

No 20a George Ellett Coghill (III)

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CTC

15 June 2015

1. In the last two talks I introduced you to George Ellett Coghill and his work. We saw that he was a quite remarkably skilled and dedicated scientist who spent his research life working on the early development of the neurological system in a little lizard called *Amblystoma*.
2. But he also had high ambitions to

*...carry out a systematic investigation of the natural history of the human mind by application of scientific method to psychological problems, with the hope of ultimately reaching a satisfying naturalistic philosophy.*¹
3. Through his whole working life, this was his main ambition. He wanted to produce a naturalistic, non-metaphysical philosophy of the human mind. In other words he wanted an explanation that did not depend on non-physical entities like souls.
4. He came up with the idea that there was a “total pattern” governing the growth and behaviour of every vertebrate creature. He had worked it out for *Amblystoma* but he believed that it applied to every vertebrate creature including humans.
5. It could be said to hint at the later discovery of genetics and DNA. But for those with a taste for philosophy, it might be seen as analogous to an idealised or platonic pre-existing framework within which the actual behaviour of the creature is realised.
6. But whatever view you take, the concept of the total pattern left Coghill with major intellectual problems because he then had to reconcile the idea of a preordained total pattern with his own rather austere ideas on freedom and responsibility. If you have a preordained total pattern of behaviour how do you reconcile that with freedom, and responsibility for how you use that freedom?
7. We saw how he introduced the idea of “mentation” to deal with the problems he had in pulling all these ideas together. The problem with mentation was that neither he nor anyone else seemed able to explain what he actually meant by it.
8. The tragic result for Coghill was that in his middle sixties and in very poor health, he was confronted with the fact that his life-project had reached a dead-end. This is confirmed by the

¹ Herrick (1949)18

discovery of the outline of a book explaining his philosophy that was found among his papers. It was clearly unwritable.

9. We saw the remarkable coincidence that in this dreadful time for Coghill, that an American journalist who was a pupil of Alexander's brother AR in New York, got to know about Coghill's work and saw parallels between it and the AT.

10. In an article he wrote in the *Brooklyn Chronicle* in April 1939, he wrote

Mr Alexander's technique for the restoration of the total integration of the individual approaches the individual as an integrated whole ..

and Professor Coghill's findings confirm the scientific basis of Alexander's practical work.²

11. This led a meeting between Alexander and Coghill in Florida and Coghill undertaking to write an "Appreciation" for *Constructive conscious control of the individual* that Alexander was completing at the time.

12. It is the only book I know that calls what is usually an Introduction or Foreword an "Appreciation". It appears in the book as "APPRECIATION *The Education Methods of F. Matthias Alexander by G.E. Coghill*". It is a kind of explanation and endorsement of the AT.

13. In writing it, Coghill faced the challenge of relating his own very abstract and sterile theories to what he had learned of the AT from reading Alexander's books and his encounter with him in Florida.

14. If he was to write something intelligible in the time and space and the energy available to him – bearing in mind that at this stage Coghill was a very ill man – it was going to need a radical simplification of his ideas.

15. The Appreciation has about 3500 words, and I think it is useful if we just go through the text and discuss it. Whatever about Coghill's difficulties with "mentation" and his attempt to write a satisfying naturalist philosophy, he had a remarkable scientific brain and his take on the AT is interesting to us.

16. He begins by saying that Alexander's technique is based on
...three well established biological principles:

² Barlow (1978)p256

the integration of the whole organism in the performance of particular functions;

proprioceptive sensitivity (by which he roughly means self-awareness) as a factor in determining posture;

and the primary importance of posture in determining muscular action.

17. We can go along with these as giving a recognisable description of how we see things as AT practitioners. But it is a bit surprising given the rudimentary little creature that *Amblystoma* happens to be, that Coghill is able to say:

These principles I have established through forty years in anatomical study of Amblystoma in embryonic and larval stages, and they appear to hold good for other vertebrates as well.³

18. Coghill then moves on to a discussion of how a vertebrate creature mobilises itself for activity. He first makes a distinction between what he calls a state of “immobility”, as in sleep, when only functions like breathing and digestion are happening and the state of “mobility” or being “mobilized”.

19. He breaks down what he means by being “mobilized” in a way that may seem odd to outsiders but is very compatible with our thinking as AT people.

20. He says that when the body is mobilised for activity it:

...is in one of two phases of action, posture or movement.

posture is relatively static in so far as the individual as a whole is concerned;

movement is transition through space for the organism or its parts.

In posture the individual is mobilized for a definite pattern of movement (and in movement) the energy mobilized in posture is released in a definite pattern of activity.

21. This is an important point for us. Posture, as in standing, is how we set ourselves up for action. We think of lengthening, releasing, freeing, balancing, all before we do anything. This preparatory getting ourselves in good order is a highly dynamic

³ Alexander (1946)p xix

process that engages our whole musculature – not in tension but in preparatory lengthening – and is the most important part of a lesson.

22. Coghill recognises the dynamic aspect of this and says:

In posture the individual is as truly active as in movement.

23. When we comes to doing things, or “behaviour”, Coghill says there is a “total pattern” that provides a characteristic mode of behaviour for an animal, such as walking, within which local partial patterns can operate as the immediate needs of its situation dictate. He says:

In my study of the development of locomotion I have found that in vertebrates the locomotor function involves two patterns: a total pattern which establishes the gait; and partial patterns (reflexes) which act with reference to the surface on which locomotion occurs. The sloth, for instance, has the same total pattern (gait) of walking that the dog has, but employs a wholly different partial pattern (reflexes), for he supports himself in suspension with his flexor muscles.

