

Disproportions, not Dichotomies John Dewey and the Alexander-Technique

Abstract: According to John Dewey (1859–1952) the common source of all other dualisms is to consider mind and body as being separate, whereas the difference is actually rather one of degree and emphasis. Furthermore Dewey is not only convinced that it is actually necessary to *do* something about this relationship in order to »making it right«, but also that the method of F. M. Alexander (1869–1955) is the proper procedure to experience the continuity of mind and body in actual practice. This insistence on the value of a specific technique seems to be quite a remarkable exception in the common universe of (philosophical) discourse.

*„The habit of walking is expressed in what a man sees
when he keeps still, even in dreams.“*

John Dewey (1922: 29)

In the same year when the young John Dewey finished his (now lost) dissertation *The Psychology of Kant*, he also wrote an article for the religious and theological *Andover Review*, where he praised what he calls either Physiological Psychology or Experimental Psychology or simply *The New Psychology* (1884). The point of departure for this innovative way of doing Psychology was a „rejection of formal logic as its model and test“.¹ It places itself explicitly against a widespread „division of the mind into faculties“ and has the courage to „turn toward concrete detail, even“, Dewey adds „though it be confused.“² In this very early text it appears to be a matter of course, that Physiology taken by itself can’t say anything directly about the psychical life of individual minds, just like the studying of the physiological geography of a country won’t tell us anything about the history of a nation. „So far as I know“, acknowledges Dewey, „all the leading investigators clearly realize that explanations of psychical events, in order to *explain*, must themselves be psychical and not physiological.“³

¹ See John Dewey: *The New Psychology* (1884). First published in: *Andover Review* 2, 278–289.

<http://psychclassics.yorku.ca/Dewey/newpsych.htm>

² Ibid.

³ Ibid. (Dewey’s optimism for science is notorious.)

The good thing about this New School (in the spirit of Hermann von Helmholtz) is that it does not entirely depend on the results of introspection, the sole value of »in-sight«, anymore, but is based on firmer grounds, that is *experimentation*. Experimentation is shortly described as the combination of wilful variation of conditions with means for quantitative measurements. What’s new about the New Psychology is the result of a change in method, respectively from inward to outward orientation. Although one can already conceive a certain dissatisfaction with dualisms, Dewey obviously doesn’t know how to get over them yet. His „solution“ at this stage can be described as isomorphic, insofar as he makes structural analogies between the and physiological the psychical – in the end the „solution“ is found in shifting the dualistic presupposition from body vs. mind (or soul) to the just as dualistic constellation of outward vs. inward orientation.

Twelve years later Dewey criticizes *The Concept of the Reflex Arc in Psychology* (1896). At its core, this (post-behaviouristic and pre-cybernetic) concept is shown to be nothing more than a platonic remnant, “a survival of the metaphysical dualism, first formulated by Plato.”⁴ The reflex arc concept still plays an important practical role in physiology today, where it serves to explain the *shortest* connection between *two* different neurons. But the fact that this concept still proves to be a quite fruitful source of data, does not automatically imply that it is well thought out – and that’s what Dewey is mostly concerned about: ultimately this concept is incoherent, split in itself. What Plato has postulated as “dualism between sensation and idea”⁵ has now been reformulated in terms of a “dualism of peripheral and central structures and functions”⁶ and what then was conceived as “dualism of body and soul” finds its “distinct echo in the current dualism of stimulus and response.”⁷ To find a way out of this classical dichotomies it is suggested to realize that there actually is no such thing as a response *per se*, nor is there something like the essence of a stimulus. For stimuli are never *only* data, but always data as prepared for certain purposes and as perceived by concrete individuals, with certain acquired or inborn predispositions. Be it personal peculiarities or universal characteristics, like inextricably being bound to the environment

⁴ See John Dewey: *The Reflex Arc Concept in Psychology* (1896). First published in: *Psychological Review* 3, 357–370. http://www.brocku.ca/MeadProject/Dewey/Dewey_1896.html

