

. . . and if I say again that the greatest good of man is daily to converse about virtue, and all that concerning which you hear me examining myself and others, and that the life which is unexamined is not worth living—that you are still less likely to believe. And yet what I say is true, although a thing of which it is hard for me to persuade you. —Plato's Socrates

The Great Ideas Discussion Forum

Dear Dr. Adler,

What should an autodidact do to continue learning throughout his or her adult life?

My answer can be summed up in three words: “**Read and Discuss**”—reading Great Books alone will not do. Solitary reading is as undesirable as solitary drinking. To enrich one’s understanding of what one has read, one must discuss it with others who have read the same book, with or without the guidance of someone who is a better reader than most of us are.

Nor will discussion itself serve this purpose without any control by or reference to topics or themes developed in the great conversation to be found in the Great Books. Without that control, discussion usually denigrates into superficial chatter, after-dinner chitchat, or what is worse, a bull-session that is nothing but an exchange of opinions with everyone speaking in turn without anybody listening to what anyone else has said.

The regulative maxim for the autodidact is “read and discuss” with emphasis on the word “**and**” to signify that the two activities must be done in planned conjunction with each other, not each in absence or deprivation of the other.

With that preamble in mind, you are cordially invited to participate in our new Members Only **Great Ideas Discussion Forum**.

We believe this will be a unique opportunity for you to discuss the Great Ideas from the Great Books and share your thoughts with other members from diverse walks of life, age, education and other cultures.

The Forum will be informally co-moderated by the Center’s Senior Fellows, Dr. Jay Gold, Robert Sutherland and myself.

The major categories for discussion are **Education, Ethics, Great Books, Great Ideas, Philosophy, Politics, and Science**.

You may also ask your own questions and/or create a new topic for discussion under any of the categories. We urge you to conduct discussions with one another.

If you would like to participate, just drop us a note and we will send you an ID and Password.

If you have questions about any of this, contact us at your convenience.

NOTE: Although these discussions are not seminars per se, we ask you to please read and abide by Dr. Adler's seminar guidelines below.



Mortimer Adler's Seminar Guidelines

Let me begin by saying what seminar questioning and discussion is not.

It is not a quiz session in which a moderator asks questions and says right or wrong to the answers.

It is not a lecture in disguise in which the moderator asks questions and, after a brief pause or after listening to one or two unsatisfactory responses, then proceeds to answer his own questions at length, thus in effect giving a lecture that is punctuated by the questions asked.

It is not a symposium or glorified “bull session” in which everyone feels equally free to express opinions on the level of personal prejudices or to recount experiences that the narrator of them regards as highly significant of something or other.

None of the foregoing counterfeits of the seminar provides the kind of learning that a seminar should afford when it is properly conducted by questions and answers and by the discussion of their significance.

Another prerequisite is the state of mind that the participants bring to the seminar. It should be both open and docile.

The participants should be prepared to change their minds as a result of the discussion in which they engage. You should be open to views that are new to you. You should be docile in considering such new views, neither stubbornly resistant to something you have never thought of before nor passively submissive. The virtue of docility (teachability) which is the cardinal virtue in all forms of learning, should predispose you to examine new views before you adopt or reject them and also to be openly receptive of them for the sake of examining them.

The task of the moderator is threefold: 1) to ask a series of questions that control the discussion and give it direction; 2) to examine the answers by trying to evoke the reasons for them or the implications they have; and 3) to engage the participants in two-way talk with one another when the views they have advanced appear to be in conflict.


That kind of learning stems ultimately from the questions the moderator asks. They should be questions that raise issues; questions that raise further questions when first answers are given to them; questions that can seldom be answered simply by Yes or No; hypothetical questions that present suppositions the implications or consequences of which are to be examined; questions

that are complex and have many related parts, to be taken up in an orderly manner.

Above all, the moderator must make sure that the questions he asks are listened to and understood, that they are not merely taken as signals for the person who is queried to respond by saying whatever is on his or her mind, whether or not it is a relevant answer to the question asked.

All this requires intense activity and great expenditure of energy on the part of both moderators and participants. It should go without saying that it also calls upon both moderators and participants to speak intently and to listen as clearly as possible. Neither should put up with half-minded listening. Neither should rest content with statements that appear to be generally acceptable without also seeking for the reasons that underlie them or the consequences that flow from their truth.

The seminar serves the purpose of continued learning by mature persons, long after they have left school. Without this no one can expect to become an educated person no matter how much or how good the schooling he had while immature.

The educational result aimed at here is the understanding of ideas and issues—never information or even knowledge about a body of subject matter. It should always involve consideration of the significance of what has been discussed. That, in turn, should lead to our agreement or disagreement concerning the main points that have arisen in our attempt to understand what has been said, accompanied by our reasons for holding opposing views or our reasons for judging certain statements to be either true or false. 

WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

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