

Revisiting the Legacy of F. Matthias Alexander: A Critical Examination of Interpretative Paradigms

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Abstract

This case study investigates F. M. Alexander's newly coined phrase "the true primary movement in each and every act," as well as the interpretations of this neologism by Alexander Technique teachers and a wellknown Alexander follower who wrote the first biography of Alexander. The case study further discusses the fact that Alexander was of the opinion that his method(s) constitute applied "race culture," that is, applied eugenics.

Key Words: Alice Rohe, Frederick Matthias Alexander, Joe Armstrong, Seán Carey, Walter Carrington, Jean M. O. Fischer, Edward Maisel, Eckhart Richter, Malcolm Williamson.

Introduction: Alice Rohe's *Mother Goose Review of The Use of the Self*

In her series of *Mother Goose Reviews* in the *New York Sun*, American magazine and newspaper writer Alice Rohe once published a lively and playful review of Frederick Matthias Alexander's book *The Use of the Self* — published in the United States in January 1932. The particular *Mother Goose Review* satirizes Alexander's exaggerated health claims, his neologisms (~ newly coined words or expressions), and his ideosyncratic jargon.

Clearly, Rohe (1932) used the text of *Little Jack Jelf* as a template (see *Note 1*):

Little Jack Jelf
Was put on the shelf
Because he could not spell "pie."
If they'd just had the grace
They'd have cured this sad case
By "central control" of "the I."

To keep off the shelf
Read "Use of the Self."
It offers the "means whereby"
Though your defects be grim
You can cure them, with vim,
If you learn the "technic of Why."

Moral: Without control of our use of ourselves, our use of other things may not lead to anything. What's the use?

The Meaning of a Neologism in a 1907 Booklet Written by F. Matthias Alexander

Prior to 1910, F. M. Alexander's teaching and his methods concerned breathing education and re-education, meaning preventing faults or defects in respiration as well as the forming of new, or re-educated, breathing habits. Yet, already in the first decade of the twentieth century Alexander introduced neologisms in his writings that can only be explained when his texts' contexts are very well read with knowledge of their content.

An illustrative example of Alexander's ideosyncratic use of language can be found in his booklet *The Theory and Practice of A New Method of Respiratory Re-Education* — simultaneously issued in England and in Australia in 1907. In it, Alexander (1907a-b, pp. 10-11) tried to clarify an ideal breathing education and re-education, albeit describing it by elliptical language:

At the outset, let me point out that respiratory education or respiratory re-education will not prove successful unless the mind of the pupil is thoroughly imbued with the true principles which apply to atmospheric pressure, the equilibrium of the body, the centre of gravity, and to positions of mechanical advantage where the alternate expansions and contractions of the thorax are concerned. In other words, *it is essential to have a proper mental attitude towards respiratory education or reeducation, and the specific acts which constitute the exercises embodied in it, together with a proper knowledge and practical employment of the true primary movement in each and every act.*

In (even) other words, if one would take lessons from Alexander, one should have “*a proper mental attitude towards*” his educational and re-educational respiratory methods and exercises and “a proper knowledge and practical employment of the *true primary movement in each and every act.*” So, it was Alexander’s view as a voice production and breathing teacher that before and while taking voice production and breathing lessons from him one should be knowledgeable about a variety of physical “principles” (Alexander listed four) concerning *breathing*-related movements (~“the alternate expansions and contractions of the thorax”) together with a to-the-point knowledge and „execution“ of the “true” *breathing*-related movement(s) in every single activity.

Since Alexander discussed breathing in his 1907 booklet — its title clearly indicates this — it can be assumed that, to the average reader, the neologism “a proper knowledge and practical employment of the *true primary movement in each and every act*” simply means a to-the-point knowledge and „execution“ of the “true” *breathing*-related movement(s), that is, *respiration*-related movement(s) in each and every act (in life).

Note here immediately that the “*true primary movement in each and every act*” simply constitutes another — that is, Alexander’s — expression for “true” *breathing*-related, or *respiration*-related, movement(s), or in other (Alexander’s) words, “true” “alternate expansions and contractions of the thorax” in each and every activity (in life).

