

John Dewey's Influence on F M Alexander

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THE RE-PUBLICATION of McCormack's 1958 thesis (Mouritz 2014) on Alexander as a 'neglected influence' on Dewey is timely given that their first meeting was almost a century ago during the winter of 1915–16. At the time, Dewey was completing his landmark work *Democracy and Education* in which he considered his philosophy 'was most fully expounded'.¹

We can be reasonably sure that neither man knew anything of the other prior to their meeting in 1916. On the face of it, their long friendship seems an unlikely one: John Dewey (1859–1952) was an established Columbia professor destined for a long and distinguished career as America's foremost philosopher while F. Matthias Alexander (1869–1955) was relatively unknown, his first book *Man's Supreme Inheritance* having had little impact in America. However, from a personal point of view, both men must have recognised a certain straightforward honesty in each other, both born of pioneering stock. More importantly, there were 'congenial features' in the ideas of both men that sustained their friendship over the years.

Several authors, including McCormack, followed F. P. Jones's lead² by making a case for Alexander's practical lessons in his technique having been a significant influence on the development of Dewey's thinking.³ In his Introduction to the new edition of McCormack, Alexander Murray sets down a

challenge for someone to show a reciprocal influence of Dewey on Alexander's thinking.

Were there discernible changes in the way Alexander expressed himself after 1916 that can definitely be attributed to his meeting and interaction with Dewey?

Turbayne (in McCormack, p. 196) writes that 'since Dewey was for a considerable time a pupil of Alexander's, his manner of thinking underwent change some time after he first came in contact with Alexander in 1916. This is easier to state than to prove.' Of course, the same may be said of any influence of Dewey on Alexander's thinking and it would not necessarily be obvious simply from the latter's writing. And again, can it be proved that features suggestive of Dewey's influence were in fact attributable solely to him and to no one else? From today's perspective, there will always be conjecture.

How much time over the years did the two men spend in each other's company? In 1914–15, Alexander established a travel pattern which he would follow until 1924 (with the exception of 1921–2) spending up to eight months each year in America. (Bloch, p. 104).⁴ Alexander could have given Dewey regular lessons from winter 1916 to Spring 1919 and then from Autumn 1922 to Spring 1924. In 1926, Dewey travelled in England where he visited Alexander's London practice for two days of lessons (Staring 2015).⁵ In 1929 he spent six months in the UK (where he delivered the Gifford Lectures in Edinburgh

¹ Martin, p. 255.

² Jones, F. P. (1943). 'The Work of F. M. Alexander as an Introduction to Dewey's Philosophy of Education'. *School and Society*, January 2, 1943, Vol. 57, No. 1462, pp. 1–4. Society for the Advancement of Education. See Murray in McCormack, p. vii.

³ Turbayne (1948), McCormack (1958), Jones (1976), Mixon (1980), Murray (1982), Boydston (1986), Boydston (1996), Williamson (2011).

⁴ Dewey was travelling in Japan and China from Spring 1919 to October 1921, so lessons would have been a gap of 3½ years. Dewey resumed lessons with Alexander's brother, 'A. R.' (1935–41) that he said were often more effective than lessons with Alexander himself (Jones, pp. 103–4).

⁵ Professor Dewey . . . visited the class for two mornings, sitting quietly in the corner while we carried on as usual. (Tasker, 23)

published as *The Quest for Certainty*) and had weekly lessons (McCormack, 114). Alexander attended Dewey's 70th birthday celebrations in New York (October 20, 1929) and in 1941–43, whilst again living in New York, Alexander consulted him on the draft of his fourth book *The Universal Constant in Living*.⁶

It seems to me that many Deweyan ideas are likely to have been instilled into Alexander's thinking via his assistants, Ethel Webb (1866–1952) and Irene Tasker (1887–1977).

Although there were long deliberations possible with Dewey, even more must have taken place with Misses Webb and Tasker as between them they worked out the most precise wording for Alexander's books from 1918 onwards.⁷ In general, once he had become established, Alexander is said to have read little and looked to his friends to keep him informed. Just as he relied on his medical friends to keep him up to date with scientific and biomedical advances, so Ethel Webb and Irene Tasker would have kept him abreast of trends in teaching methods.

Though many of their ideas were developed independently, Dewey and Alexander must have found much in common. There are numerous instances where Dewey expressed views close to Alexander's and it would be surprising if none of Dewey's views had rubbed off onto Alexander as vice versa. The story Tasker tells of the proposed title of Alexander's second book shows that the point Alexander makes to Dewey is, in fact, one that Dewey could quite easily have first made to Alexander:

At that time we must have been working on C.C.C. because I remember various people, including Professor Dewey, objecting to the

⁶ Evans, p. 208.

⁷ Tasker, p. 15. Also, Preface, *CCCI* (London 1923) Mouritz, p. xxiv and 'I have gone on with Professor Dewey, and we have spent night after night discussing these matters' ('An Unrecognised Principle in Human Behaviour' (1925) in *A&L*, p. 158).

length of the title 'Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual', suggesting that the words 'of the Individual' be cut out. F.M. said 'No. That's the most important part of the title. The time is coming when the individual is going to be considered of less and less importance. The state, the community, will be all. *'We are concerned,' he went on, 'with the quality of the individuals who make up the community.'* (Tasker, p. 15 italics added)

It would be difficult to over-state the importance of the contribution made by Ethel Webb and Irene Tasker to Alexander's books. Tasker, in particular, took an interest in Dewey and became a friend of his wife, Alice.⁸ In her 1967 talk to Alexander teachers, she describes a train journey across America in the company of the Deweys (Tasker, p. 14). When Tasker's school teaching post in Yorkshire was curtailed by the war, Margaret Naumburg (see below) had invited her to teach at her school in New York. One reason Tasker had been so enthusiastic about this offer was that her afternoons would be free to attend Dewey's lectures.⁹ Dewey obviously had a lasting influence on Tasker's thinking. Her talk to Alexander teachers was entitled, 'Connecting Links', one of Dewey's recurring themes.¹⁰ Tasker said that, at the time, Alexander's style of teaching was very different from how it became in later years.¹¹ It is not unreasonable to think that, in as far as Dewey's ideas influenced Alexander, it was Misses Webb and Tasker – and in particular Tasker – who steered Alexander towards Dewey's

⁸ Alexander is reported to have said that Alice was the most intelligent woman he ever knew.

