

No 11 John Dewey (1859-1952) (I)

Gerald Foley

CTC

January 2012

1. The last time I told you about the three women supporters who played such an important role in the history of the Technique. Two of these, Irene Tasker and Ethel Webb devoted their lives to helping Alexander.
2. The other, Margaret Naumburg, had her own life as a founder of Art Therapy, but she played a crucial role in introducing Alexander to John Dewey. This was a major factor in the promotion of the Technique especially in the United States.
3. So who was John Dewey? He was born in 1859 and died in 1952 – aged 93. He was almost an exact contemporary of Alexander himself (1869 – 1955). While still at university, Dewey was greatly influenced by the work of Charles Darwin which was just emerging into public consciousness at that time and he remained a lifelong Darwinian.
4. A little later he came under the influence of a man called Granville Stanley Hall, who had studied under William James and became one of the pioneers of experimental psychology in America. It was he who gave Dewey his lifelong interest in the application of scientific methodology to psychology. This was highly important when he became interested in the AT.
5. Dewey had a high-flying academic career. He got his PhD from Johns Hopkins University in 1884 and spent the next ten years as a faculty member in the University of Michigan. He then became Professor and Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy at the University of Chicago.
6. In 1904 he became Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University in New York – which is the oldest and one of the most prestigious universities in the US – and is about as high as you can go up the academic ladder in The United States.
7. He worked there until he retired from active teaching in 1930 when he was 71. But he kept going, writing and joining in public debates for another twenty years and his last book was published in 1949, when he was ninety.
8. Dewey was not just a philosopher. He had a lot to say about a lot of things and his collected writings amount to 37 volumes. I have managed to get a 2-volume condensation of his work called *The Essential Dewey* but this is nearly 1000 pages long.

9. The introduction to one of these condensed books said

In addition to being one of the greatest technical philosophers of the twentieth century, John Dewey was also an educational innovator, a Progressive Era reformer, and one of his country's last great public intellectuals...it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that for a generation no major issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken.¹

10. As a philosopher, Dewey is best remembered for being one of the founders of a school of philosophy called Pragmatism which emerged in America in the latter half of the 19th century.

11. The founder was C.S.Peirce and the other big name associated with it was William James – probably the biggest figure in the early development of psychology.

12. These three philosophers can be linked together in the broad sense that they saw themselves as outside the European metaphysical tradition. They rejected any notion of mind-body duality and any idea that the body is inhabited by a non-material soul which can exist independently of it.

13. To get a sense of where he fits in the general field of philosophical studies, I looked him up in a big history of philosophy I have had for about thirty years.

14. The author of this history was a very scholarly Jesuit, who would obviously have had very different ideas to Dewey on the question of mind and body and their interaction. But he is a remarkably fair and balanced writer.

15. In his summary on Dewey he says:

The strength of Dewey's philosophy doubtless lies in the fact that its author always has his eye on empirical reality, or concrete situations and on the power of human intelligence and will to deal with these situations and to create possibilities of further development. Dewey brings philosophy down to earth and tries to show its relevance to concrete problems, moral, social and educational. And this helps to explain his great influence. He is a rather dull writer. And he is not a conspicuously precise and clear writer. His success in bringing his ideas to the attention of so many of his

¹ Dewey, Vol 2 (1998)p ix

*fellow-countrymen is not due to his literary gifts; it must be attributed in great part to the practical relevance of his ideas.*²

16. He also says that Dewey appeals to those who
*...seek a forward-looking philosophy which does not appeal in any way to supernatural realities but in some sense justifies a faith in indefinite human progress.*³
17. This is high praise from someone who is definitely on the other side of the philosophical or metaphysical divide from Dewey. It also helps us to see why Alexander appealed so much to Dewey. Dewey believed that philosophy was not just about ideas but was about how to live life in a more fulfilled and effective way and he felt the Technique contributed to that.
18. Dewey also thought deeply about education and was very influential in the development of educational policies in the United States. There are books with titles like *Moral Principles in Education, Democracy and Education*, articles like *The Child and the Curriculum* and so forth. Some of this material is quite interesting to read but a lot of it is quite dated.
19. He was by American standards very much a liberal democrat. He says in one paper: *"I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals"*⁴. He was a supporter of women's suffrage and the unionization of teachers. Reading him, it is obvious he was a deeply intelligent and thoughtful man. He would not have liked Margaret Thatcher.
20. When Margaret Naumburg arranged the meeting between Dewey and Alexander in 1915, Dewey was aged 56 and at the height of his fame.
21. But he was in a terrible psycho-physical shape. All his life he had suffered from various health problems, including back pains, eye strain and a stiff neck and these had now become acute. His marriage was in trouble and he seemed to be on the verge of a nervous breakdown.
22. His wife was having lessons with Alexander but Dewey himself was too busy. But when he met Alexander the two of them got on very well and Dewey signed himself up for lessons.

