

## Reading Essential Texts and the Art of Study

One of the principal aims of the Temenos Academy is to rediscover the art of study. It is commonly thought that learning is simply the acquisition of facts, of committing information to memory or, in the arts, making a critical judgement. But this conception of learning leaves out of account its true purpose, which is to come to a new level of understanding and a new order of being.

Here the Temenos Academy Reading Essential Texts seminars have a special place. In them we are engaged in exploring seminal texts which embody the finest thought, reflection and insight of mankind. Works that bear the spiritual and cultural inheritance of mankind require a special quality of study which can penetrate their essence and engage directly with the source of wisdom from whence they came. This special quality of study aims at learning from these works, not simply about them.

Therefore, the first aim of study in these seminars is to apprehend and understand texts accurately. This is the first discipline of learning. The simple discipline of accurate reading is necessary because it brings precision to the mind and opens the way to deeper reading. Without this initial precision no deeper understanding is possible, because no contact is made with the inner order and working of the text. The mind remains outside the world of the text.

This precise and accurate reading is greatly facilitated by carefully reading aloud. Language is a spoken medium and the printed word comes fully alive and reveals all its subtleties only when spoken. Until a text begins to render up its own inherent meaning, until it begins to speak directly to us, it will only call to mind associative ideas and opinions - meanings imposed upon the text from outside. All too easily this can pass for interpretation.

Ideally, a seminar is an exploration between students in a common search for new understanding and insight. The seminar leader has the task of focussing and guiding the study towards this object. Working together in harmony is the second discipline of learning. A seminar works at its finest when it works with one mind.

Unity of purpose and unity of mind go together and create a propitious atmosphere for study. This unity arises quite naturally through the love of the work being studied and through the common quest for understanding. In true study the heart and the reason work together. Through love of a great work the heart embraces its fineness and beauty, and this fineness and beauty is an aspect of its truth, while through careful exploration the intellect discerns its wisdom. Love moves naturally to the essence of the text, while intellect naturally discerns its parts, coherence and implications. These two actions of heart and intellect are

mutually reciprocal and sustain one another. Together they lead to deeper engagement with the text, and open the way to insight.

When this deeper engagement is established significant questions spontaneously emerge from the text, and these are the appropriate questions to pursue. Such questions always illuminate the text being studied. These questions lead, in turn, to a contemplative reading in which the text comes alive and its meaning becomes actually present in itself; this contemplative reading represents a higher order reading than 'critical' or 'comparative' readings.

Given this process of full engagement with the text being studied, of learning directly from the text, scholarship then finds its natural place. Learning and research may then be called upon to facilitate penetration of the text. This is the rightful place for previously acquired knowledge. Temenos seminars are not concerned with disputations between different schools of thought about the work being studied. These are matters for lectures or private study. Yet seminars ought to lay the foundations for good scholarship. For it is only through a deeper reading of the text being studied that useful and pertinent scholarly questions arise.

In summary, true study arises by three stages: accurate reading, reflective engagement, and contemplative insight.

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