⁹ See Tasker, p. 13. A description of Tasker attending one of Dewey's lectures is included in Murray (McCormack, pp. 222–3), from *Philosopher's Holiday* by Irwin Edman. New York: Viking Press 1938: pp. 138ff.

¹⁰ Dewey 1916, pp. 115, 137, etc. Compare, 'Knowledge is of little use in itself; it is the linking up of what we know with that which comes to us daily in the shape of new ideas and new experiences which is of value . . .' *CCCI* (Mouritz 2004), p. 77.

¹¹ Tasker, p. 10. See also, Bloch, p. 81.

educational topics and wove them into Alexander's subsequent writing. By the time of the second book, *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* – the one Alexander considered as definitive – what can be seen as Deweyan concepts were adopted for Part II: education became the main agent for human kind's growth replacing *Élan vital*.¹² This is likely to be due to Alexander's discussions with Dewey and testimony to the skills of Webb and Tasker who stitched these ideas seamlessly with Alexander's drafts so expertly as to persuade him that they were what he had meant all along.

Before we discuss the specific ways in which Dewey influenced Alexander, it would be useful briefly to remind ourselves of the events that led to their meeting (described in McCormack, pp. 42–3, Tasker, pp. 9–11 and Bloch, pp. 98f.).

Ethel Webb – Alexander's life-long assistant and secretary¹³ – had met Irene Tasker and a group of American students, including Margaret Naumburg (1890–1983), in Rome. They had all been there to study with Maria Montessori.¹⁴ Tasker became interested in Alexander's work when Webb showed her a copy of his newly published, *Conscious Control* (1912). A Girton graduate and interested in teaching children, she soon became another of Alexander's life-long teaching assistants. Naumburg had roomed with Dewey's daughter Evelyn as an undergraduate at Barnard College, and had been a post-graduate student of Dewey's at Columbia.

¹² Henri Bergson met Dewey's fellow 'pragmatist', William James (1842–1910), in London in 1908. James was planning a foreword to the English translation of Bergson's book *Creative Evolution* at the time of his death.

¹³ Webb went to Alexander after reading *Man's Supreme Inheritance* and, by 1914, was the first trained teacher in the UK from outside the Alexander family (Bloch, p. 95).

¹⁴ Tasker remembered it occurring in 1912, (1978, p. 8) but in *Montessori: A Biography*, Rita Kramer (1988, p. 178) it is reported that the training that Naumburg attended began in January, 1913. alextech-list-digest, Friday, October 3 2003, Volume 01 : Number 439.

She was struck by similarities between both men's ideas and proceeded to have lessons with Alexander in London.¹⁵

On her return home, Naumburg set up her experimental school that became the Walden School. She was anxious that Dewey and Alexander should meet and, with the outbreak of war in Europe – and the consequent reduction in number of pupils seeking lessons – Alexander decided it was a good time to visit New York and that John Dewey was the man to introduce his work to America (Bloch, 106–7).¹⁶

Dewey's ideas and ways of expressing them developed from his earlier book, *How We Think* (1910) and, just as Alexander had made a quantum leap from 'vocal arts' to humankind's destiny as fully conscious beings, so Dewey's horizons had widened beyond the school classroom to education and society at large. The aim of progressive education was to develop an individual's potentialities; to foster a general mental (thinking) attitude necessary for adapting successfully to the 'rapid and abrupt' changes in the prevailing industrialised society. Further, social efficiency was not to be measured solely by product or output, but by the degree to which the potentialities of each individual were cultivated and fostered confidence and contentment. In short: 'It is the aim of progressive education to take part in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation, not to perpetuate them' (Dewey 1916, pp. 91–2). For Dewey, Pragmatism in its social form –

'was a commitment to construct a society in search of its own improvement. If our understanding of the universe was always changing, always in progress, then our reconstruction of society must always be

¹⁵ Webb had taken a copy of the recently published booklet, *Conscious Control* (1912) with her (Tasker, p. 9).

¹⁶ Martin (p. 285) writes that Dewey was introduced to Alexander in 1916 by James Harvey Robinson.

in progress. The schools must instil this attitude and the commitment to the cooperation of all for the benefit of all in the society of all.’ (Steinberg, p. 16)

How We Think had become the bible of those who came to be called “progressive” educators.¹⁷ It was based on his first book, *Psychology* (1887) but it had been reframed to eliminate the inherent dualism of Hegel’s philosophy.¹⁸ And *Democracy and Education* states this emphatically. *Democracy and Education* (1916) was the clearest account of Dewey’s philosophy to date.¹⁹ It was the book he was completing when he met Alexander and that Alexander alludes to at the end of the chapter, ‘An Illustration’ in *Constructive Conscious Control* (Alexander 2004: 124–5).²⁰ Like Alexander, Dewey firmly rejected the orthodoxy of mind over body. Traditional teaching methods were based on the idea that subject matter could be poured into the empty vessel of a child’s mind and that innate mental faculties (memory, reasoning, moral judgement, etc.) could be trained by mechanical performance of exercises just as physical exercise develops the body. Dewey adopts the philosophy of the Greeks (revived by Rousseau) in recognising the importance of *physical health and the role of the body in learning*: ‘develop the mind especially by exercise of the muscles of the body’ (Dewey 1916, p. 89). Dewey insisted that we can only truly learn through active engagement and experiencing: ‘An ounce of experience is better than a ton of theory’ (Dewey 1916, p. 110).