² Copleston (1996)p379

³ Ibid.379

⁴ Dewey, Vol 1 (1998)p230

23. These had a dramatic effect and two years later a friend of Dewey's said he was a radically changed person. The benefits were lifelong and thirty years later, when he was in his late eighties, he gave an impression of amazing youthfulness which he attributed to the Technique.⁵
24. After meeting Alexander, Dewey became a huge enthusiast for the Technique. He promoted it widely and a variety of prominent academics signed up for lessons at his suggestion. The introduction to Dewey was one of the key moments in the spreading of awareness of the Technique in the US.
25. Later, he became friendly with Frank Pierce Jones and told him that the greatest benefit he got from lessons was the ability to stop and think before acting and he said that:
- Physically, he noted an improvement first in his vision and then in breathing. Before he had lessons, his ribs had been very rigid. Now they had a marked elasticity which doctors still commented on, though he was close to eighty-eight.*⁶
26. At that time, Alexander was in the process of producing a new edition of *Man's Supreme Inheritance (MSI)*, which had first appeared in 1910, and Dewey made some editorial suggestions and contributed an enthusiastic Introductory Word to the new edition which came out in 1918. Alexander also included a couple of other small pieces about the Technique in the book under the heading of Appreciations, two of which were by Dewey.
27. Dewey also introduced Alexander to the well-known publishing firm of E.P.Dutton who accepted the book when Alexander was having problems getting an American publisher.⁷
28. Because of the prestige of the publisher and the enthusiastic reviews by Alexander's distinguished pupils, the book was a big success and Alexander was inundated with work in New York. In fact, he made a lot of money in America over the next decade though he lost it all in the 1929 crash.
29. Alexander then moved on to writing *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual (CCCI)*. Frank Pierce Jones says Dewey read it critically and made suggestions for revisions.⁸

⁵ Bloch (2004)p107

⁶ Jones (1976)p97

⁷ Bloch (2004)p113

⁸ Jones (1976)p37

30. One has to wonder about that when reading some of the things that Alexander wrote on evolution; a particularly unfortunate example is his discussion of the emergence of eyes.⁹ No Darwinian would have let that pass so Dewey's influence over the final text was limited. But whatever went on, Dewey wrote a very enthusiastic Introduction.
31. Dewey's enthusiastic public support was very important for Alexander. Knowing one of the most prominent intellectuals in the English-speaking world was solidly behind him must have provided Alexander with a great deal of confidence. If Dewey was convinced by his arguments, Alexander knew he could face anyone.
32. In addition to publicising the Technique and recommending pupils to Alexander, Dewey was very keen to have the Technique subjected to scientific analysis and he got a promise of a research grant from the Rockefeller Foundation. But Alexander put so many obstacles in the way that the project was abandoned and there was a major cooling of relations with Dewey.
33. Michael Bloch, in his biography of Alexander, says one of the reasons for Alexander's reluctance to get into a scientific study was his fear that it would mean control of the Technique would slip from him.
34. But I also like to think that he was wiser than Dewey and knew that a Technique that was based on the psychophysical unity of the human being could not be analysed satisfactorily by the science of his day.
35. Twenty years later, in 1947, Sir Charles Sherrington said that while science could address the issue of reflex action, the mechanism of urges and drives, the control of which is at the heart of the AT, had not yet been analysed sufficiently for laboratory treatment.¹⁰ If Dewey had had his way, and the Technique had been subjected to some kind of scientific study, it is highly unlikely it would have delivered the results Dewey wanted.
36. But this disagreement with Alexander did not put Dewey off the Technique. He continued to have lessons with Alexander's brother AR who was now living in America and with FM whenever

⁹ Alexander (1923) p14

¹⁰ Sherrington (1906)pxiv

he came to New York. Dewey also contributed an introduction to *The use of the self* which was published in 1932.