In fact, the neologism concerns proper inhaling and exhaling-related movement(s), or: proper breathing in and breathing out-related movement(s), in each and every activity. People breathe in and breathe out during each and every activity, they inhale and exhale since birth and keep on breathing in and out till their final breath. They inhale and exhale while sitting, while sleeping, while walking, while driving a car, while singing, *etc.*, and yes: people even breathe while being in an inverted position or when scuba diving, in other words, they breathe “in each and every act” of life. The “*primary movement in each and every act*” is the *breathing*-related movement, that is, the *respiration*-related movement, occurring in any activity. It must also be obvious that Alexander’s expression “true” in “*true primary movement*” bears a special meaning in this whole context. Since this term refers to the four “true” physical principles listed in the first line in the above citation from Alexander’s 1907 booklet, one can perhaps translate the term “true” by using the synonym „proper,“ as above, but other synonyms are possible as long as one does not forget that the synonym does not perfectly cover the meaning of Alexander’s expression “true:” „according to physical principles,“ „natural,“ or perhaps best, „as will occur when not interfered with at all.“

Next in his 1907 booklet, Alexander, as a good teacher, listed which body movements show that breathing exercises are exaggerating defects in respiration, pinning down defects during “customary „breathing exercises”” (p. 11). In fact, Alexander categorized (pp. 11-17) all kinds of defects, like depressing the larynx, raising the upper thorax, hollowing the lumbar region of the back, protruding the abdomen, tensing the neck, moving the head backwards, and more, as opposed to the situation showing a “proper expansion of the chest, as a primary movement” (p. 12), before indicating what happens during practice of his own method(s) (pp. 17-20; see *Note 2*), inducing “*due increase in the movements of expansion and contraction of the thorax until such movements are adequate and perfectly controlled*” (p. 18; italics added). Alexander added,

Further, the expansions are primary movements in securing that increase in the capacity of the chest necessary to afford the normal oscillations of atmospheric pressure, without unduly lowering that pressure—opportunity to fill the lungs with air, while the contractions overcome the air pressure and force the air out of the lungs, and at the same time constitute the controlling power of the speed and length of the expiration. (*Ibid.*).

This perhaps confusing line later also appeared in the 1910 UK and US editions of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (Alexander, 1910a-b, pp. 175-176). The line, however, has been changed for the 1918 UK and US editions of *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, and then remained unchanged in all later editions of the book published during Alexander's lifetime:

Further, the expansions are primary movements in securing that increase in the capacity of the chest necessary to afford the normal oscillations of atmospheric pressure, without unduly lowering that pressure—or, in other words, they give opportunity to fill the lungs with air, while the contractions overcome the air pressure and force the air out of the lungs, and at the same time constitute the controlling power of the speed and length of the expiration. (Alexander, 1918a, pp. 227-229; 1918b, p. 336).

Important to keep in mind is the fact that Alexander stated that his method on the one hand concerns “re-education,” that is, “the eradication of respiratory faults or defects” (*i.e.*, inappropriate respiratory habits), and on the other hand and simultaneously the preventing of breathing faults or defects, which he called “education” (p. 11). Indeed, it was a “method of respiratory education and re-education” (p. 13). Alexander did not mention it, but it seems he observed his pupils well while they were performing respiratory exercises; diagnosed breathing defects; listed them; and then gave “detailed personal instruction...in connection with each exercise in its application to individual defects or peculiarities of the pupil” (p. 14).

In October 1910, the text of the 1907 booklet *The Theory and Practice of A New Method of Respiratory Re-Education* was incorporated in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, Alexander's first book, published simultaneously in London and in New York (Alexander, 1910a-b, pp. 141-181). All later editions of the book contain the — almost unchanged — text of this 1907 booklet (*e.g.*, Alexander, 1918a, pp. 211-229; 1918b, pp. 313-339).