¹⁷ Richard Rorty, Introduction to *John Dewey, Later Works, 1925-1953 (Volume 8: 1933)*, p. ix.

¹⁸ See Turbayne in McCormack, p. 207.

¹⁹ At that time he had a close relationship with Evelyn who co-operated in the next book, *Schools of Tomorrow*. There is an anecdote of Dewey’s publisher saying how he preferred his style of writing in one of the chapters to that of another. Dewey was quiet, and then replied, “That is very interesting. My daughter Evelyn wrote the one you liked!”

²⁰ ‘A pupil of mine, an author [i.e. Dewey] . . .’ Murray points out that the book the pupil is completing is *Democracy and Education* (McCormack, p. 128).

It seems reasonable, therefore, to compare Dewey’s writing at this time with Alexander’s writing of 1910, 1912 to see what ideas were common, and to compare this with the 1918 edition of *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* (that contains new material) and *CCCI* (as we know Alexander sought Dewey’s opinions on the draft).

It is interesting that McCormack finds scarce evidence for Dewey having influenced Alexander.²¹ And three people who knew Alexander well testify that he showed little interest in Dewey’s or anyone else’s views, except to the extent that they corroborated his own.²² However, closer inspection of Alexander’s texts reveals otherwise. There are the changes evident from a comparison of the two editions of *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* – i.e. 1910 and 1918 – noted by McCormack: the addition of chapter VIII ‘... the Crisis of 1914’ that Alexander wrote in support of his friend who was being heavily criticized for his pro-war views, and the omission of a quote from Professor Hugo Münsterberg at the opening of Chapter IV (1910: 49).²³

The rest of this article is devoted to identifying common themes in both men’s thinking. Some, the ‘congenial features’ recognised by Naumburg had been developed independently on either side of the Atlantic. Other features of Alexander’s work developed after 1916.

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Obvious instances of Dewey’s influence on Alexander’s thinking

Dewey wrote introductions to three of Alexander’s books. So, if only by these alone,

²¹ In fact, one can imagine Alexander making the same outrageous criticism of Dewey that he reportedly made of Gurdjieff and Jesus Christ; each lacked a practical ‘technique’ (Bloch, p. 103 footnote). Dewey modified his views on the role of inhibition following his lessons with Alexander. See McCormack’s discussion on pp. 44-5.

²² See views of Jones, Barlow and Naumburg, McCormack p. 48 footnote 33.

²³ See McCormack, p. 44.

he has a considerable presence in Alexander's major writings 1918, 1923, 1932.

Dewey is cited on 18 pages of main texts:

1918: none

1923: 1 instance – 'emotional gusts' (Mouritz) p. 78.

1932: 3 instances – 'thinking in activity' (1985) pp. 42, 108; science, 'skill in conducting inquiry' (quoting *Experience and Nature*) pp. 51, 76fn.

1942: 14 instances – 'revolution in thought and action' (Mouritz) pp. 25, 65 *Educational Essays* pp. 44–5, 'vital freedom' pp. 74, 115–6, 'thinking in activity' pp. 86, 182, 188, 'emotional gusts' pp. 89, 154, 182.

Pre-existing 'congenial features'²⁴

All the following extracts from Dewey are from *Democracy and Education* (1916)²⁵ unless stated otherwise. As one might expect with 'connected' thinking, many features cannot easily be isolated and there is often considerable overlap.

REJECTION OF DUALISM

Much of Dewey's writing is concerned with revealing the *continuity* of existence by resolving commonly perceived dualities: mind/body but also – object/subject, knowing/doing, intellect/emotions, self/non-self, i.e. environment or society, method/subject matter, theory/practice, means/ends, etc.

A target is not the future goal of shooting; it is the centering factor in a present shooting. (Dewey 1916, p. 130)

²⁴ McCormack, 2014: 48

²⁵ I have used the 'print on demand' edition by The Echo Library (2011). All page numbers for Alexander's books have been regularised to apply to the modern Mouritz editions.

[Traditional scholarly methods do not educate children] 'into responsibility for the significant and graceful use of bodily powers, but into an enforced duty not to give them free play. It may be seriously asserted that a chief cause for the remarkable achievements of Greek education was that it was never misled by false notions into an attempted separation of mind and body [*Mens sana in corpore sano*²⁶].' (Dewey 1916, p. 108)

All of these separations e.g. knowledge and knowing; intellect and emotions] culminate in one between knowing and doing, theory and practice, between mind as the end and spirit of action and the body as its organ and means. . . . The advance of physiology and psychology associated with [continuity] have shown the connection of mental activity with that of the nervous system. Too often recognition of connection has stopped short at this point; the older dualism of soul and body has been replaced by that of the brain and the rest of the body. But in fact the nervous system is only a specialized mechanism for keeping all the bodily activities working together. Instead of being isolated from them, as an organ of knowing from organs of motor response, it is the organ by which they interact responsively with one another. The brain is essentially an organ for effecting the reciprocal adjustment to each other of the stimuli received from the environment and responses directed upon it. Note that the adjustment is reciprocal; the brain not only enables organic activity to be brought to bear upon any object of the environment in response to a sensory stimulation, but this response also determines what the next stimulus will be. (Dewey 1916, p. 246)