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

(for example by breathing, standing on the floor or sitting on a chair) – all this is taken to be irrelevant and factored out. Far from bringing actual truths to light, the results of such laboratory experiments don’t show nature at work or plain facts, but more likely reflect simply the premises of the investigators and ultimately give proof to nothing more than the separation of sensation from motion, mind from matter etc. In the final analysis, seemingly “strictly scientific” undertakings organized around the reflex-arc-principle turn out to be just another manifestation of classic presuppositions: „neither physical (or physiological) nor psychological; it is a mixed materialistic-spiritualistic assumption.“⁸

What is needed, therefore, is an alternative terminology, one that accounts for an „underlying principle“ that surpasses the false to facts assumptions of the reflex arc as a mere „patchwork of disjointed parts“. „This reality“ so Dewey, „may most conveniently be termed coördination.“⁹ As to co-ordinate (a compound word of Latin „co-“ and „ordinare“) means to put something in the same order or rank, the common sub-ordination of the one over the other (depending on whether one has more spiritualistic or more materialistic leanings) is reconciled already at the verbal level. From here it becomes possible to show, that what has been construed as an arc actually functions like a circle – both, stimulus and response, it may be summarized without further going into detail, are not „distinct psychical existences [but] always inside coördination.“

Again more than a decade later, in *How We Think* (1910), Dewey is breaking the ground by presenting a rather inclusive understanding of reflection by analogizing it with „finding one’s way.“¹⁰ The beginning of thinking is then illustrated “with what may be fairly enough called a forked-road situation.“¹¹ Basically, Dewey then goes on, „one may have to learn to think *well*, but not to *think*.“¹² Therefore the profound question is not ‘to think or not to think’, but how to think properly or well – and the final test of this kind of thinking appears to be not of logical nature, but an ethical one. The problem of course being, as Dewey is going to write in *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922), that “only the man [or woman] whose

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dewey (1910): 10

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Dewey (1910): 29

habits are already good can know what the good is.”¹³ The question of habit will then become paramount and particularly helpful in overcoming the usual separation of mind from body. Although the important influence of the ‘bodily factor’ in *How We Think* is already accounted for, Dewey is still not able to find a wholly satisfactory solution and statements concerning this level of analysis still appear to be somewhat contradictory: on the one hand it is supposed that the „ordering of thought“ mainly happens „through ordering of action“¹⁴, but on the other stated that „mastery of the body“ has to be regarded „an intellectual problem.“¹⁵ We will have to come back to this later, since it was only after meeting Frederick Matthias Alexander that Dewey will really be able to cope with this most popular manifestation of the dualistic paradigm. Looking back from 1939 he wrote that his, respectively „my theories of mind-body [...] required contact with the work of F. M. Alexander [...] to transform them into realities“.¹⁶

1915, one year after World War I had started, Dewey was invited to give a lecture at Columbia University (NYC), where he got the chance to express his reservations regarding dualisms on a more general level. The first of these three lectures, which were published shortly afterwards as *German Philosophy and Politics* (1915), was called *The Two Worlds*. It is a very harsh critique of the architecture of Kantian Philosophy, especially of the presuppositions it is considered to be built upon. Dewey starts by stating that, unlike their physical analogues, for example earthquakes or conflagrations, which are bound to a concrete situation, „intellectual catastrophes“ might – in the long run – turn out to be even more devastating. The abstract nature of certain conceptions tends to make those who try to rethink them forget, that they emerged in a specific historic context and hence to treat them as if they were neutral tools which can be commanded at one’s own sweet will. But that’s not the case. By thinking in Kantian terms, one gets infected with the „germinal idea“¹⁷ of the Two Worlds, the one being called phenomenal or empirical, the other noumenal or ideal. Here is the world of science and causality, where each and everything

¹³ Dewey (1922): 26

¹⁴ Dewey (1910): 41

¹⁵ Dewey (1910): 159

¹⁶ Jones (2003): 98

¹⁷ Dewey (1915): 19

seems to be connected, but there is the realm of morality and freedom, the place for debating what really matters.

