

## No 12 John Dewey (II)

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1. The last time, we were discussing John Dewey and his connections with Alexander and the Technique.
2. As Professor of Philosophy at Columbia University and a well-known public figure, Dewey had a lot of prestige and influence in his time and he used it generously to support Alexander and to promote the Technique.
3. He was important in providing Alexander with publicity and distinguished pupils in academic and literary circles.
4. The fact that he wrote Introductions to three of the books gave them a considerable lift and meant that they were reviewed in various prestigious publications which otherwise might not have bothered with them. We can definitely say that Dewey's support was extremely important in the early promotion of the Technique
5. I also mentioned that Dewey was very emphatic that what distinguished the Technique from what he called the "*various systems of exercise and methods of mental, psychological and spiritual healing*" with which the world was flooded, was that the Technique was "*scientific in the strictest sense of the word...(and) satisfies the most exacting demands of scientific method.*"
6. This is something which is just as relevant to all of us today as when Dewey was writing it 65 years ago in the Introduction to CCCI. So I think it is interesting and challenging to see if Dewey's broader thinking about the Technique has any relevance for how we ourselves may think about it and explain it to our pupils and the wider public?
7. As I mentioned, Dewey's collected works come to thirty-seven volumes so there is quite a bit of material there. But he was fifty six when he first met Alexander so that cuts down the task. But nevertheless, he kept going for another thirty years and his last book was published in 1946 when he was eighty-seven.
8. Since the last talk, I have come across a few very interesting things about Dewey and Alexander which I had not seen before. One of these is a 1958 PhD thesis in the University of Toronto by a Benedictine monk called Eric McCormack. This is called *Frederick Matthias Alexander and John Dewey: A neglected influence*.

9. Although McCormack was awarded his PhD for the thesis in 1958, according to Alex Murray, he 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.
10. I have not managed to get a full copy of this thesis but I have found various extracts on the web and elsewhere. There is a very useful website run by an American Alexander teacher called Marian Goldberg.
11. She runs an Alexander training school in Washington DC. The website is [www.alexandercenter.com](http://www.alexandercenter.com) and is a very good starting place for any of you who want to get further into all of this.
12. One of the other things I have found 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 got her bachelor's degree from Oklahoma University in 1944, which would put her in her mid-eighties today. She incidentally got her PhD from Columbia in 1950 and started her life's work on Dewey in 1961.
13. She gave the keynote address to the International Congress of AT Teachers held in the US in 1986. She started having lessons in 1980, at the age of 56, the same age as Dewey.
14. I have also found that Alex Murray has 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. So there is plenty out there for anyone who really wants to get into the Dewey-Alexander relationship.
15. In fact, there is so much there, I can only give you a taster. But before getting into it any further, I think it is worth backtracking and saying a little more about Dewey the philosopher. I think this tells us quite a bit about why he was so keen on Alexander.
16. Dewey is often linked with C.S.Pierce and William James as the main practitioners of a branch of nineteenth century American philosophical thinking usually called Pragmatism, though Pierce liked to call it pragmaticism – we are dealing in subtle distinctions.
17. 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.

18. But there are very large differences between these three philosophers and from our Alexander perspective, we can ignore the others and consider Dewey on his own.
19. To get a sense of where he fits in the general field of philosophical studies, I looked him up in a couple of reference sources. The one I found the most useful was in Vol VIII of a big history of philosophy which I have had for nearly thirty years though I will admit it has not actually been my bedside reading.
20. But I found a long and useful article there entitled *The experimentalism of John Dewey*.
21. 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. In an overview towards the end of his piece 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 fellow-countrymen is not due to his literary gifts; it must be attributed in great part to the practical relevance of his ideas.<sup>1</sup>*

22. 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.<sup>2</sup>*
23. This is high praise from someone who is definitely on the other side of the philosophical or metaphysical divide from

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<sup>1</sup> Copleston (1996)p379

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p379

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.

24. But even though he is generally regarded as America's leading philosopher, and is still studied in philosophy courses, there is little or no acknowledgement by his professional colleagues of the extremely important role the Technique played in Dewey's later life and thinking.

25. In so far as any Dewey scholars know anything about Alexander or the Technique, they assume that this was one of Dewey's little eccentricities. Frank Pierce Jones who was friendly with Dewey and, on whom Dewey had a major influence, recalled asking a philosopher who had given a lecture about Dewey at Brown University about the influence Alexander had on Dewey. The speaker said with obvious embarrassment

*Oh yes! Alexander was an Australian doctor who helped Dewey once when he had a stiff neck.<sup>3</sup>*

26. So among professional philosophers and students of Dewey, there is a tendency to write off Alexander and the Technique as just a bit of soft-headedness on the part of the great man.

27. But this is very strongly denied by Jo Ann Boydston in the keynote address she gave to the AT Congress in 1986. From her work on Dewey, she is clear that Dewey took the Technique very seriously indeed.

28. She quotes from a letter he wrote to Joseph Ratner, the man Dewey authorised to write his biography. This letter was written in 1946, when Dewey was eighty-seven.

*...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 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.*

29. She also quotes from a biography of Dewey published in 1939 in which he is reported as saying

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<sup>3</sup> Jones (1976)p98

*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.*

30. McCormack also says that though Dewey only refers twice to Alexander by name in his books, *Human Nature and Conduct* published in 1922 and *Experience and Nature* published in 1925<sup>4</sup>, Alexander's influence is clearly visible in Dewey's later work.

31. McCormack says

*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>5</sup>

32. I looked up these two direct references by Dewey to Alexander and luckily they are both in condensed version of Dewey. The one from *Experience and Nature* is in a chapter is called *Nature, Life and Body-Mind*.

33. This is what Dewey 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-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>6</sup>

34. You notice all kinds of echoes here and there is a footnote which says "See F. Matthias Alexander's *Man's Supreme*

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<sup>4</sup> Alex Murray III p3

<sup>5</sup> Alex Murray III p5

<sup>6</sup> Dewey, Vol 1 (1998)p152

*Inheritance, and Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual.”*

35. Here is another piece from a long essay called *The Place of Habit in Conduct* from Dewey's book *Human Nature and 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>7</sup>*

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

37. McCormack also raises an issue which I find very interesting. He points out that Dewey acknowledges the difficulty of communicating or explaining what goes on in the Technique to someone who has not experienced it – in other words that it is in that sense subjective. Yet at the same time he insisted that the Technique is scientific.

38. This is an obvious difficulty here since one of the key features of science is that it is objective rather than subjective. 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 about the technique, and to have it linked with the relevant body of established scientific knowledge.<sup>8</sup>*

39. There's obviously a lot further we could go, chasing down these ideas but it's about all we have time for today. But I hope I have given you enough to make you feel there is still useful work to be done on the Alexander-Dewey connection.

40. One of the important points to remember about Dewey was that he was primarily interested in the practical application of

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<sup>7</sup> Dewey, Vol 2 (1998)p28

<sup>8</sup> Alex Murray III p6

the AT to the quite complex business of living. He felt that the Technique 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. And it's also worth remembering that even if you do not feel you want to get into chasing obscure references on the internet, there are the Introductions Dewey wrote to the three books. They are certainly worth reading carefully.

## REFERENCES

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