But for both men, there was a hierarchy of mind over body. Muscular release is not to be thought of as an end in itself, but as a means for cultivating the intellect (learning). As with Alexander,

²⁶ Quoted by Alexander *MSI*, 1910, p.11; 1996, p. 8.

the ultimate achievement is that *the conscious mind must be quickened* [i.e. enlivened].²⁷

In this book [*CCCI*] the word evolution is used to indicate all processes which are involved in the quickening of the potentialities of the creature at the different stages of growth and development, and which are necessary to the success of his attempts to satisfy the varying needs of an ever-changing environment, and to reach a plane of constructive conscious control of the individual organism. (Alexander, Mouritz 2004, p. 5fn.)

Learning by doing²⁸ and learning by experience.²⁹

Hence the first approach to any subject in school, if thought is to be aroused and not words acquired, should be as **unscholastic as possible**. . . . They give the pupils something to do, not something to learn; and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; learning naturally results. (Dewey 1916, p. 117)

To “learn from experience” is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; the undergoing becomes instruction – discovery of the connection of things. (Dewey 1916, p. 107)

- The point is this; a patient who submits himself for treatment, whether to a medical man or to any other practitioner, may DO what he is told, but will not or cannot THINK as he is told. In ordinary practice, the man who has taken a medical degree disregards this mental attitude in ninety-nine

²⁷ Alexander, 1910: 58; 1918 (1996): 33. See *Creative Evolution*, below.

²⁸ Dewey 1916, p. 140

²⁹ Dewey 1916, p. 107.

cases out of a hundred. (Alexander 1910, pp. 66–7; 1918 (Mouritz 1996), p. 46)

- In *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* I endeavoured to leave no room for doubt that I base my philosophy and practice on the unity of human potentialities, which, up till now, have been differentiated and represented as “body,” “body and mind,” or “body, mind, and soul.” *CCCI*, Mouritz 2004, p. 46fn.
- Moreover, I have not found in the “New Thought” a proper consideration of cause and effect in treating the mental and physical in combination. These writings [on New Thought] exhibit, and have always exhibited, the fallacy of considering the mental and physical as in some sense antitheses which are opposed to each other and make war, whereas in my opinion the two must be considered entirely interdependent, and even more closely knit than is implied by such a phrase. (Alexander 1910, p. 51; 1918 (Mouritz 1996), p. 28)
- . . . such a [teaching] technique involves correct manipulation on the part of the teacher in the matter of *giving the pupil correct experiences in sensory appreciation*, in the spheres of re-education, readjustment and co-ordination. Furthermore, in order to give these satisfactory sensory experiences, the teacher must himself be in possession of a reliable sensory mechanism and have gained the experience in re-education and co-ordination that is required for a satisfactory readjustment of the organism.’ (*CCCI*, Mouritz 2004, p. 81)
- Problems with the narrow, overly academic education described by Miss Thompson of the “rudderless” young men (*UCL*, Mouritz 2000, pp. 170–3)

and Dr. William Heard Kilpatrick of Columbia University ‘a colleague of John Dewey’ (ibid., pp. 174–8). Is it likely Dewey alerted Alexander to these cases?

MEANS AND ‘DISTANCE COVERED’ IN GAINING ENDS³⁰

Dewey advocates an education that develops ‘general, broad and flexible’ means³¹ (Dewey 1916, p. 54) by which individuals can learn reliably and independently for themselves. Dewey’s articulation of sensory and experiential learning theory and practice (the means whereby approach to learning) preceded their best articulation in Alexander’s texts and practice, and occurred after Tasker joined on as assistant.³²

Dewey had realised the importance of utilising the best fit-for-purpose means for reaching desired goals. Of education in general, Dewey writes:

Any activity with an aim implies a distinction between an earlier incomplete phase and later completing phase; it implies also **intermediate steps**. . . . The time difference between the given incomplete state of affairs and the desired fulfilment exacts effort in transformation, it demands continuity of attention and endurance. (Dewey 1916, p. 105)

Results (external answers or solutions) may be hurried; processes may not be forced. They take their own time to mature. Were all instructors to realize that *the quality of mental process, not the production of correct answers, is the measure of educative growth* something hardly less than a revolution in teaching would be worked. (Dewey 1916, p. 133)

The word **interest** suggests, etymologically, what is between, – that which connects two things otherwise distant. In education, the

distance covered may be looked at as temporal. The fact that a process takes time to mature is so obvious a fact that we rarely make it explicit. We overlook the fact that in growth there is ground to be covered between an initial stage of process and the completing period; that there is something intervening. In learning, the present powers of the pupil are the initial stage; the aim of the teacher represents the remote limit. Between the two lies **means** – that is middle conditions: – acts to be performed; difficulties to be overcome; appliances to be used. Only through them, in the literal sense, will the initial activities reach a satisfactory consummation. (Dewey 1916, p. 98)

CORRECT MENTAL ATTITUDE

Both men saw it as essential that the pupil (or patient) adopts the correct mental attitude³³: trying hard to be ‘right’, over-eagerness to please others [teachers], over-anxiety towards making mistakes rather than seeing them as a learning opportunity.³⁴ Dewey articulates what he considers key desirable traits:

Some attitudes may be named, however, which are central in effective intellectual ways of dealing with subject matter. Among the most important are directness, open-mindedness, single-mindedness (or whole-heartedness), and responsibility. (Dewey 1916, pp. 131–5)

Dewey explains what is meant:

‘Directness’: It is easier to indicate what is meant by directness through negative terms than in positive ones. Self-consciousness, embarrassment, and constraint are its menacing foes. They indicate that a person is not immediately concerned with subject matter. Something has come between which deflects concern to side issues. A self-conscious person is partly thinking about his problem and partly about what others think of

³⁰ Dewey 1916, p. 98.

