

Dialogue on John Dewey [and F. Mattias Alexander]

To celebrate John Dewey's (1869-1952) Centennial, a group of former colleagues and students got together for an informal discussion of his work in December of 1958. A transcript of the conversation was edited by Corliss Lamont; *Dialogue on John Dewey* was published by Horizon Press in 1959. Concerning Alexander, the most extensive remarks are Horace Kallen's. Biographical notes say that in 1958 Kallen was Professor Emeritus in the Graduate Faculty and Research Professor in Social Psychology at the New School for Social Research and a favorite pupil of William James. Of the other participants in the excerpt, James T. Farrell authored the *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, Herbert W. Schneider was co-editor of the *Journal of Philosophy*, and Alvin Saunders Johnson was on the editorial staff of the *New Republic*.

Although he wrote a favorable review of the U.S. edition of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* in 1918, here Kallen characterizes the Alexander Technique as "dubious" and "developed and elaborated in a variety of ways." He notes that Alexander told him "that he had gotten his idea by reading James" but "then...seemed to have forgotten about James." Elsewhere in the discussion, Schneider characterizes *Human Nature and Conduct* as Dewey's "best book,"¹ in which Dewey characterizes the role of habit in thought by referring to Alexander.

Excerpts from *Dialogue on John Dewey*:²

KALLEN. Did he ever talk to you or write to you about Matthias Alexander?

FARRELL. Not very much. He had said that at one time he had believed in — had been interested in him. But he never said much about him; that's all I recall.

SCHNEIDER. Dewey thought Alexander had done him a lot of good.

FARRELL. Yes. Oh, he said that. That's all he said.

KALLEN. He and James Harvey Robinson (Professor of History at Columbia, 1892-1919) introduced me to Alexander. I tried to persuade Ernest here at the time, when he was having the same trouble that I had, to see Alexander, but he scorned it. I said that Dewey had had relief, but he thought Dewey was superstitious.

JOHNSON. Well, Dewey was enamored of Alexander, so that when Alexander wrote a book and Randolph Bourne reviewed it pretty harshly, Dewey declared he'd write no more for *The New Republic* if we allowed Randolph Bourne to write for us. It was a terrible blow to Randolph, who was a great admirer of Dewey.

LAMONT. Well, now, about Alexander, was he concerned with your posture and that sort of thing?

GUTMANN. Yes. *Man's Supreme Inheritance* was the name of the book, and Dewey wrote the introduction to it.

1. page 62.
2. pages 24-30.

KALLEN. Dewey wrote introductions not only to *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, which he got me to review for, *The Dial*, but also to two other books of Alexander's. Alexander I met through Robinson and Dewey; we had got to talking about the whole problem of bodily stance, and movement — the Delsarte teaching and so on. I don't remember what the occasion was, but I know that Delsartism came into the conversation somehow. This was when I was teaching at Columbia's summer session. It must have been 1917, because we used to go, a gang of us, to a movie and stand up when they played "The Star Spangled Banner" and the "Marseillaise," regularly.

GUTMANN. Your class was in the same room as Dewey's and an hour before, as I recall. Is that correct?

KALLEN. Yes. They took me down to Alexander, who was living at the Hotel Leonori with his brother; and Alexander asked me to dinner. We had dinner in his workshop with his brother, and he served champagne — which was an extraordinary and interesting episode. And then he told me that he'd been preparing a new book and wanted to know if I would review it. Well, I couldn't be committed unless somebody would ask me to; and Dewey saw to it that I was asked. Dewey told me that at one time he suffered from a very stiff neck, and that he had had difficulty with his eyes. I think it was through Robinson (James Harvey) that he came to Alexander; and he said that Alexander had completely cured him, that he was able to read and to see and move his neck freely. Now Alexander's technique was a rather dubious one; it had been developed and elaborated in a variety of ways. Alexander told me that he had gotten his idea by reading James. And then he seemed to have forgotten about James and used the formula "ideomotor attitude" — no, not attitude, but some other term that went with ideomotor which he had gotten from James's *Psychology*. And in his own formulation what he called "the position of mechanical advantage" was a central idea. He said that every body was askew, every body had developed bad postural habits, that posture irradiated a body's feelings and thinking, that therefore, if you could establish correct posture, you could correct everything posture involves. It was not only a universal constant, but a scheme of universal salvation. Dewey didn't take to the salvation, but he did get something out of the physiology, as applied later, say, in Mabel Todd's *The Thinking Body*, and implied in Walter Cannon's *The Wisdom of the Body*. Alexander held there's a natural way of sitting, standing, running, walking and so on — a correct unlearned condition of the muscles. But the ways of the society we grow up in make us crooked and sick. To be straightened out, we must take thought and learn how to recover the naturally right posture. To show me, Alexander put me in a chair, placed a carpet-covered brick at my back, and altered my posture with his

hands. Then he had me stand up and walk, and sit, walk, sit, move around, again and again. I took Judge Julian Mack down to him once, and Julian couldn't see the good of it at all. He went once but never again.

GUTMANN. Jack Randall and I were in a small group to whom Robinson sang the praises of Alexander, and told how Alexander had cured him of holding his head to one side. The only difficulty was that throughout the conversation Robinson sat there talking about it with his head on one side. So it wasn't quite convincing. But I think, Mr. Johnson, if we're going to keep the record straight, you must have a detail inexact. If Bourne was devoted to Dewey and resented the suggestion that he no longer review for *The New Republic*, that must have been some years after he published in *The Seven Arts*, at the time of the out-break of the First World War, an article on Dewey with the significant title, "Twilight of Idols." So I think something must be a little different in that particular record.

KALLEN. *Man's Supreme Inheritance* must have appeared in '18 or early '19.

GUTMANN. Yes. And the *Seven Arts* article was 1917 at the latest.

KALLEN. Incidentally, the American edition was the second edition. There had been an earlier edition in England, I think in 1910 or '12.

FARRELL. Years later, I pressed Dewey on all these questions. I was too brash. I recall that on the train going to Mexico in 1937 I pressed him very hard on Randolph Bourne. John showed no animus, and he said in his calm way that Bourne was extremely clever and gifted, but he did not have depth. It was evident that John was speaking without animus.