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## Sustainable Hedonism: A Thriving Life That Does Not Cost the Earth -Written by Orsolya Lelkes

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**BOOK REVIEW****Sustainable Hedonism: A Thriving Life That Does Not Cost the Earth**

Orsolya Lelkes

Bristol University Press, 2021, 224 pages, ISBN 978-1529217988, £80.00 hardback, £21.99 paperback, £21.99 ebook

Review by Guy Shennan

Solution-Focused Practitioner, Consultant and Trainer

I found it hard to resist this book given its title, for who would not want a thriving life that does not cost the earth? That might not have been enough though, and it was probably the main rather than the sub-title that really drew me in. It seemed to be almost an oxymoron, as I associated hedonism with the seeking of pleasures in the moment, so I was curious about how this could be 'sustainable'. I hope it draws in many more readers, as it is a fascinating book, full of interesting ideas, though unusual and rather hard to categorize or summarize. I shall endeavor to convey here some of its content and spirit. I should add that it is not a book about solution-focused practice, though it receives a brief mention, but it is a spirit that connects, and I believe there is much within its pages for readers of this journal to learn from.

The book's personal vision reflects its author's diverse experiences, studies, and interests, set out in an important preface that gives the book a biographical context. Originally an economist, Orsolya Lelkes went on to study social policy, happiness economics, positive psychology, and psychological counseling, and to develop her own version of psychodrama, which she terms the Theatre of the Soul. From these experiences emerges a series of reflections, on the social and environmental challenges we face, exacerbated by some of the responses made to them, on what a good life might consist of and look like, and on what might help to realize such a life.

The discipline of economics, the neoliberal market economy of the early 21st century, and the ways in which many of us seek happiness are all subjected to critique. Economists say that 'desires drive the world', without pausing to think what desires these are. Economics is seen by its practitioners as a value-free science, a view that is convincingly debunked here. Our desires and preferences are not given to us, by nature or fate, but are formed, and we can play a role in this formation especially if we pay careful attention to their underlying values. The book includes an invitation to the reader to identify their own values, via a personal value inventory, and then to connect these values to those held by others across cultures around the world.

This relationship of the personal to the collective is a theme that runs through the book. When studying happiness economics and positive psychology, the author experienced their separation, as if there was 'a blind wall' between these disciplines that focused exclusively on institutional or inner life respectively. Much of her work involves bringing them together, and there are some inspiring passages, especially in the middle section on what makes up a good life, that reminded me of the "moments of collective joy" in Lynne Segal's 2017 book, *Radical Happiness*. One such passage beautifully exemplifies not only the social and interactive aspects of happiness, but on how we are active agents in its creation. The quest for happiness via searching for a 'best' thing, whether a job, partner, or film, is gently critiqued, as it may 'underestimate our creative power as humans, may forget about our role as co-creators of our experiences'. The way we are and relate can lead to whatever we are seeking becoming the 'best' for us.

Attention is given to the benefits of happiness, and there are echoes to be found here of the solution-focused practice of eliciting descriptions of preferred futures. These benefits extend from the happy individual to the people and community around them, as happiness leads to more social participation and community-oriented behavior. I found myself thinking this is a two-way street, with such behaviors likely to have a positive impact on the individual and their happiness. A number of ancient Greek philosophers are drawn upon in this exploration of what makes up a good life, Aristotle in particular. In short, happiness is not just, or even primarily, a sensation to be perceived or an emotion to be felt, but involves doing, and the essence of Aristotelian happiness is 'values-based action accomplished in friendship and community'.

Another theme of the book, perhaps already evident in the foregoing given the references to paying attention to our desires and our values, is that of mindfulness. We have already learned that there are more types of hedonism than its contemporary thrill-seeking meaning suggests, by the time we are invited into a hedonism that is termed 'conscious' as well as 'sustainable'. Bringing a mindful presence to them can make ordinary experiences - such as drinking a glass of water - extraordinary and can assist us in dwelling on moments of 'static pleasure', rather than leaving them to immediately seek out the next pleasure-giving thing. This connects with the earlier account of co-creating someone or something to be the 'best' for us, as a wonderful example of the potential impact of our human agency.

The book's final section includes one suggested route to the good life developed here, based on the psychodrama of Jacob Levy Moreno, who believed in human agency to the extent that 'ordinary people can also become the artists and creators of their own lives'. It is an interesting account that left me keen to know more. As it is clearly not intended as a 'how to do it' guide to psychodrama, the reader needs to engage with the text to co-create its usefulness for them, and one thing I took from it was the importance of experiential learning and the usefulness of working with people in groups.

I shall conclude by quoting from the book's conclusion: 'This thriving life is a utopia that already lives with us and among us... We already have the needed repertoire of tools for such a life'. This book is itself one of these tools. You might want to pick up a copy and add it to your belt.

### Reference

Segal, L. (2017). *Radical happiness: Moments of collective joy*. Verso.

### The reviewer

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