³¹ CCCI Mouritz 2004, p. 92 & etc.

³² alextech-list-digest, op cit.

³³ Alexander mentions ‘mental attitude’ several times. MSI 1910: 16, 20, 66–8, 71, 77; CC 1912: 2–3, 29–30.

³⁴ Compare Dewey 1916: 149.

his performances. . . . Confidence is a good name for what is intended by the term directness (Dewey 1916, pp. 131–2).

Open-mindedness means retention of the childlike attitude; closed-mindedness means premature intellectual old age. (Dewey 1916, p. 133)

‘Responsibility’ is defined as ‘the disposition to consider in advance the probable consequences of any projected step and deliberately to accept them . . .’ (Dewey 1916, p. 135)

Alexander’s teaching aphorisms:

- ‘Don’t come to me unless, when I tell you you are wrong, you make up your mind to smile and be pleased.’ (Maisel, p. 10)
- ‘To know when we are wrong is all that we shall ever know in this world.’ (ibid.)

Interest, curiosity and wonder

The child has an interest on his own account . . . He imitates the *means* of doing, not the end or thing to be done. . . . As a matter of fact, imitation of ends, as distinct from imitation of means which help to reach ends, is a superficial and transitory affair which leaves little effect upon disposition. Idiots are especially apt to this kind of imitation . . . (Dewey 1916, p. 31)

With respect to the development of powers devoted to coping with specific scientific and economic problems we may say the child should be growing in manhood. With respect to sympathetic curiosity, unbiased responsiveness, and openness of mind, we may say that the adult should be growing in **childlikeness**. One statement is as true as the other. (Dewey 1916, p. 42)

HABIT

Dewey’s – or Alexander’s? – ‘general law’ of habit

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.³⁵ (Dewey 1922, pp. 30–31)

What Jones (1976) describes as Dewey’s general law of habit can be seen as common to both men.³⁶ Indeed, it was Alexander who was able to demonstrate the ‘law’ to Dewey. Habit to Dewey and others referred to overt behaviours: good habits associated with, say, one’s professional values and skills³⁷; ‘bad’ habits as those uncontrolled behaviours and cravings of over-indulgence. Alexander, however, was addressing more fundamental pre-disposing reactive habits in personal manner of use, see *UCL Mouritz*, pp. 99ff.

In both kinds of responsive adjustment [automatic or ‘intelligent’], our activities are directed or controlled. But in the merely blind response, **direction** is also blind. There may be training, but there is no education. Repeated responses to recurrent stimuli may fix a habit

³⁵ “A man who can stand properly does so, and only a man who can, does” (1922: 29). This is a reworking of Alexander’s arguments for “a boy who stoops... [and] is told to ‘stand up straight’” reproduced in Alexander 1910: 191 (*Re-education of the Kinaesthetic Systems*... pamphlet December 1908, in *Articles and Lectures*, Mouritz 1995, p. 82) and, again, regarding breathing in his pamphlet, *Why We Breathe Incorrectly* (1909) quoted in Alexander 1996: 90–1).

³⁶ Jones, p. 102.

³⁷ Compare also William James’, *Principles of Psychology* (1890), Chapter 4.

of acting in a certain way. All of us have many habits of whose import we are quite unaware, since they are formed without our knowing what we were about. Consequently they possess us, rather than we them. They move us; they control us. Unless we become aware of what they accomplish, and pass judgment upon the worth of the result, we do not control them. (Dewey 1916, p. 27)

Above all, the intellectual element in a habit fixes the relation of the habit to varied and elastic use, and hence to continued growth. We speak of fixed habits. Well, the phrase may mean powers so well established that their possessor always has them as resources when needed. But the phrase is also used to mean ruts, routine ways, with loss of freshness, open-mindedness, and originality. . . . As we have seen, *the acquiring of habits is due to an original plasticity of our natures*;³⁸ to our ability to vary responses till we find an appropriate and efficient way of acting. Routine habits, and habits that possess us instead of our possessing them, are habits which put an end to plasticity. They mark the close of power to vary. (Dewey 1916, p. 41)

These passages bear a striking similarity to Alexander's (1910):

'In the first place it is essential to understand the difference between the habit that is recognized and understood and the habit that is not. The difference... is that the first can be altered at will and the second cannot. For when real conscious control has been obtained, the "habit" need never become fixed. It is not truly a habit at all, but an order or series of orders given to the subordinate controls of the body, which orders will be carried out until countermanded.' (MSI 1910, p. 74–5; 1918 (Mourtiz 1996), p. 54)

³⁸ This is reminiscent of Alexander's point in *UoS*, p. 36, 'Surely,' I argued, 'if it is possible for feeling to become untrustworthy as a means of direction, it should also be possible to make it trustworthy again.'

For Alexander, concerned with the use or instrumentality of the self, the body is a dynamic unit of function and posture is not something separate from what one is doing. Holding and drinking from a cup is not separate from postural 'doings' inherent to the activity.³⁹

Furthermore, not only do habits 'interpenetrate' one another, as Dewey said, they also include the tools one is using – the spoon being used for stirring⁴⁰; the chair for sitting – and even more than the immediate setting – distant objects such as those remembered, relationships, emotional feelings etc.

