

The Philosophy of Happiness Hedonism vs Stoicism



Advanced (C1-C2)

WARM UP

Part 1. Read the quote below and then discuss the questions.

“You have power over your mind — not outside events. Realise this, and you will find strength.” — Marcus Aurelius

1. Do you agree with Aurelius? Why/why not?
2. Which sounds more persuasive to you as a path to happiness: hedonism or Stoicism?
3. Is pleasure a reliable guide to the good life?
4. Can self-denial become just another form of self-indulgence?

Hedonism (noun): living and behaving in ways that mean you get as much pleasure out of life as possible, according to the belief that the most important thing in life is to enjoy yourself

Stoicism (noun): the quality of experiencing pain or trouble without complaining or showing your emotions



READING TEXT

Part 1. Read the following text.

Hedonism vs Stoicism: What Does It Mean to Live Well?

Hedonism treats pleasure as the central measure of a good life. In its crude form, this means chasing enjoyable experiences; in its more refined versions, it prioritises tranquillity and the absence of pain. Stoicism, by contrast, locates happiness in virtue—acting with wisdom, justice, courage, and self-control—regardless of external fortune. Where the hedonist asks, “Does this feel good?”, the Stoic asks, “Is this within my control, and is it the right thing to do?”

Both views face challenges. Hedonism collides with hedonic adaptation: pleasures fade as we get used to them. Stoicism risks ascetic overreach, where valorising restraint can harden into rigidity. Contemporary psychology complicates the picture: momentary positive affect (hedonic pleasure) and eudaimonia (purpose and growth) are distinct yet intertwined. The practical question is less about choosing a camp than about balancing values: how to enjoy life without becoming enslaved to pleasure, and how to cultivate virtue without scorning legitimate joys.

Part 2. Discuss the questions below based on the text.

1. What central question differentiates a hedonist's decision-making from a Stoic's?
2. How does hedonic adaptation undermine a purely pleasure-based theory of happiness?
3. In what sense can Stoicism risk ascetic overreach? Give a concrete example.
4. Explain the distinction between hedonic pleasure and eudaimonia as presented here.
5. What position does the author appear to take on “choosing a camp” versus “balancing values”?



DEBATE

Part 1. Match the terms to their meanings.

Eudaimonia

Hedonic adaptation

Locus of control

Deferred gratification

Ascetic discipline

Value trade-off

Cultivate virtue

Fleeting pleasure

1. _____ The tendency to return to a baseline level of happiness after changes.
2. _____ A form of well-being focused on flourishing, purpose, and virtue.
3. _____ A belief about whether outcomes depend on you or on external forces.
4. _____ Choosing a later, larger benefit instead of an immediate smaller one.
5. _____ Strict self-control practices that train character and reduce dependence on comfort.
6. _____ A decision between competing goods where gaining one reduces another.
7. _____ To develop moral character through deliberate, repeated practice.
8. _____ Short-lived enjoyment that fades quickly.

Part 2. Complete the sentences with the correct terms.

1. After a pay rise, many people feel happier briefly before _____ pulls mood back to baseline.
2. Stoics emphasise an internal _____, focusing on what can be controlled.
3. Saving rather than spending immediately is a classic case of _____.
4. Hedonism can prioritise _____, which Stoics argue is unstable.
5. Some Stoic training involves _____, such as voluntary discomfort.
6. Deciding to work fewer hours for less income is often a _____ between money and time.
7. Aristotle's idea of _____ frames happiness as flourishing through excellence.
8. Many Stoic practices aim to _____ over time rather than chase short bursts of pleasure.

Part 3. Look at the useful expressions. Rewrite the sentences using these expressions to make them sound more formal and persuasive for a debate.

Framing the issue: Perhaps the real question is whether... / We might reframe this as...

Hedging & caution: It seems reasonable to suggest that... / There is a case to be made that...

Challenging assumptions: Are we assuming that...? / Does that not presuppose that...?

Evaluating evidence: The evidence on this is mixed; however... / Studies suggest..., yet...

Concede then pivot: Granted, pleasure matters; even so... / I accept that point; nonetheless...

1. Pleasure is the highest goal. ->
2. Stoicism ignores human emotion. ->
3. People can't be happy without comfort. ->
4. Self-denial always leads to a better life. ->

Part 4. Take part in a structured debate with your teacher/partner. Use the vocabulary and debate expressions from this lesson. Speak fluently, challenge ideas politely, and support your opinions with clear reasons and examples.

Eudaimonia

Hedonic adaptation

Locus of control

Deferred gratification

Ascetic discipline

Value trade-off

Cultivate virtue

Fleeting pleasure

Round 1: Defend hedonism as a path to happiness. Your teacher/partner challenges with Stoic counterpoints.

Round 2: Defend Stoicism as a path to happiness. Your teacher/partner defends hedonism.



REFLECTION

Part 1. Discuss the following questions.

1. Where in your life could you enjoy more without overindulging?
2. Where could you cultivate virtue without slipping into ascetic discipline?
3. What personal rule would help you balance pleasure and purpose this week?

WRAP-UP TASK (OPTIONAL HOMEWORK)

Part 1. Write a short editorial (180–220 words):

“Do we need a balanced approach to happiness, or should we commit to one philosophy?”

- Use at least 4 vocabulary items (e.g., hedonic adaptation, eudaimonia, locus of control, value trade-off).
- Use at least 2 debate expressions (e.g., Perhaps the real question is..., I accept that point; nonetheless...).
- Present one counterargument and refute it briefly.

