

## No 12 John Dewey (1859-1952) (II)

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1. The last time, we were discussing the American philosopher John Dewey and his connections with Alexander.
2. We saw that after being introduced to Alexander by Margaret Naumburg in 1915, Dewey became a keen supporter and promoter of the Technique. This was particularly important at that time because interest in the Technique and the number of Alexander's pupils in the UK had fallen off greatly because of the First World War.
3. As a result of Dewey's support, Alexander acquired various high level academics and intellectuals as pupils in New York and, later Boston. If it had not been for this surge of Interest in the Technique in the US, life would have been a lot more difficult to Alexander and the Technique.
4. Apart from boosting Alexander's income, it is an interesting question whether his long-standing friendship with Dewey, the philosopher and intellectual, had any influence on Alexander's thinking about the Technique in the years that followed.
5. The fact that he was able to quote Dewey's support at various times in the books presumably boosted his confidence when he was talking about the Technique. I think one could also make a case that he influenced Alexander's writing style for the worse.
6. But apart from that, I suspect any effect was relatively slight. Dewey was rather disarmingly modest about himself as a pupil. He said:

*...I had an unusual opportunity for making an intellectual study of the technique and its results. I was, from the practical standpoint, an inept, awkward, and slow pupil. There were no speedy and seemingly miraculous changes to evoke gratitude emotionally, while they misled me intellectually. I was forced to observe carefully at every step of the process, and to interest myself in the theory of the operations.'*

7. Alex Murray said that he thought Dewey was rather over-awed by Alexander and that rings true.
8. But if Dewey did not exert much influence on Alexander's thinking, the reverse is not true. There is no doubt about the

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<sup>1</sup> Alexander (1932) p10

marked influence Alexander had on Dewey's post 1915 work. This was a real problem for Dewey's professional colleagues and disciples.

9. When Niklaas Tinbergen devoted half his Nobel Prize speech to the Technique, his colleagues could ignore it because it was not directly connected with Tinbergen's professional work. It was just one of the great man's little eccentricities which they could ignore.
10. This is exactly how Dewey's colleagues tried to deal his involvement with the Technique. Frank Pierce Jones recalled being at a lecture given by the philosopher Sidney Hook on Dewey's philosophy at Brown University. After the lecture, he approached Hook and asked him about Alexander's influence on Dewey.
11. Hook said with obvious embarrassment:

*Oh yes! Alexander was an Australian doctor who helped Dewey once when he had a stiff neck.<sup>2</sup>*
12. The reality is different. Some of Dewey's major works, such as *Human Nature and Conduct* published in 1922 and *Experience and Nature* published in 1925 show Alexander's direct influence. It is also possible to trace his influence in less direct ways in other later works. Since his last book was published in 1949 when he was ninety there was plenty of thinking and writing to be influenced.
13. Bearing in mind that Dewey is still taught in philosophy classes this is a real shame. If people studying Dewey's post 1915 works in their philosophy classes were aware that one of the significant influences on these works was the AT, they might become usefully curious about it. In fact, we would find that philosophy courses, just like music and drama schools, would have a resident Alexander teacher.
14. For anyone who wants to look into the influence of Alexander on Dewey, there is already a reasonable amount of material available. Here are the main sources I have found.
15. The most important contribution is a PhD thesis by a Benedictine monk called Eric McCormack. It was accepted at the University of Toronto in 1958 and is called *Frederick Matthias Alexander and John Dewey: a neglected influence*.

