length in the next chapter. For reasons which will be explained, two are put to one side as we concentrate upon the remaining three. These three objections are the first indication that a new, modified Epicureanism is warranted and so constitute an inspiration for the arguments which follow. They are termed the Parsimony Objection, the Non-Hedonic Objection and the Intrinsic Value Objection.

Chapter 3 asks whether Aristotle supplies all that Epicureanism supplies but without the potential weaknesses we will have discussed. I argue that this is most persuasively the case regarding the Non-Hedonic and Intrinsic Value objections. However, because Epicurus and Aristotle are both, in their own ways, parsimonious, neither offers an entirely satisfactory perspective in this respect.

A short Interlude will therefore propose that Epicurean ethics still has much to offer, even though it may seem we have sliced away at it so much that there is barely anything left but a few bleached bones.

The second half of the book focuses upon four subjects in sketching the outlines – the foundation stones – of a new Epicureanism. Chapter 4 looks at freedom. By challenging the recommendation to withdraw from political affairs, and by rejecting the interpretation of Epicureanism as a form of anarchism and libertarianism, it argues that a new Epicureanism must be committed to fostering a social, outward-facing individuality if it is to be credible.

Chapter 5 explores a key hurdle in this respect, that is, that the Epicurean account of justice, indebted to social contract assumptions, represents an impoverished view. However, I hope to show that a new Epicurean version of social justice can potentially build upon what classical Epicureans may have believed by means of three categories: well-being and needs, inclusivity and community, just distributions. We introduce Rawls at this point but argue that, unlike Rawls, Epicureanism allows us to regard time as a critical social resource.

The next chapter asks whether there can be an Epicurean environmental ethic. It examines the Epicurean rejection of cosmic teleology and
whether Epicurean materialism (and what is called ‘hedonic recognition’) constitutes a cogent account of humanity’s place in nature. It ends by formulating a possible counter-argument to an Aristotelian critique which insists that, because they start with subjective well-being, Epicureans can have no real concern for future generations.

Chapter 7 first inquires how new Epicureans can, indeed, embrace both subjective and objective forms of well-being. It argues in favour of a ‘situational’ account which focuses upon those social conditions most conducive to a simple life of inner peace. New Epicureanism advocates the creation of more ‘autonomous time’ as both an input into, and an outcome of, socially just conditions. This means challenging the recent shift towards social, political, economic and cultural insecurities. An ethos of what is called the ‘social guarantee’ could help to rethink our social welfare systems, use of public spaces, economic and employment systems, contextualizing all of these in terms of the need for long-term ecological sustainability.

All of which takes us a long way from ancient Athens.

Yet you should also understand that, although you do not have to have read them, this is a book which stands in sequence with its two predecessors: Climate Change and Poverty in 2014 and A Green History of the Welfare State in 2017. Because the first publication could be subtitled Where are we? and the second How did we get here?, an alternative subtitle to this book could be Where should we go next?

It was all planned out carefully, you understand. In retrospect.