A Prominent Alexander Technique Teacher's Interpretations of Alexander's Neologism

Alexander's Australian acquaintance since 1896 from Melbourne, Alexander Leeper, who was First Warden of Trinity College, University of Melbourne, wrote in March 1909 in his *Report on Physical Culture in the United Kingdom and the Continent of Europe* about his 1908 visits to Alexander's London studio that teacher of breathing and voice production F. Matthias Alexander (in London since mid-1904) had “further developed, and, as he thinks, perfected his method of what he calls respiratory re-education” (Leeper, 1909, p. 186; consult Staring, 2018). Yet, Alexander's Australian medical friend from Sydney, Dr. Stewart McKay (2001) recalled in his autobiography *Reminiscences, Surgical & Sporting* that he visited “Elocution and Breathing” teacher F. M. Alexander while in London in 1909 (p. 172) and that he noticed that Alexander's breathing method was basically similar to the one he taught prior to leaving Sydney, Australia for London in April, 1904 (p. 332; consult Staring, 2005, p. 110).

This means that Alexander's breathing method indicated by Leeper most probably had been further developed since 1896. It also means that Alexander's breathing method indicated in the 1907 *The Theory and Practice of A New Method of Respiratory Re-Education* and later in his *Man's Supreme Inheritance* was basically the breathing method he taught when he was living in Sydney between 1900 and April 1904, as well as the breathing method he taught during his early years in London until 1909. It is very interesting in this respect that a London local newspaper had already published a short interview with Alexander less than half a year after his arrival in London in 1904. While explaining his methods, Alexander remarked,

The primary movement of breathing must be thoracic, that is, the thorax or chest-box must be expanded naturally without drawing in any breath by suction. The thorax must be made as mobile as possible. (Daily Express, 1904; italics added).

With the above explanation of Alexander's 1907 neologism in mind, the focus will now be on the interpretations of those who teach and/or promulgate his methods.

An illustrative example of explaining the above neologism “the *true primary movement* in each and every act” in Alexander's 1907 booklet stems from a book titled *Explaining the Alexander Technique*, issued by two prominent Alexander Technique teachers. It may give us an insight in the ways Alexander's

neologisms and jargon are explained to (future) Alexander Technique teachers or to clients of his method(s). Alexander Technique teacher Seán Carey once invited Alexander Technique teacher training school Director Walter Carrington to interpret the concept “proper knowledge and practical employment of the *true primary movement* in each and every act.” Carey asked Carrington, “Could you explain what [Alexander] means?” Carrington answered: “Yes, the head has to go up” (Carey & Carrington, 1992, p. 26). This, in fact, is an inept explanation of Alexander’s concept; it misrepresents the meaning of Alexander’s expression regarding the “*true*” *respiration*-related movement(s). Note in this context: Carrington’s exclamation is not even about breathing.

Probably Carrington somehow was of the opinion that Alexander’s 1907 phrase “*true primary movement*” concerns the second of a duo of “orders” to be simultaneously, mentally rehearsed to help achieve a re-educated poise and posture, first described by him in a pamphlet *Supplement to Re-education of the Kinæsthetic Systems Concerned with the Development of Robust Physical Well-Being*:

The pupil should then be asked to order the body and neck to relax and the head to move forward and upward [...]. (Alexander, 1910c).

A year later, in his 1911 booklet *Man’s Supreme Inheritance (Addenda)*, Alexander described a similar order — incorporated in all later editions of his book *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*:

[...] order the neck to relax, and at the same time order the head *forward* and up. (Alexander, 1911, p. 19; 1918a, p. 191; 1918b, p. 284; emphasis Alexander).

Ergo, Carrington was replacing Alexander’s earlier (~ 1907) concepts concerning *respiratory*-related movements by *his own interpretation* of Alexander’s instructions regarding movements that do not (specifically) concern *respiratory*-related movements and that were published later (~ 1910, 1911, 1918a; 1932).

Interestingly, Carrington added, “If the support of the body-weight is the first requirement then the second is that the energy to support the weight has to go in an upwards direction” (Carey & Carrington, 1992, p. 26). Carrington did not explain the meaning of “energy to support the weight” of the body. Moreover, there exists no “energy to support the weight [of the body]” that “has to go in an upwards direction.” It is therefore fair to conclude that Carrington’s explanation concerns *quasi-physics*.

Later, in *Curiosity Recaptured: Exploring Ways We Think and Move* — without explicitly referencing Alexander’s 1907 neologism above — Carrington (1996, p. 225) re-expressed his *quasiphysics*:

[...] since the force of gravity perpetually operates in a downward direction, the *primary movement* required is a counteractive *force* in an upwards direction. (Italics added; see *Note 3*).