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<sup>2</sup> Jones (1976)p98

16. According to Alex Murray, who is a mine of useful information on Dewey, McCormack was quite dissatisfied with what he had done and he intended to do the whole thing over again. But unfortunately he died in 1963, before he had a chance to produce ( anything new.
17. Shelagh Aitken ([www.atinuk.com/](http://www.atinuk.com/)) gave me the link to the text of the full thesis which has been digitised by Toronto University and made available on the web as part of an archive run by Canadian Libraries. It is at  
<http://www.archive.org/details/frederickmatthia00mccouoft>
18. In his book *Freedom to Change*, Frank Pierce Jones devotes a thoughtful chapter to Dewey and Alexander in which he picks up on some of McCormack's ideas. He refers to Dewey's book *Experience and nature* and says:  
*...anyone who had studied the Technique himself can perceive its effect on the tone and often the language of almost every chapter.*<sup>3</sup>
19. An American Alexander teacher called Marian Goldberg, who runs an Alexander teacher-training school in Washington DC has also taken an interest in the Dewey-Alexander connection. Her website is a useful way into the discussion and has extracts from Dewey's writings and from McCormack's thesis at [www.alexandercenter.com](http://www.alexandercenter.com)
20. Alex Murray has also put together four booklets with extracts from Dewey's writings, McCormack's thesis and other relevant bits and pieces. You can get copies of these booklets from the American Society of Teachers of the Alexander Technique. The link is <http://www.alexandertech.org/> So there is plenty out there for anyone who wants to get into the Dewey-Alexander relationship.
21. In one of the booklets Alex Murray includes a chapter from a 1951 volume called *The Philosophy of John Dewey*. This is by Professor Paul Grimley Kuntz of Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia. This has a variety of other references some of which look quite intriguing.
22. Kuntz says of Dewey's involvement with Alexander's work:

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.p103

*Dewey's friends saw the eccentricity and heresy; Dewey himself saw in Alexander's teaching an important truth.*<sup>4</sup>

23. He also discusses the problem Dewey's link with Alexander poses for professional philosophers and says:

*The Dewey-Alexander problem may be put as a dilemma: either Alexander had made some genuine discovery and was able to apply his principle in a technique of benefit to those who worked successfully with him, or he did not make a discovery and was not able to apply it.*<sup>5</sup>

24. Another interesting and somewhat surprising connection between Dewey and the Technique is that Professor Jo Ann Boydston, who is the editor of the 37 volumes of Dewey's collected works, is a big enthusiast for the Technique. She was Director of the Director of the Center for Dewey Studies and Distinguished Professor at the Southern Illinois University. She was awarded her bachelor's degree from Oklahoma University in 1944 and obtained her PhD from Columbia in 1950 and started her life's work on Dewey in 1961.

25. She started having Alexander lessons in 1980, at the age of 56, the same age as Dewey. She gave the keynote address to the International Congress of AT Teachers held in the US in 1986. The text of this talk can be downloaded from the Marian Goldberg website I mentioned earlier. It is also reproduced in one of Alex Murray's booklets.<sup>6</sup>

26. She makes the point strongly in this talk that contrary to what Dewey scholars would like to be the case, Dewey's interest in the Technique was no passing enthusiasm. She quotes from a letter Dewey wrote to Joseph Ratner, the man he authorised to write his biography.

27. This letter was written in 1946, when Dewey was eighty-seven and confirms his continuing belief in the importance of the Technique. It says:

*This is just to say that my confidence in Alexander's work is unabated. He made one of the most important discoveries that has been made in practical application*

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<sup>4</sup> A Murray III p9

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p7

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.pp10-17

*of the unity of the body-mind principle. If it hadn't been for their treatment, I'd hardly be here today, as a personal matter. I don't talk about it very much because unless one has had personal experience, it sounds to others just like one of those enthusiasms for some pet panacea.*<sup>7</sup>

28. Boydston also quotes from a biography of Dewey published in 1939 in which Dewey is reported as saying

*My theories of mind-body, of the co-ordination of the active elements and of the place of ideas in inhibition and control of every action required contact with the work of F.M Alexander and in later years his brother A.R., to transform them into realities.*

29. McCormack's analysis of the influence of Alexander on Dewey's work is the most comprehensive. He says Dewey refers to Alexander by name in *Human Nature and Conduct* published in 1922. This quotation is from a long essay called *The Place of Habit in Conduct*. The theme is very familiar to Alexander people, and Dewey provides a footnote reference to *Man's supreme inheritance*:

*Recently a friend remarked to me that there was one superstition current among even cultivated persons. They suppose that if one is told what to do, if the right end is pointed to them, all that is required in order to bring about the right act is will or wish on the part of the one who is to act. He used as an illustration the matter of physical posture; the assumption is that if a man is told to stand up straight, all that is further needed is wish and effort on his part, and the deed is done.*<sup>8</sup>

30. Dewey also refers directly to Alexander in his book *Experience and Nature* published in 1925 in a chapter called *Nature, Life and Body-Mind*. This is what he says:

*To see the organism in nature, the nervous system in the organism, the brain in the nervous system, the cortex in the brain is the answer to the problems which haunt philosophy. And when thus seen they will be seen to be in, not as marbles are in a box but as events are in history, in a moving, growing never-*

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p13

<sup>8</sup> Dewey, Vol 2 (1998)p28

*finished process. Until we have a procedure in actual practice which demonstrates this continuity, we shall continue to engage in appealing to some other specific thing...calling the specific religion or reform or whatever ...is the fashionable cure of the period. Thus we increase the disease in the means used to cure it.*<sup>9</sup>

31. I got both of these from condensed version of *The Essential John Dewey*.
32. McCormack also says that traces of Alexander's thinking ...are discernible as late as 1939, in *The Theory of valuation*, often in Alexander's peculiar terminology.<sup>10</sup>
33. He also says in relation to Alexander's overall intellectual contribution to Dewey's philosophy that:
- By providing a technique whereby rigid, unthinking habits can be brought under integrated, flexible, conscious control, Alexander seems to have enabled Dewey to see more concretely how readjustments to environmental considerations, physical, social and even moral might be affected.*<sup>11</sup>
34. McCormack also looks at the philosophical problems caused by the difficulty of communicating or explaining what goes on in the Technique to someone who has not experienced it. He says that this is one of the factors that has retarded the spread of the Technique and also its acceptance as scientific.<sup>12</sup>
35. This is something that worried Dewey a lot. One of the key features of science is that it is concerned with the objective rather than the subjective. The Technique produces its results through methods which can only be properly understood by those who have experienced it and yet Dewey was saying these results are scientifically verifiable.
36. McCormack says:
- ...the apparent discrepancy between these two statements accounts in part for Dewey's hesitation to commit himself more completely to Alexander's theories in his books and accounts also for his constant efforts to establish scientific communication*

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<sup>9</sup> Dewey, Vol 1 (1998)p152

<sup>10</sup> A Murray III p6

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p5

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p6

*about the technique, and to have it linked with the relevant body of established scientific knowledge.*<sup>13</sup>

37. Putting it another way, the problem facing Dewey was that the extraordinary effect the Technique had on him was a major element in the reality of his life experience. He needed it to be scientifically verifiable if it was to fit coherently into the framework of his philosophic pragmatism. If it was not amenable to pragmatic scientific analysis, it was metaphysical and that would mean an awful lot of revision to the 47 volumes.
38. This is a very interesting point and following it could take us a long way. I personally am happy with the amenability of the Technique to scientific analysis in principle, but I think we have quite a distance to go before our scientific description of the Technique would be satisfactory to either a present-day follower of Dewey or the ordinary neuroscientist in the street.
39. So there is plenty of useful work to be done on both the Alexander-Dewey connection and the basic science of what is happening when we give and receive AT lessons.
40. In the meantime, it is also important to remember that Dewey was interested in Pragmatism rather than metaphysics. In other words he was primarily concerned with the practical application of the Technique to the ordinary business of living. He felt it was a resource, not just for fixing a stiff neck or a bad back, but for enabling us to live calmer, healthier and generally more effective lives.
41. Dewey would have been sympathetic to the argument that we may not know everything we would like about the neuroscience of how the Technique works but we have overwhelming practical evidence that it does work.
42. And it's also worth remembering that even if you do not feel interested enough in Dewey to go chasing obscure references on the internet, there are the Introductions he wrote to the three books. They are certainly worth reading carefully.

## REFERENCES

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<sup>13</sup> Alex Murray III p6

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