When a man is eating, he is eating food. He does not divide his act of eating and food. . . . Just as the organs of the organism are a continuous part of the very world in which food material exists, so the capacities of seeing, hearing, loving, imagining are intrinsically connected with the subject matter of the world. . . . Experience, in short, is not a combination of mind and world, subject and object, method and subject matter, but is a single continuous interaction of a great

³⁹ Similarly, the Technique is not something one 'does' separate from the activity or objects involved in, say, sitting on a chair. It cannot be experienced apart or as something extra to what one is doing.

⁴⁰ 'To "move" our forearm is not the same as to move a spoon. Moving ourselves and bits of ourselves – as opposed to moving external objects – is always a question of *allowing* movement to take place, rather than of picking-up and putting somewhere else. . . .' Barlow, W. (1973). *The Alexander Principle*, London: V. Gollancz, p. 176. Compare ' . . . I move external objects with the help of my own body, which takes hold of them in one place in order to take them to another. But I move my body directly, I do not find it at one objective point in space in order to lead it to another. I have not need of looking for it because it is always with me. I have no need of directing it toward the goal of the movement, in a sense it touches the goal from the very beginning and it throws itself towards it. In movement, the relations between my decision and my body are magical ones.' Merleau-Ponty, M. *Phenomenology of Perception* translated by D. A Landes. London & New York: Routledge 2012, pp. 96–7. Originally published 1945.

diversity (literally countless in number) of energies. (Dewey 1916, pp. 126–7)

- Alexander mentions examples of mental “rigidity” such as (1) the fixed habitual behaviour of a fireman on duty at a theatre: ‘I forgot the escapes last night and I am sure to forget ’em again if you make me go that way round.’ (MSI 1996: 132 footnote, also in CC 1912, p. 28.) And (2) his friend’s behaviour in a hotel fire, ‘When I entered the room he was calmly buttoning up his waistcoat as on any other morning when he had nothing to fear. He was self-hypnotized as regarded his chances of being burned alive, and had even shaved.’ (MSI, 1996: 151; not in 1910 edition.)

Changes in terminology after 1916

There are changes in terminology – patient/pupil, orders/directions; new topics; and a developing teaching philosophy.

‘Patient’ – ‘pupil’

Alexander refers several times to his ‘patients’ in the first edition of *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* but he once refers to his ‘pupil’ (p. 22). Two years later (Alexander 1912), though not consistent, ‘pupil’ is the more common term. (Ethel Webb would most likely have been assisting him by this time.) In *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* 1918 edition, he refers to ‘patient or pupil’ in a new section (p. 183). By 1923 he is consistently referring to his pupils. How much did Dewey or Webb and Tasker influence this change? Dewey is adamant that both teacher and learner have a shared active interest in the process and outcome of the lesson; the teacher is as much a learner as is the pupil.

In such shared activity, the teacher is a learner, and the learner is, without knowing it, a

teacher – and upon the whole, the less [self-] consciousness there is, on either side, of either giving or receiving instruction, the better. (Dewey, 1916, p. 121)

Interest and aims, concern and purpose, are necessarily connected. . . . But for the active being, a being who partakes of the consequences instead of standing aloof from them, there is at the same time a personal response. (Dewey 1916, p. 96)

‘Orders’ – ‘directions’

There is the change in terminology from guiding ‘orders’ to ‘directions’ that Murray identifies (in McCormack, p. XIII).

In 1910, Alexander refers to ‘guiding sensations or orders’. In a section added to the 1918 edition he writes:

If they are trained under the older methods of education they become more and more dependent on their instructors; if under the more recent methods of “free expression” (to which I shall presently refer at some length), they are left to the vagaries of the imperfect and inadequate **directions** of subconscious mechanisms that are the inheritance of a gradually deteriorated psycho-physical functioning of the whole organism. . . . (Alexander 1918 (Mourtiz 1996), p. 71)

In 1923, Alexander still uses the term ‘orders’ but more than not qualifies it as ‘guiding or controlling **orders or directions**’. Some teachers have tried to rationalise Alexander’s usage of the terms by designating orders as ‘inhibitory acts’ and directions as ‘volitional acts’: ‘primary [orders], to be given, but not to be carried out (inhibition)’ and orders ‘which are to follow and to be actually carried out.’ (Alexander 2004, pp. 104, 107) However, Alexander is not entirely consistent and the distinction is not clear. By 1932, ‘directions’ is the preferred terminology.

Of these three words, direction, control, guidance, the last best conveys the idea of [the

teacher] assisting through cooperation the natural capacities of the individuals guided; control conveys rather the notion of an energy brought to bear from without [i.e. by the teacher] and meeting some resistance from the one controlled; *direction is a more neutral term and suggests the fact that the active tendencies of those directed are led in a certain continuous course*, instead of dispersing aimlessly.⁴¹

Two conclusions emerge from these general statements. On the one hand, purely external direction is impossible. The environment can at most only supply stimuli to call out responses. These responses proceed from tendencies already possessed by the individual. . . . Speaking accurately, *all direction is but re-direction; it shifts the activities already going on into another channel.*⁴² (Dewey 1916, pp. 23–4)

Mind is not a name for something complete by itself; it is a name for a course of action in so far as that is intelligently directed [as when we say, ‘I have a mind to . . .’]; in so far, that is to say, as aims, ends, enter into it, with selection of means to further the attainment of aims. (Dewey 1916, p. 101)

For to find that one is unable to execute directions, including inhibitory ones, in doing such a seemingly simple act as to sit down, when one is using all the mental capacity which one prides himself upon possessing, is not an experience congenial to one’s vanity. (Dewey in Alexander 1932 (1985), p. 10)

‘Learning and learning to do’

The phrase ‘learning and learning to do’ makes the distinction between ‘academic’ conceptual learning and implicit ‘how to’ learning. It appears on eight pages of

⁴¹ The same might be said to apply to ‘self-control’ or ‘self-direction’.