In another work, *Thinking Aloud*, Carrington (1994, p. 32) re-formulated his view:

In *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, [Alexander] talks about the primary movement, and the primary movement is, of course, up. I remember so well being struck by it when I first read it. The primary movement is up.”

Apart from noticing the fact that Alexander did not speak of “the primary movement” but of “the *true primary movement*,” note that this time in Carrington’s view it is not the head that “has to go up” but a non-specified “primary movement” itself is “up.”

All kinds of questions should immediately pop up, first of all of course formulated by Alexander Technique teacher training course students and instructors and by Alexander Technique teachers, e.g., “Is „the *true primary movement*” (a neologism that in reality concerns „*true*” *breathing*-related movement(s), see above) in Carrington’s view a concept concerning a movement of the head, or concerning a movement itself?”

Another example, again from a work by Carrington (1999, p. 79) — *The Act of Living*:

In *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, if you comb through it very carefully, you will find that Alexander uses the phrase “the primary movement.” Alexander wasn’t concerned with the anatomy or physiology of the primary movement, but he was very much concerned with the practical reality that if a primary movement wasn’t taking place, then his breathing was interfered with, his voice interfered with, and all sorts of things were going wrong.

Note again that Alexander did not use the phrase “the primary movement” as stated by Carrington. Alexander used the phrase “the *true primary movement*.” It is clear to the average reader of Alexander’s 1907 booklet that the neologism concerns the „proper“ *breathing*-related movement(s) (see above). Therefore, a rough kind of translation of Carrington’s words (that leave out Alexander’s word “*true*”) would be, “Alexander was very much concerned with the practical reality that if a *breathing*-related movement wasn’t taking place, then the client’s breathing was interfered with, his voice interfered with, and all sorts of things were going wrong.” Well, we can sort-of agree here: given no *breathing*-related movement takes place, it is highly likely that Alexander’s client was dying, or was already dead. Alexander should have been “very much concerned” indeed.

It is obvious by now; Carrington could *not* explain Alexander’s concept “proper knowledge and practical employment of the *true primary movement* in each and every act,” as asked by Alexander Technique teacher Seán Carey, no matter how hard he tried, time after time. He simply has never understood the neologism.

The Interpretation of Alexander’s Neologism by the Very First Alexander Biographer

The above citations from successive books and from a book chapter by Carrington show that this prominent Alexander Technique teacher has never been corrected by his fellow Alexander Technique teachers, by his Alexander Technique teacher training course students, by editors of his texts, not by others. Whatever may be the reasons, the above misunderstandings kept on being spread by Carrington without any restraint.

The vocabulary and the language used by Alexander Technique teachers like Carrington can lead to all kinds of, let-us-call-it, strangeness in the understanding of Alexander’s texts by others.

For instance, in his biography of Alexander, Edward Maisel (see *Note 4*) wrote,

It was this *vertebral lengthening in activity* which [Alexander] then called “the true *and* primary movement in each and every act.” (A quarter of a century later, he began applying to it the much less satisfactory term “primary control.”) (Maisel, 1969, p. xxv; italics added).

Apart from the fact that Maisel smuggled in an “and”, thereby changing Alexander’s words (the original phrase was “the *true primary movement*,” see above), his interpretation of Alexander’s neologism is nothing less than yet another strange interpretation of Alexander’s original 1907 phrase. Literally, his explanation describes a situation of “lengthening” (*sic!*) of vertebrae, that is, vertebral bones. Maisel did not reveal why such kind of miraculous deformation of vertebrae is necessary in the Alexander Technique practice. Happily, “vertebral lengthening in activity” by way of Alexander’s methods is biologically impossible.

Note further that Carrington agreed with Maisel’s remark in parentheses, above. Alexander Technique teacher Carey once asked him, “So the term „primary control“ is simply a later version of the „primary movement“?” Carrington replied, “Yes, absolutely” (Carrington & Carey, 1992, p. 109). This means that Carrington and Maisel agreed that “Primary Control” was identical to (“*true*”) “primary movement” (see *Note 5*).