24. By reflexes, we need to be clear, Coghill means habits or learned behaviour. So while the dog and the sloth have the same total pattern, the sloth does its walking upside down in comparison with the dog. In Coghillian terms, the two animals have different partial patterns, or reflexes, within the same total pattern.

25. He goes on to say:

Now the reflexes may be, and naturally are, in harmony with the total pattern, in which case they facilitate the mechanism of the total pattern (gait), or they by force of habit become more or less antagonistic to it. In the later case they make for inefficiency in locomotion.

26. But then he goes further and says when the partial pattern is habitually out of harmony with the total pattern we get trouble. He says:

It is my opinion that the habitual use of improper reflex mechanisms in sitting, standing and walking introduces conflict in the nervous system, and that this conflict is the cause of fatigue and nervous strain, which bring many ills in their train.

27. This resonates with us. The stiffened neck, the clenched fists, the raised shoulders, all the rest of the things we recognise as misuse, Coghill would describe as conflicts between the “total pattern” and individually cultivated reflex or habitual mechanisms. Like us, he saw them as the cause of so many of our physical and mental problems.
28. While Coghill was able to recognise that conflict between the total pattern and improper reflex mechanisms could bring a variety of problems for the individual in whom they occurred, he had not the slightest idea what to do about it in practical terms. Worrying about mentation was not going to free his neck.
29. Alexander, in contrast, knew exactly what to do and this was the crucial point for Coghill. He says that Alexander’s work is concerned
- ...with the nature of the influence of the working of the psycho-physical mechanisms upon the general functioning of the human organism (posture), and his technique was evolved as an aid in maintaining the general conditions best suited to this working in those in whom they already exist, and in changing and improving them when this working can be shown to be harmful.*
30. When it came to his session with Alexander, Coghill seems to have abandoned his sterile intellectualising and put himself entirely in Alexander’s hands and gone with the flow of a lesson in the hands of the master. He says that Alexander
- ... enabled me to prevent misdirection of the muscles of my neck and back, and to bring about a use of these muscles that determined the relative position of my head and neck to my body and so on to my limbs, bringing my thighs into the abducted position.*
31. Coghill then goes on to say
- Mr Alexander, by relieving this conflict between the total pattern which is hereditary and innate and the reflex mechanisms which are individually cultivated conserves the energies of the nervous system, and by so doing corrects not only postural difficulties but also many other pathological conditions that are not ordinarily recognized as postural...*
32. Coghill introduces some very sharp criticisms of the chair, which sound odd coming from such an over-intellectualised and

probably desk-bound person as Coghill seemed to be. Presumably this was in response to things Alexander had said to him during their working sessions. Coghill calls the chair:

...the most atrocious institution hygienically of civilised life.

33. He compares it with the more natural behaviour of primitive people.

Primitive man sat on the ground or squatted when not standing....This posture requires extreme stretching of the thighs. Habitual use of the chair, on the other hand, prevents this stretching of the extensor muscles and tends to produce adduction of the thighs, even to the extreme of crossing one leg over another.

34. He also says rather surprisingly, that Alexander

...has further demonstrated the very important psychological principle that the proprioceptive system can be brought under conscious control, and can be educated to carry to the motor centres the stimulus which is responsible for the muscular activity which brings about the manner of working (use) of the mechanism of correct posture. Of course the time required for this education could be greatly lessened through the assistance of a competent teacher.

35. I do not think this is actually true. We certainly can be educated to be more aware of what is happening in us but the extent to which we can bring our proprioceptive system under conscious control is a lot more limited than Alexander believed. I think this is another example of the extraordinary magnetism of Alexander and his ability to influence people.

36. The fact was that Coghill had induced himself into a state paralysed intellectual sterility. Alexander was not going anywhere near the problems Coghill had created for himself. His way of dealing with the state in which he found Coghill was totally pragmatic.

37. He did not bother his pupils with the philosophical problems of mind body interaction. He taught them how to inhibit their first thought, their habitual way of doing things and then he guided them into an improved way of managing themselves.

38. Alexander showed Coghill the way out of the trap he had created for himself. Coghill finishes his Appreciation by saying:

*Mr Alexander's method lays hold of the individual as a whole, a self-vitalizing agent. He re-conditions and re-educates the reflex mechanisms, and I regard his methods as thoroughly scientific and educationally sound.*⁴

39. I feel the AT provided him with a way out of the intellectual trap in which he found himself. The discovery of Alexander's work would have represented a radical simplification of the task he had set himself. I see his encounter with the AT as a kind of coming home for Coghill.
40. In the end, I do not think Coghill has anything to teach us about the AT. Nor do I think that his views of the AT as a scientist will resonate with other scientists. As someone once said about something complicated: *There is less there than meets the eye.*
41. But for me it has been a quite rewarding exercise going through his work to reach that conclusion. My conclusion at the end of it is that if you have other important things to with your life, I would not postpone them to study Coghill.
42. Finally, a little thought-provoking anecdote from Walter Carrington's *A time to remember* in which he recounts that when Coghill was talking to Alexander he compared their two lives.
43. Coghill said that he as a healthy young man had devoted his life to science and had ruined his health peering through a microscope to find out the principles which Alexander as an unhealthy youth had discovered by looking in a mirror and used them to improve himself and live to be the healthy seventy-two year old that Coghill had got to know.⁵

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⁴ Ibid. xxiv

⁵ Carrington (1996)p50