⁴² Compare Walter Carrington, *Thinking Aloud* (San Francisco: Mornum Time Press 1994) directing ‘a stream of water’, p. 36.

Constructive Conscious Control and is not used again until *Universal Constant*, where it appears on seven pages.

‘Emotional gusts’ . . .

Alexander’s succinct phrase, ‘Unduly excited fear reflexes, uncontrolled emotions and fixed prejudices’⁴³ is a reworking of central Deweyan themes: i.e. ‘directness’ (see above) without ‘dread of the uncertain and the unknown’ (Dewey 1916, p. 42), freedom from what Dewey called “emotional gusts”⁴⁴, and ability to adapt one’s opinions in the light of fresh evidence.

The expression ‘out of communication with their reason’ (1918, Mouritz 1996, pp. 42, 87, 151, 157, 173), attributed to Emerson, may well be a phrase suggested by Dewey. Compare, ‘out of communication with reasoning’ (*CCCI*, Mouritz, p. 93).

‘Thinking in activity’ is Dewey’s description of the kind of moment-by-moment, practical thinking that he encountered in his lessons and Alexander adopted the phrase in his third book, *The Use of the Self* (Alexander 1985, pp. 42, 108).

- *The process I have just described is an example of what Professor John Dewey has called “thinking in activity,” and anyone who carries it out faithfully while trying to gain an end will find that he is acquiring a new experience in what he calls “thinking.”* (1985: 42; also p. 108. The phrase also appears in *UCL*, Mouritz 2000, pp. 84, 86 and 182.)

‘Saying no’

Pure conjecture in this case, but the expression ‘saying no’ to indicate an act of intentional

⁴³ Compare Alexander (1923), Part Two, chapter VI, pp. 134f.

⁴⁴ *CCCI* (Mouritz 2004), pp. 78, 138fn, 144, 184, 191 ‘dominated by his emotional impulses’, etc. *UCL* (Mouritz 2000), pp. 89, 154, 182, (205 Appendix F).

inhibition first appears in Alexander's writing in 1918 (Mouritz, p. 136). Austin (2014) quotes from a 1907 lecture by William James (p. 69) where he uses the same phrase:

'It is notorious that a single successful effort of moral volition, such as saying 'no' to some habitual temptation . . . will launch a man on a higher level of energy for days and weeks, will give him a new range of power.'⁴⁵

Could Dewey have possibly suggested that Alexander use the phrase?

New themes and developing concepts

PERSONAL GROWTH and 'UNDERGOING' – a continual beginning afresh; 'learn to learn' (Dewey 1916, p. 39).

This could be seen as a pre-existing theme in Alexander's early writing with its theme of creative evolution (Bergson) – *élan vital* i.e. 'vital force' – humankind's growth through a developing consciousness.

Every man, woman, and child holds the possibility of physical perfection; it rests with each of us to attain it by personal understanding and effort. (Introduction to *MSI* 1910 edition, p. xvi)

By and through consciousness and the application of a reasoning intelligence, man may rise above the powers of all disease and physical disabilities. This triumph is not to be won in sleep, in trance, in submission, in paralysis, or in anaesthesia, but in a clear, open-eyed, reasoning, deliberate consciousness and apprehension of the

⁴⁵ William James (1907) 'The Energies of Men', delivered as the presidential address the American Philosophical Association at Columbia. First published in *Science*, N.S. 25 (No. 635), 321-332. <http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/James/energies.htm> [accessed 5/2/2015]

wonderful potentialities possessed by mankind, the transcendent [sic] inheritance of a conscious mind. (Close of *MSI* 1910, p. 140; 1996, p. 146)⁴⁶

Alexander aligns closer to Dewey's concept of education as the 'civilising' agency in his later writing.

Since in reality there is nothing to which [personal] growth is relative save more growth, there is nothing to which education is subordinate save more education. It is commonplace to say that education should not cease when one leaves school. The point of this commonplace is that the purpose of school education is to insure the continuance of education by organizing the powers that insure growth. The inclination to learn from life itself and to make the conditions of life such that all will learn in the process of living is the finest product of schooling.

When we abandon the attempt to define immaturity by means of fixed comparison with adult accomplishments, we are compelled to give up thinking of it as denoting lack of desired traits. Abandoning this notion, we are also forced to surrender our habit of thinking of instruction as a method of supplying this lack by pouring knowledge into a mental and moral hole which awaits filling. Since **life is growth**, a living creature lives as truly and positively at one stage as at another, with the same intrinsic fullness and the same absolute claims. Hence education means the enterprise of supplying the conditions which insure growth, or adequacy of life, irrespective of age. (Dewey 1916, pp. 42-3)

Don't you see that if you "get" perfection today, you will be farther away from

⁴⁶ See also closing sentences of chapters 'Primitive Remedies and their Defects' (*MSI* 1910, p. 26; 1996: 18), 'Subconsciousness and Inhibition' (*MSI* 1910, pp. 47-8; 1996, p. 27), etc.

perfection than you have ever been? F. M. Alexander⁴⁷

DEWEY 'SCIENTIFIC' INQUIRY – REFLECTIVE THINKING

Probably the most impressive example of Dewey's influence is evident in the famous first chapter of *The Use of the Self*, 'Evolution of a technique'.⁴⁸ This is written in the form of a **Dewey Scientific Inquiry**.