One wonders, “How many Alexander Technique teacher training course instructors and Alexander Technique teachers are at this very moment propagating Carrington and Maisel’s views above as the correct representation of Alexander’s „*true primary movement* in each and every act?“” It is a fact that Alexander Technique teachers trained by Carrington are indeed actively propagating those views in their own writings — they documented this themselves; *e.g.*, Joe Armstrong (2015, 2016a-b), Jean M. O. Fischer (1995, pp. 281-282), Eckhart Richter (2016), Malcolm Williamson (2003, 2014, 2016, n.d.); see also Greenoak (2003, p. 23). Carrington and Maisel’s misunderstandings influenced numerous others as well, *e.g.*, Jeremy Chance (2013), Victoria Cole (n.d.), Bruce Fertman (2013, 2016), Mark Josefsberg (2009), John Lawson (2008), Carolyn Nicholls (2014), Carol Pino (1993), Sir George Trevelyan (1991).

Alexander’s Eugenics and Racism

Earlier in this journal, when addressing Alexander's neologism "Primary Control," I already stated that because "neither Alexander nor his followers have ever attempted to negotiate the meaning or definition of his many neologisms" contemporary Alexander Technique teachers "are perceived as belonging to a sect or cult...with its own closed, estranged vocabulary, and its own, also closed citation community" (Staring, 2015, pp. 40-41). This observation certainly is not new (see Becker, 1973). Above, I addressed the expression, "*true primary movement* in each and every act" — of which there is no correct explanation in the Alexander Technique literature. However, other phrases and concepts used by Alexander are also prone to misrepresentations by his followers, e.g., „antagonistic action,“ „inhibition,“ and „mechanical advantage“ (Staring, 2005).

Far more serious, though, is the fact that the not-understanding of Alexander's writings by Alexander Technique teachers and followers also concerns „race culture,“ another phrase used by Alexander in *Man's Supreme Inheritance* — by the way, a phrase not coined by him. It is a term that was in use at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, and it means eugenics. When one reads *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, especially the chapter titled „Race Culture and the Training of the Children,“ as well as other writings by Alexander's pen, then one cannot escape getting substantially frightened: Alexander saw his methods as *applied* race culture, that is, *applied* eugenics. He wrote in *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (referring to the chapter titled „Race Culture and the Training of the Children“),

The question of Eugenics—or the science of race culture—is debated by earnest men and women; and the whole problem of contemporary physical degeneration is one which looms ever larger in the public mind. It is the problem which has exercised me for many years, and which is mainly responsible for the issue of this [book], and in my next chapter I shall treat it in connection with the theory of progressive conscious control which I have outlined in the foregoing pages. (Alexander, 1910a-b, p. 97).

The fact that Alexander preached a Butlerian evolutionism and inheritance-of-habits eugenics (consult Staring, 1995, 1996, 1997, 2005) has never alarmed Alexander Technique teacher training course Directors, Alexander Technique teachers, and Alexander Technique followers (e.g., Carey & Carrington, 1992; Evans, 2001). And the fact that book reviewers of Alexander's 1910 *Man's Supreme Inheritance* and his 1912 *Conscious Control (Man's Supreme Inheritance) in Relation to Human Evolution in Civilization* refer their readers interested in eugenics to these books has never alarmed them as well. A few examples. Alfred B. Olsen's (1910a-c) tripartite review of the 1910 edition of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* pays attention to Alexander's eugenics. The *Occult Review* (1910) stated about *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, "This is a book *which should certainly be read by all those interested in eugenics, in education, and in that problem of physical deterioration which is so marked a feature of the age*" (Italics added). The Sydney, Australia, newspaper *Daily Telegraph* (1910) wrote that Alexander in *Man's Supreme Inheritance* contended "that the application of [his] theory to present conditions has *a remarkable bearing on the education of children [and] on eugenics*" (Italics added). And the Perth, Australia newspapers *West Australian* (1910) and *Western Mail* (1910) wrote about the book, "The author is hopeful of good results in the near future from the ever-widening interest taken in the science of psychology and in eugenics." Further, E. M. M. (1913) in the *Occult Review* concluded that Alexander's 1912 book *Conscious Control* "is one which *should not be overlooked by eugenicists*" (Italics added). Later, zoologist Samuel Jackson Holmes (1924) even listed Alexander's 1918 edition of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* in his *Bibliography of Eugenics* as a publication "*dealing specifically with eugenics*" (p. 10; italics added). All this means that Alexander was categorized on three different continents as an eugenicist. And mind you, the 1918 and later editions of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* published during Alexander's lifetime also contain racist arguments related to his Butlerian evolutionism and his eugenics (consult Staring, 1990, 1993, 1994; see Note 6).