What troubles Dewey most is that these are the grounds on which a „logics of fanaticism“¹⁸ appears to be justifiable. Backed by the dogma of the forever missing link between politics and nature one is all too easily tended to head off „to act for the sake of what ought to be – no matter what actually is [...].“¹⁹ Dewey leaves no doubt, where to locate the very root of the problem – if not evil itself.²⁰ However, as the emphasis is put on bringing to light the working principle of this immensely productive and rather relentless ‘abstract machine’, not so much is said about the means for getting over this menacing bifurcation – and maybe that’s hardly wondrous, since here is not the point to reconcile, but to take sides and declare oneself in a global state of emergency. But never again will Dewey make such a resentful public appearance. In fact, those lectures are generally considered as being quite atypical in comparison to the rest of his work: in some contemporary eyes they even „seemed for a time to change Dewey’s whole thinking“, as the then dissident student Max Easterman reported: he got the impression that his former master „went over to the war side.“²¹

It was only one year later that Dewey met Frederick Mathias Alexander, the strident inventor of probably the first ‘somatic discipline’ that was developed outside of Asia, certainly the first one which was developed on the Australian island Tasmania, where Alexander was born in 1859. His (success) story goes roughly like this: The young Alexander was just at the beginning of a promising career as professional reciter of Shakespeare’s texts (which was indeed a job to make a living), when he got troubling voice problems, a recurring coarseness of speech, for which no doctor was able to offer any remedies. He then somehow started to watch himself in the mirror to find out what might cause the problem and soon realized that it has something to do with the way he holds his head etc. ... This way he recognized, that „I was doing the opposite of what I believed I was doing and of what I had decided I ought to do.“²² But to figure out the details and to find a

¹⁸ Dewey (1915): 43

¹⁹ Dewey (1915): 24

²⁰ Compared to the devastating effects of Kant’s Schizo-Psychology “the philosophy of a Nietzsche to which so many resort at the present time for explanation of what seems to them otherwise inexplicable” appears to be “but a superficial and transitory wave of opinion.” Dewey (1915): 28

²¹ McCormack (1958): 53

²² McCormack (1958): 30

way of actually being able to *do* something about it, he had to get much more mirrors to be able to watch himself from all sides and did so, for years. And after also testing his findings on friends and colleagues he finally developed what is nowadays – more or less – still known as the Alexander-Technique. As he himself was rather overwhelmed by these findings, which had an „exhilarating effect on his entire being“,²³ he was eager to spread it all over the world.

After spending some years in Melbourne, Australia, he went to London and finally to New York, where in the year 1916 he was invited to a semi-private dinner party, organized by members of the Columbia University: “On this occasion Professor Dewey, Professor James Harvey Robinson, and Professor Wesley C. Mitchell were present. This was Alexander's first meeting with Dewey. Shortly afterwards all of these men, and their wives as well, were taking lessons with Alexander in his [then so called] technique of ‚conscious control‘.”²⁴

Obviously this Mr. Alexander was quite a convincing appearance. As Frank Peirce Jones chronicled, some Dewey experts felt seemingly awkward or even embarrassed, when being asked about their topic’s (i. e. Dewey’s) relationship with Alexander. The most common reaction was to write this pivotal point of Dewey’s career off as some minor affair. “Ah yes!” said for example Sidney Hook, when asked about this connection by Jones: “Alexander was an Australian doctor who helped Dewey once when he had a stiff neck.”²⁵ While it’s true that one of this techniques main focus points lies on the relationship of the head to the rest of the body – “Put your head forward and up!”²⁶ is an often-heard phrase –, Alexander himself was not a doctor and his influence on Dewey by far greater (than simply helping him to get rid of some minor indisposition). Also playing the issue somewhat down is Max Eastman, the aforementioned former student, according to whom “Dewey was smiled at in some circles for his adherence to this amateur art of healing but it undoubtedly worked in his case.”²⁷ Nevertheless, it did work indeed, as Dewey himself was not at all hesitating to admit.

