

## No 11 John Dewey (I)

6 October 2008

1. Last time I told you about some of the early people around Alexander after he had come to London. They included Margaret Naumburg, and his lifelong helpers Ethel Webb and Irene Tasker. It was all by way of background to John Dewey and Alexander's meeting with him in 1915.
2. This meeting was one of the most important events in John Dewey's life.
3. It was also extremely important in the promotion of the Technique especially in the United States. And to an extent that we do not know, it influenced the way Alexander wrote about and thought about the Technique.
4. So first of all who was John Dewey? We met him as Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University. But he was much more than that. He was what used to be called a public intellectual, a person who was famous for being both wise and clever.
5. We do not have many people who are famous for being either wise or clever these days – it is more the winners of Big Brother, or the David Beckhams who are famous for being famous but don't seem to have anything interesting to say about anything.
6. But Dewey 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.
7. 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.*<sup>1</sup>
8. Dewey 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

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<sup>1</sup> Dewey, Vol 2 (1998)p ix

the work of Charles Darwin which was just emerging into public consciousness at that time and he remained a lifelong Darwinian.

9. 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.
10. Dewey had a high-flying 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.
11. 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.
12. 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.
13. He was one of the prime exponents of a school of philosophy called Pragmatism which emerged in America in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The founder was C.S.Pierce and the other big name associated with it was William James – probably the biggest figure in the early development of psychology. Pragmatism had something of a renaissance in the 1950s and its most famous exponent was the very controversial Richard Rorty.
14. I have had a go at trying to get an idea of what Dewey was about as a philosopher but I find him rather hard going. You can understand the words, but what they actually mean tends to be rather elusive.
15. In an essay entitled *Qualitative thought*, for example, he says things like

*“Metaphysics has been concerned with the existential status of qualitative objects as contrasted with those of physical science, while epistemology, having frequently decided that qualities are subjective and psychical, has been concerned with their relation in knowing to the*

*properties of “external” objects defined in non-qualitative terms.*<sup>2</sup>

16. He 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.
17. He was by American standards very much a liberal democrat. He says at one stage “*I believe that the individual who is to be educated is a social individual and that society is an organic union of individuals*”<sup>3</sup>. 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.
18. Very few people refer to him nowadays but it is a fact of life in relation to many original and important thinkers that many of the really new, interesting and relevant things they said have been incorporated into the way we think today and so no one thinks of where the ideas came from. I am certain Dewey had a significant impact in developing what might be called the modern liberal democratic consensus.
19. At the time he met Alexander, in 1915, Dewey was aged 56 and at the height of his fame. 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.
20. Dewey’s wife was already having lessons with Alexander but Dewey himself was too busy. But when Margaret Naumburg set up the dinner party, he met Alexander and the two of them got on very well together. Dewey signed himself up for lessons.
21. 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.<sup>4</sup> He told Frank Pierce Jones

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<sup>2</sup> Dewey, Vol 1 (1998)p195

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p230

<sup>4</sup> Bloch (2004)p107

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.*<sup>5</sup>

22. Dewey immediately 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.
23. At the time he met Dewey, Alexander was in the process of producing a new edition of 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.
24. Dewey also introduced Alexander to the well-known publishing firm of E.P.Dutton who accepted the book when Alexander was having problems getting a publisher.<sup>6</sup>
25. 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.
26. Alexander then moved on to writing CCCI in which Dewey is said to have taken a major part and to have carefully reviewed the whole manuscript. One has to wonder about that when reading some of the stuff that Alexander wrote on evolution – it does not look as though it has been reviewed by a Darwinian. But whatever influence he had over the final text, Dewey definitely wrote a very enthusiastic Introduction.
27. All this 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

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<sup>5</sup> Jones (1976)p97

<sup>6</sup> Bloch (2004)p113

deal of confidence. If Dewey was convinced by his arguments, Alexander knew he could face anyone.