It looks as if London researcher Jennifer Tarr's (2010) participant observations in Alexander Technique lessons reveal that a still unknown percentage of Alexander Technique teachers do preach a strange kind of evolutionism inspired by Alexander.

One wonders, "Do these teachers possibly even think they are applying Alexander's „race culture“ while teaching his methods?" And, "How many Alexander Technique teachers actually embrace Alexander's eugenics and racism?"

It seems Alexander Technique teachers should by now agree upon an informed consent with their clients who do not wish a mere educational course of Alexander Technique lessons but instead a course of lessons seen as complementary or alternative medicine — before the course starts. Specifically, they should ask their clients, “Alexander explained in his works that his methods concern applied race culture, that is, applied eugenics. Do you (still) wish to have Alexander Technique lessons, knowing now what the founder of the Alexander Technique intended by those lessons, namely applied race culture, that is, applied eugenics?” And a not specified number of those teachers should then add, “By the way, I agree completely with Alexander’s views and have never in any form objected to his ultimate intentions regarding practicing his methods as applied race culture, or to his racist remarks.”

Conclusion

One wonders, “Do Alexander Technique teachers *really* know what they are teaching and doing in the name of F. M. Alexander?”

Notes

1. *Little Jack Jelf* is an English children’s song that mocks *Little Jack Horner*, a 1725 Mother Goose-like nursery rhyme that denounces an early sixteenth-century real estate swindle.
2. Note that Alexander had already listed 10 respiratory defects in a 1906 booklet (Alexander, 1906) and that in Australia he had commented upon respiratory defects in a booklet published around 1900 (Alexander, n.d.). He gave, however, no specific descriptions of the how and what of his method(s). It was not until December 1908 that Alexander began to publish details of the practice of his methods (*e.g.*, Alexander, 1908, 1910, 1911).
3. Note that Carrington defined “the primary movement” (his mistaken term for Alexander’s neologism “the *true primary movement*”) in a book chapter about correctly reading Alexander’s *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*. The book chapter opens, “When I first read Alexander’s book, *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, I thought I knew how to read” (Carrington, 1996, p. 223). Later in the chapter, Carrington indicated he began to understand Alexander’s text after having had lessons from him. Still, one wonders, “Why did not Carrington *just ask* Alexander what he exactly meant by his neologism “the *true primary movement*”? After all, Alexander himself was training Carrington. Responding to questions must have been part of the curriculum, even of the Alexander Technique teacher training course organized by Alexander. Why did Carrington not *just ask* Alexander?”
4. Maisel was not an Alexander Technique teacher trainer, nor an Alexander Technique teacher, but an Alexander Technique adept heavily influenced by numerous Alexander Technique teachers. During the 1960s, he interviewed Alexander Technique teachers worldwide, among them Walter Carrington. Around the turn of the millennium, Maisel recognized his misapprehensions during correspondence and conversations by telephone with the author. Sadly, Maisel died before he was able to issue the corrected version of his work on Alexander
5. For the meaning and history of Alexander’s neologism “Primary Control,” see Staring, 2015.
6. Jean M. O. Fischer removed part of a racist remark from the 1996 edition of *Man’s Supreme Inheritance* he edited. Fischer (1996, p. xxxvi) was not transparent about it, changing the meaning of the Alexander’s racist remark, calling the removed part of Alexander’s blaming of the victims of the Ku-Klux Klan racist remark a “misleading and inappropriate analogy” instead of „part of a racist remark;“ and he did not indicate the exact page number and exact spot where he removed Alexander’s words. One wonders, “Why?”