

[John Dewey and the Alexander Technique](#)

Dewey and Alexander

by Frank Pierce Jones

The following is an excerpt from "Dewey and Alexander," a chapter from Freedom to Change. The Development and Science of the Alexander Technique (1976, 1997) by [Frank Pierce Jones](#).

The problem of obtaining experimental evidence for the Alexander Technique was one to which John Dewey had given a great deal of thought, and the opportunities that I had to discuss it with him were invaluable to me. Though I had some correspondence with Dewey, I did not meet him until June 1947, when I called on him in New York. He and Roberta Grant had been married the winter before and were living with their two adopted children in a large, cheerful, old-fashioned apartment on upper Fifth Avenue. The Deweys were hospitable, informal and easy to talk to; and the feeling of awe with which I arrived was soon dissipated. Dewey had been reading an article in the *Psychological Review*. As I came in he threw it down with an impatient gesture, remarking, "I despair of psychologists. They seem to think borrowing a technique from another science makes them scientists." He pointed to the cracks in the plastered wall behind me and said, "If I measured each of those cracks, I could calculate their slopes and derive a formula for them. That would not be science, but I could fool a psychologist into thinking it was." Almost the only example of scientific method in the field of psychology today, he said, was the Ames demonstration in visual perception. He was greatly distressed that foundation support had been suddenly withdrawn from the Dartmouth Eye Institute, where Ames had done his experiments.

I asked Dewey about his early experiences with the Alexander Technique. He said he had been taken by it first because it provided a demonstration of the unity of mind and body. He thought that the demonstration had struck him more forcibly than it might have struck someone who got the sensory experience easily and quickly, because he was such a slow learner. He had always been physically awkward, he said, and performed all actions too quickly and impulsively and without thought. "Thought" in his case was saved for "mental" activity, which had always been easy for him. (Alexander told me that when Dewey first came to him he was "drugged with thinking" and used to fall asleep during lessons.) It was a revelation to discover that thought could be applied with equal advantage to everyday movements.

The greatest benefit he got from lessons, Dewey said, was the ability to stop and think before acting. 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.

Intellectually, Dewey said, he found it much easier, after he had studied the technique, to hold a philosophical position calmly once he had taken it or to change it if new evidence came up warranting a change. He contrasted his own attitude with the rigidity of other

academic thinkers who adopt a position early in their careers and then use their intellects to defend it indefinitely.

I asked him if he thought the technique had implications for the moral as well as the intellectual side of life, and he agreed emphatically that it had. In his own case, he said that once he had decided on a course of action as the right one to follow, the technique made it much easier for him to carry it out. In the introduction to *The Use of the Self* he spoke of "the great change in mental and moral attitude that takes place as proper coordinations are established," and in a letter to me he said that these aspects of the technique were "an intrinsic part of the whole scheme." [Irene Tasker](#) [Alexander Technique teacher] told me that when she first went to South Africa Dewey had given her a letter of recommendation in which he spoke of her teaching as "contributing to the physical, mental, and moral improvement of the child."

In the face of Dewey's positive statements about the moral and intellectual value of the technique, I have always found it difficult to understand the insistence by his disciples that its application was purely physical--as if the technique were a kind of Australian folk remedy which Dewey in the kindness of his heart had endorsed in order to help Alexander to sell his books. I ran into this attitude long before I met Dewey. Sidney Hook had given a lecture at Brown on some aspects of Dewey's philosophy. I had just discovered Alexander's books and had been impressed by Dewey's introductions to them. At the end of the lecture I went up to the platform to ask Hook about Alexander's influence on Dewey. He looked at me uncomprehendingly at first and then said with obvious embarrassment: "Oh yes! Alexander was an Australian doctor who helped Dewey once when he had a stiff neck." A little later in an article on Dewey in the *Atlantic Monthly* Max Eastman described Alexander as "A very unconventional physician...an Australian of original but uncultivated mind." "Dewey was smiled at in some circles," Eastman wrote, "for his adherence to this amateur art of healing but it undoubtedly worked in his case." In Corliss Lamont's *Dialogue on John Dewey*, Alexander again appears as a quaint character who was "concerned with your posture and that sort of thing." The speakers agreed that "Dewey thought Alexander had done him a lot of good," but none of them gave Dewey credit for intelligent judgment, and Ernest Nagel (according to Horace Kallen) attributed the whole episode to superstition on the part of Dewey. This picture of Dewey as the naive supporter of an ignorant Australian doctor has unfortunately been given increased currency in a recent biography, *The Life and Mind of John Dewey*, by George Dykhuizen (1973).