37. As time passed, Dewey and Alexander gradually became friendly again. Dewey continued to send pupils to Alexander and he organised that Alexander address a gathering of professional and scientific people in New York in 1941.¹¹
38. Dewey had no input to Alexander's last book, UCL. But by then the war was on and Dewey was now in his eighties, so it is hardly surprising that things were running down. Dewey died in 1952 at the age of 93.
39. Having sketched in this background, I think it is now worth having a look at some of the things Dewey said about the Technique. The most obvious source is the Introductions he wrote to three of Alexander's books.
40. He came late to MSI and in the *Introductory Word* to the 1918 edition, he basically reiterates and emphasises Alexander's main themes. The main importance of that Introduction is that he was putting his prestige on the line in support of Alexander
41. In the Introduction to CCCI, he goes considerably further. He says "*The world is flooded at present with various systems for relieving the ills that human flesh is heir to... systems of exercise, methods of mental, psychological and spiritual healing...In what fundamental respect, then, do the principles and consequences of Mr Alexander's teaching differ from these?*"¹²
42. The question is just as valid today as it was in the 1920s. How are we as Alexander teachers different from the practitioners of the various alternative and complementary therapies with which we are so often grouped in the public eye?
43. In trying to separate the Technique from what he calls these "cure-alls", Dewey sets out a series of questions that he says people should ask themselves when they look at one of these systems.
44. The questions can make us smile at how transparently biased towards the Technique they are. But they also highlight those aspects of the Technique that Dewey thought most important and it is worth looking through them.
45. They include:

¹¹ Bloch (2004)p186

¹² Alexander (1923) pxxvi

Does it deal with the “mind” and “body” as things separated from each other, or does it deal with the unity of man’s individuality?...Does it aim at securing results directly, by treatment of symptoms, or does it deal with the causes ..

46. And so on. Dewey says that anyone who bears these questions in mind when reading Alexander’s book “...will have little difficulty in discriminating between the principle underlying his educational method and those of the systems with which it might be compared and confused.”¹³

47. But the main point he makes is that the distinguishing feature of Alexander’s teaching is that it “is scientific in the strictest sense of the word...(and) satisfies the most exacting demands of scientific method.”¹⁴

48. He also says:

*Mr Alexander has persistently discouraged the appeal to “cures” or to any other form of remarkable phenomena...if he had not been so wholeheartedly devoted to working out a demonstration of a principle – a demonstration in the scientific sense of the word – he would readily have had his day as one among the miracle-mongers.*¹⁵

49. In his Introduction to *The Use of the Self* published in 1932 Dewey continued to emphasise what he called “*The genuinely scientific character of Mr Alexander’s teachings and discoveries.*”

50. Dewey and Alexander knew each other for nearly forty years. The support and publicity Dewey brought to Alexander helped and encouraged him. The Technique made it possible for Dewey to live a much healthier and presumably longer life.

51. Looking back over the long association between the two men, it is interesting to ask to what extent their work was influenced by this relationship. In other words, to what extent can we detect Dewey’s influence in Alexander’s books and Alexander’s influence on Dewey’s post-1915 output?

52. Next time, I will tell you something about that.

¹³ Ibid.xxvii

¹⁴ Ibid.xviii

¹⁵ Ibid.xxix

REFERENCES

- F. M. ALEXANDER (1923) *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* - Mouritz, London 2004 edition
- F. M. ALEXANDER (1932) *The use of the self* - Gollancz, London, (1985 edition)
- M. BLOCH (2004) *F.M. The Life of Frederick Matthias Alexander* - Little, Brown, London
- F. COPLESTON (1966) *A history of philosophy: Vol VIII, Bentham to Russell* - Burns and Oates, London
- L. HICKMAN T. M. ALEXANDER (1998) *The essential Dewey, Vol 1, Pragmatism, Education, Democracy* - Indiana University Press, Bloomington
- L. A. HICKMAN T. M. ALEXANDER (1998) *The essential Dewey, Vol 2, Ethics, logic, psychology* - Indiana University Press, Bloomington
- F. P. JONES (1976) *Freedom to change: the development and science of the Alexander Technique* - Schocken Books, New York (3rd edition Mouritz Books London 1997)
- C. SHERRINGTON (1906) *The integrative action of the nervous system* - Cambridge University Press, Cambridge (1948 edition)