Webb and Tasker may have used *How We Think* to provide a template for a rationalisation of Alexander's initial investigations into a meticulously logical, step-by-step procedure.

[T]he most important factor in the training of good mental habits consists in acquiring the attitude of suspended conclusion, and in mastering the various methods of searching for new materials to corroborate or to refute the first suggestions that occur. To maintain the state of doubt and to carry on systematic and protracted inquiry these are the essentials of thinking. (Dewey 1910, p. 13)⁴⁹

Compare this with a 1916 outline:

An aim implies an orderly and ordered activity, one in which the order consists in the progressive completing of a process. . . . In the first place, it involves careful observation of the given conditions to see what are the means available to reaching the end, and to discover the hindrances in the way. In the second place, it suggests the proper order or sequence in the use of means. It facilitates an economical selection and arrangement. In the third place, it makes choice of alternatives

⁴⁷ Maisel, p. 10.

⁴⁸ See Bloch, pp. 109 – 10 and John Skinner's remark, 'a terrible book which falsified and misled' quoted from Edward Owen's interview with Skinner 13 November 1961 (Bloch, p. 258, note 29).

⁴⁹ In the 1933 revised edition, Dewey names the steps succinctly: 1) Suggestion, 2) Intellectualization, 3) Idea, hypothesis, 4) Reasoning, and 5) Testing the hypothesis by action (Dewey 1933, pp. 102–4, 107–18).

possible. If we can predict the outcome of acting this way or that, we can then compare the value of the two courses of action; we can pass judgment upon their relative desirability. (Dewey, 1916, p. 79)

And the revised edition of *How We Think* 1933, pp. 196–8⁵⁰

- 1) Observation
- 2) Suggestions
- 3) Intellectualization, idea, hypothesis
- 4) Testing the hypothesis by action
- 5) Reformulate, refine in the light of experience.

By **science** is meant, as already stated, that knowledge which is the outcome of methods of observation, reflection, and testing which are deliberately adopted to secure a settled, assured subject matter. It involves an intelligent and persistent endeavor to revise current beliefs so as to weed out what is erroneous, to add to their accuracy, and, above all, to give them such shape that the dependencies of the various facts upon one another may be as obvious as possible. (Dewey 1916, p. 164)

When Newton thought of his theory of gravitation, the creative aspect of his thought was not found in its [known, familiar] materials. . . . Only silly folk identify creative originality with the extraordinary and fanciful; others recognize that *its measure lies in putting everyday things to uses to which had not occurred to others*. The operation is novel, not the materials out of which it is constructed. (Dewey 1916, pp. 120–1)

We sometimes talk as if "original research" were a peculiar prerogative of scientists or at least of advanced students. But all thinking is research, and all research is native [innate], original, with him who carries it on, even if everybody else in the world already is sure of

⁵⁰ Observation, Suggestions, Correlation of data, testing. See pp. 200–9.

what he is still looking for. (Dewey 1916, p. 113)

FREEDOM IN THOUGHT AND ACTION

Less obvious is the development of a major theme expressed around the time *The Universal Constant in Living* was published, 1941–2 in the midst of yet another world war⁵¹ – the notion of ‘freedom in thought and action.’⁵² Freedom, in the sense of “vital freedom” from enslavement by blind, fixed habits⁵³ is mentioned first in his discussion of “free expression” (Alexander 1918, p. 86) and more clearly in 1923:

No less great limitations in the purely mental field, e.g., domination by a fixed idea, inability to apprehend and to respect other points of view, failure to grasp the essentials of freedom, etc. All this is symptomatic of some underlying cause. (Alexander, 2004, p. 70)

Alexander gives it its fullest expression in his writing in 1941–3 when he is again living in America:

The desire that mankind will come into the heritage of full individual freedom within and without the self still remains an “idealistic theory.” Its translation into practice will call for individual freedom *IN* thought and action through the development of conscious guidance and control of the self. Then and then only will the individual be liberated from the domination of instinctive habit and the slavery of the associated automatic manner of reaction. (Alexander, Preface to New Edition [1941] of *The Use of the Self*, p. x; 1985, p. 20)

⁵¹ Alexander was based in New York October to April these years, pretty much as he had been during WWI (Bloch, p. 184).

⁵² Preface to New Edition of *Use of the Self* (i.e. 1941); UCL 1941 (Mouritz 2000), pp. 74, 181, 188.

⁵³ “that “vital freedom” in reaction (freedom *IN* thought and action) which enables us to give effect to a decision previously reasoned out . . .” (Alexander 1941 (Mouritz 2000), p. 74)

And in *The Universal Constant in Living*⁵⁴ which ends with a postscript:

My teaching experience has shown me that a person who has accepted the idea of freedom of thought and action, and has consistently advocated it in daily life, is not on this account any more capable of commanding freedom *in* thought and action when trying to keep to a well-considered decision to employ procedures which demand, for their successful carrying-out, a use of the self which is not his habitual reaction in thought and action. F.M.A. (Alexander 2000, p. 188)

Conclusion

With the passage of time, there will inevitable be conjecture. However, I hope I have shown enough in this outline to convince readers of a reciprocal influence and to encourage others to conduct a thorough study of Dewey’s influence on Alexander’s thinking. There is enough material for a degree; maybe even another doctoral thesis.

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⁵⁴ Dewey is quoted several times, also (Alexander 2000), pp. 73–4, 155, 181, etc.

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