Having tried in vain to discover the reason for the discrepancy between Dewey's own testimony about his relations with Alexander and the testimony of his disciples, I came to the conclusion that "there were no reasons only causes" (As A. E. Houseman said of the persistence of errors in classical scholarship). A serious investigation of the causes was made by E. D. McCormack in his doctoral dissertation, *Frederick Matthias Alexander and John Dewey: A Neglected Influence* (1958). Starting out with Dewey's 1939 statement that his "theories of mind-body, of the coordination of the elements of the self and of the place of ideas in inhibition and control of overt action needed contact with the work of F. M. and A. R. Alexander to turn them into realities," McCormack explored the meaning and tested the validity of the statement by the use of new biographical material obtained from letters and interviews and by a comparative analysis of the writings of the two men. One of the conclusions to which he came was that Dewey's endorsement of Alexander's work proved his "deep conviction that Alexander was correct" and that writing off the endorsement as that of a "kind patron lending his approval and influence to the support of just another praiseworthy endeavor" was to impute serious intellectual dishonesty to Dewey. (p. 158).

There is no doubt that Dewey was disappointed and hurt that his strong, positive statements about Alexander's principles--for example, that they "bear the same relation to education that education bears to all other human activities"--were mocked or ignored. In November

1942, Miss Webb, who was staying with Mrs. Wendell Bush in New York, wrote me: "Someone was in tonight who knows him and says he is lonely now and often depressed. . . . It sometimes seems as if his disciples, like the men in the Bible who continually said 'Lord, Lord,' are satisfied to call on his name but don't go on to apply his teaching to what they are doing." When I knew him five years later, he was certainly not lonely, but there was no one with whom he felt he could discuss the Alexander Technique. He apologized for not introducing me to more people saying that those of his friends who might have been sympathetic to the technique were dead.

It is easy to see why the lessons appealed to Dewey (apart from the contribution to his health and well-being). They provided him with a kind of laboratory demonstration of principles that he had arrived at by reasoning: the aesthetic quality of all experience; the unity of conscious and unconscious; the continuity between self and environment; the operational significance of inhibition; the indivisibility between time and space. All of these concepts had theoretical validity for Dewey, but the concrete, sensory evidence that lessons supplied gave them a solid grounding in experience. Alexander, Dewey said, was the only person he knew or knew of "who knows what he is talking about in the way a competent engineer knows when he is talking about his specialty" (McCormack, p. 129). The reason Dewey continued to study the technique long after it had "made him over" physically was that the lessons kept enlarging and sharpening his experiences. "As one goes on," he wrote in *The Use of the Self*, "new areas are opened, new possibilities are seen and then realized; one finds himself continually growing, and realizes that there is an endless process of growth initiated."

Passages could be collected from almost any of Dewey's later books that reflect his experiences with the Alexander Technique. In two of them, *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) and *Experience and Nature* (1925), Alexander is referred to explicitly.

Human Nature and Conduct was expanded from three lectures given at Stanford University in June, 1918. Part One is devoted to the place of habit in conduct. Habit in Dewey's exposition is interactional ("transactional" was the term he later preferred). Like breathing and other physiological functions, habits, though learned rather than innate, involve a relation between an organism and an environment and cannot be understood by looking at the organism alone. Virtues and vices, moral functions like cowardice or courage, do not belong exclusively to a self but have meaning only by reference to an environment. Because of their interactional nature, habits, like physiological functions, "can be studied objectively and can be modified by change of either personal or social elements."

Habits are not "an untied bundle" of isolated acts. They interact with one another and together make up an integrated whole. Whether or not a particular habit is manifest, it is always operative and contributes to character and personality. "A man may give himself away in a look or a gesture," said Dewey, anticipating the body-language people. "Character can be read through the medium of individual acts."

Mechanization is an essential property of all habit. But it does not follow that habit must be mindless. "The real opposition," Dewey said, "is not between reason and habit, but between routine, unintelligent habit and intelligent habit or art." Habit can be plastic and creative. Indeed, in a changing world it must be: "Old habits must perforce need modification no matter how good they have been." It is the function of intelligence to determine where changes should be made.