28. 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 of it that the project was abandoned and there was a major cooling of relations with Dewey.
29. 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.
30. But I also like to think that he was wiser than Dewey and knew that a Technique which emphasised the total psychophysical unity of the human being could not be analysed satisfactorily by the science of his day.
31. Sir Charles Sherrington, who basically invented neuroscience, said twenty years later, in 1947, that while science could address the issue of reflex action, the mechanisms of urges and drives, the control of which is at the heart of the AT, had not yet been analysed sufficiently for laboratory treatment.
32. Despite the cooling of relations, Dewey contributed a long introduction to *The use of the self* which was published in 1932. He also continued to have lessons from Alexander's brother AR who was living in America and with FM whenever he came to New York.
33. Dewey and Alexander gradually became friends 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.<sup>7</sup> But it was never quite the same again and Dewey had no input to Alexander's last book, UCL. But 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.
34. Having sketched in this background, I think it is now worth having a look at some of the things he said about the

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p186

Technique. The most obvious source is the introductions he wrote to three of Alexander's books.

35. 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

36. 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?*"<sup>8</sup>

37. 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?

38. In trying to separate the Technique from what he calls these "cure-alls", Dewey sets out a series of questions or criteria that he says people should ask themselves. It is still worth looking through them. They include

*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 ..*

39. And so on. Dewey says that anyone who bears these in mind when reading MSI "...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."<sup>9</sup>

40. But the main point he makes is that the distinguishing feature of Mr Alexander's teaching is that it "*is scientific in the strictest sense of the word...(and) satisfies the most exacting demands of scientific method.*"<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Alexander (1923) pxxvi

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pxxvii

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pxviii

41. 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.<sup>11</sup>*

42. In fact, the introduction to CCCI is largely an essay on the scientific nature of the Technique.

43. Dewey also contributed an Introduction to *The Use of the Self* in 1939 where he continued to emphasise what he called “*The genuinely scientific character of Mr Alexander’s teachings and discoveries.*”

44. He also says rather disarmingly about himself

*...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.<sup>12</sup>*

45. These Introductions were deeply serious pieces of work for Dewey. But among his professional colleagues, there is little or no acknowledgement of the extremely important role the AT played in his life.

46. But the Alexandrian influence is clearly evident in his later work to those who look for it. In one of his essays in Vol I of *The essential Dewey*, called *Nature, Life and Body-Mind* I noticed the following quite striking passage:

*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>11</sup> Ibid. pxxix

<sup>12</sup> Alexander (1932) p10

*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>13</sup>

47. There are various echoes Alexandrian ideas here sure enough there is a footnote which says "See F. Matthias Alexander's *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, and *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*."

48. Here is another piece from a long essay called *The Place of Habit in Conduct* published in 1922

*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>14</sup>

49. And again there is a footnote a little bit further on referring us to MSI

50. I myself think there is a lot of gold in Dewey which we can and should mine. The challenge for us, if you like, is to identify those aspects of the Technique which occupied a major intellectual figure like Dewey for almost forty years of his life.

51. A serious beginning has been made on this work. There was a doctoral dissertation produced at the University of Toronto in 1958 entitled *Frederick Matthias Alexander and John Dewey: a neglected influence*. It is by a Catholic priest called Eric McCormack, though I have not managed to get hold of this.

52. Alex Murray, who runs the Alexander training school in Urbana, Illinois, is also interested in Dewey and has apparently produced a series of booklets on John Dewey and Alexander but I have not managed to get hold of any of them.

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<sup>13</sup> Dewey, Vol 1 (1998)p152

<sup>14</sup> Dewey, Vol 2 (1998)p28

53. I think there is still plenty of worthwhile work to be done on the Dewey-Alexander connection. But even if we never read word of Dewey, we can say that the meeting between him and Alexander, organised by Margaret Naumburg, was one of the most important events in making influential people aware of the Technique and getting it taken seriously.

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