A habit cannot be changed, however, without the intelligent control of an appropriate means or mechanism. To believe that it can is to believe in magic. People still think, nevertheless, that by passing laws, or by persuasion, by "wishing hard enough" or "feeling strongly enough" they can change human behavior and get a desirable result. That, Dewey says, is

superstition. At this point in the argument he introduces F. M. Alexander and devotes the next fifteen pages to an exposition of the Alexander Technique as a scientific and reliable means for changing behavior.

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 pointed out that this belief is on a par with primitive magic in its neglect of attention to the means which are involved in reaching an end. And he went on to say that the prevalence of this belief, starting with false notions about the control of the body and extending it to control of mind and character, is the greatest bar to intelligent social progress. . . .

We may cite this illustration of the real nature of a physical aim or order and its execution in its contrast with the current false notion. A man who has a bad habitual posture tells himself, or is told, to stand up straight. If he is interested and responds, he braces himself, goes through certain movements, and it is assumed that the desired result is substantially attained. . . . Consider the assumptions which are here made. It is implied that the means or effective conditions of the realization of a purpose exist independently of established habit and even that they may set in motion in opposition to habit. It is assumed that the means are there, so that the failure to stand erect is wholly a matter of failure of purpose and desire. . . .

Now in fact a man who *can* stand properly does so, and only a man who can, does. In the former case, fiat of will are unnecessary, and in the latter useless. A man who does not stand properly forms a habit of standing improperly, a positive, forceful habit. The common implication that his mistake is merely negative, that he is simply failing to do the right thing, and that the failure can be made good by an order of will is absurd. . . . Conditions have been formed for producing a bad result, and the bad result will occur as long as the bad conditions exist. . . . It is as reasonable to expect a fire to go out when it is ordered to stop burning as to suppose that a man can stand straight in consequence of a direct action of thought and desire. The fire can be put out only by changing objective conditions; it is the same with rectification of bad posture.

Of course something happens when a man acts upon his idea of standing straight. For a little while, he stands differently, but only a different kind of badly. He then takes the unaccustomed feeling which accompanies his unusual stand as evidence that he is now standing straight. But there are many ways of standing badly, and he has simply shifted his usual way to a compensatory bad way at some opposite extreme. . . . Only when a man can already perform an act of standing straight does he know what it is like to have a right posture and only then can he summon the idea required for proper execution. The act must come before the thought, and a habit before an ability to evoke the thought at will. Ordinary psychology reverses the actual state of affairs." [pp. 27-30]

Dewey uses this example of "standing straight" to illustrate his general law of habit: "Only the man whose habits are already good can know what good is." McCormack in his commentary on this passage says that through Alexander, Dewey as a philosopher "has suddenly experienced what the Gestaltists call 'closure.' . . . One might say that a

Copernican Revolution has taken place as a result: thought now revolves around habit, instead of habit around thought as hitherto and in 'ordinary psychology'" (pp. 98-99). Dewey is convinced that experience must come first and concepts evolve from it. But if concepts have become linked to wrong, maladaptive experiences, how is change possible? Dewey found the answer in Alexandrian inhibition. We must give up the idea of gaining the end (that is standing up straight) directly, and approach it indirectly "through a flank movement."

We must stop thinking of standing up straight. To think of it is fatal, for it commits us to the operation of an established habit of standing wrong. We must find an act within our power which is disconnected from any thought of standing. We must start to do another thing which on one side inhibits our falling into the customary bad position and on the other side is the beginning of a series of acts which may lead into the correct posture. The hard drinker who keeps thinking of not drinking is doing what he can to initiate the acts which lead to drinking. He is starting with the stimulus to the habit. . . .

Until one takes intermediate acts seriously enough to treat them as ends, one wastes one's time in any effort at change of habits. Of the intermediate acts, the most important is the *next* one. The first or earliest means is the most important *end* to discover. . . .

We must change *what* is to be done into a *how*, the means whereby. The *end* thus re-appears as a series of "what nexts," and the what next of chief importance is the one nearest the present state of the one acting. Only as the end is converted into means is it definitely conceived, or intellectually defined, to say nothing of being executable. . . . Aladdin with his lamp could dispense with translating ends into means, but no one else can so [pp. 35-37].

Dewey's account of the Alexander Technique is close to the account in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, though it is, of course, much more succinct. It leaves out the sensory experience that is given to the pupil by the teacher and that makes it easier for the pupil to alter his incorrect concept of the end he wishes to attain. It describes the inhibitory act as if it could be worked out by the pupil independently (as, indeed, it had been by Alexander himself). And there is no reference to "primary control," a concept that was not developed until later. It is nevertheless a remarkable exposition of Alexander's principles, and the whole chapter can be profitably read as a philosophical introduction to the technique.

Experience and Nature (1925), which Dykhuizen says is generally considered Dewey's magnum opus, is an enlarged version of the Paul Carus Lectures given in 1922. Dewey had again been having lessons in the technique and their influence is again apparent. "Of all Dewey's published writings," McCormack said, "*Experience and Nature* is the one in which Alexander's principles stand out most clearly and have penetrated most deeply." There is no detailed account of them as in *Human Nature and Conduct*, but anyone who has studied the technique himself can perceive its effect on the tone and often on the language of almost every chapter. In particular, Dewey's discussions of the mind-body problem, the role of inhibition, the continuity between man and nature, the immediate felt quality of things, the degeneration of the civilized subconscious, the perversion of sensory appreciation, and the need for controlling the process of change all reflect his experiences in studying with the Alexanders. McCormack, applying a kind of "litmus test" of idiomatic terms and phrases for detecting Alexander's influence, came to the conclusion that *Experience and Nature* could not be fully understood without knowing what Alexander taught.

Dewey studied the Alexander Technique intermittently throughout the 1920s and 1930s. From 1935 to 1941, he was having lessons with A.R. Alexander, and he told me that in many respects he got more from them than from the lessons he had from F.M. Applying the litmus test to books written during this period--*Art as Experience*, *The Quest for Certainty*, the revised edition of *How We Think*, *The Theory of Valuation*, *Experience and Education*--provides the Alexander student with a wealth of passages that evoke experiences he has had in applying the technique to his own life.

Dewey staked his reputation on the scientific character of the Alexander Technique, stating positively and unequivocally that "Mr. Alexander's teaching is scientific in the strictest sense of the word." McCormack says that in the introduction to *Constructive Conscious Control*, "Dewey expresses his position on these and related matters with such vigor that one is at pains to know why this essay has been neglected." In it Dewey discusses what scientific method is and what it isn't, reiterating the five steps (first set forth in *How We Think*, 1910) by which problems are solved scientifically. He concluded the discussion by saying:

After studying over a period of years Mr. Alexander's method in actual operation, I would stake myself upon the fact that he has applied to our ideas and beliefs about ourselves and about our acts exactly the same method of experimentation and of production of new sensory observations, as tests and means of developing thought, that have been the source of all progress in the physical sciences. . . .[xxvii]

Alexander's principle was scientific because it was demonstrable; it had "falsifiability," to use Popper's term. It could only be demonstrated, however, to someone who was willing to have lessons in the technique. As Dewey said in *The Quest for Certainty* (1947): "One may lead a horse to water but cannot compel him to drink. If one is unable to perform an indicated operation or declines to do so, he will not of course get its meaning." Unfortunately, very few, even of Dewey's own disciples, would allow themselves to be led to water, let alone drink.

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About the Author

Frank Pierce Jones was born and educated in Wisconsin. After receiving his B.A. and M.A. degrees in Classics at Stanford University, he received his Ph.D. at Wisconsin University in 1937. The same year he began teaching Greek and Latin at Brown University.

In 1938, in the hopes of improving his health, Jones began having lesson with A.R. Alexander (F. Matthias Alexander's brother). In 1940, he began lessons with F. Matthias Alexander. A year later, Jones entered the three year teacher-training course being offered by F.M. Alexander in Massachusetts.

After completing his training, Jones decided to devote himself to helping to establish the scientific validity of Alexander's work. Jones was strongly encouraged by John Dewey to proceed with scientific research into the Alexander Technique. Jones left his teaching position at Brown, and, in 1954, began to conduct experimental research at the Institute for Psychological Research at Tufts University into the physiological

and behavioral principles underlying Alexander's method. Over the next 20 years, he published numerous papers on these subjects, wrote a book on his studies of the Alexander Technique, *Body Awareness in Action* (recently republished under the title *Freedom to Change, see below*), and became a full professor of psychology at Tufts University in 1972.

Jones continued his research and teaching of the Alexander Technique, and concurrently continued to teach Classics at Tufts as Professor Emeritus, until his death in 1975.

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