²³ McCormack (1958): 15

²⁴ McCormack (1958): 47

²⁵ Jones (1997): 98

²⁶ This invitation is quite a common utterance for Alexander-Technique-lessons and its realization is usually guided by the hands-words-eyes (presence) of the teacher. See Alexander (1932).

²⁷ Jones (1997): 98

Quite to the contrary: Shortly after Dewey had gotten his first lessons he wrote a number of articles for newspapers and magazines about the technique and in the following years Dewey wrote three introductions for Alexander’s books (1918, 1923, 1932). The overall tone is exuberant and somehow doesn’t seem to fit a philosopher. The technique is eulogized in terms, which seem to be exaggerating to the extreme. In the latest of those introductions Dewey writes for example, that “it [the Alexander-Technique] bears the same relation to education that education itself bears to all other human activities”²⁸ or that “[t]he technique of Mr. Alexander gives to the educator *a* standard of psycho-physical health – in which what we call morality is included.”²⁹

Six years and uncountable Alexander-lessons after the momentous encounter, Dewey made his first attempt to work out the philosophical implications of his ‚nondual experiences’ in more detail. *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922) starts by stating that the phys(iolog)ical is primary to the moral, which, obviously, means nothing more than to do with Kant what Marx did with Hegel, i. e. ‚putting him from his head on his feet’. But while it sometimes might indeed be necessary to distinguish between the moral and the physical, “the serious matter”, so Dewey, “is that this relative pragmatic, or intellectual distinction between the moral and the nonmoral has been solidified into a fixed and absolute distinction.”³⁰

As we have seen Dewey has already experimented with the term “coördination“, to bring those two – traditionally separated – worlds together, now it will be the role of conduct or “habit“ to function as a mediating term. Like “coördination“ habit is described as connecting the organism with the environment;³¹ but it is also shown that it is intrinsically social: what holds true for “personal traits“ in general, is also the case with habits: they are “functions of social situations.”³² To figure out, however, how we could make a better “use of ourselves“, to use an Alexandrian phrase,³³ one necessarily has to start by considering concrete people. To illustrate the problems involved Dewey refers to Alexander’s *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*

²⁸ Dewey (1939): 12

²⁹ Dewey (1939): 12

³⁰ Dewey (1922): 31

³¹ „Breathing is an affair of the air as truly as of the lungs [...] walking implicates the ground as well as the legs [...] seeing involves light just as certainly as it does the eye [...]” Dewey (1922): 15

³² Dewey (1922): 18

³³ Cf. F. M. Alexander’s probably most important, certainly most technical book: *The Use of the Self* (1932)

(1918), more concretely to the problem of physical posture or the “art“ of standing straight.³⁴ When, for example, somebody is told to “put his or her head forward and up“ or to “stand straight“, that will only work out if this person already has a correct understanding of what that actually means – but what’s the point of telling then? The problem being, negatively stated, “the idea [of standing straight, IG] can be carried into execution only with a mechanism already there. If this is defective or perverted, the best intention in the world will yield bad results.“³⁵

What therefore is needed is “a procedure in actual practice which demonstrates the continuity of mind and body“³⁶ – and that’s exactly what Alexander developed in Dewey’s eyes. Only after experiencing this Dewey was able to realize fully that “the current philosophical dualism of mind and body, of spirit and mere outward doing, is ultimately but an intellectual reflex of the social divorce of routine habit from thought.“³⁷ From then on, it will be this distinction that Dewey is going to come back to again and again³⁸ – with the aim of informing practice and by way of showing the intelligence that lies in routine.

Ivo Gurschler

³⁴ Cf. Dewey (1922): 16 – where habits are said to be arts.

³⁵ Dewey (1922): 26 Since Dewey’s thinking is vitalistic to the core, he sees no contradiction in stating that „all life operates through a mechanism.“ Dewey (1922): 51

³⁶ See Dewey (1928): Preoccupation with the Disconnected. First published in the Bulletin of the NY Academy of Medicine, 1928. <http://www.alexandercenter.com/jd/johndeweydisconnect.html>

³⁷ Dewey (1922): 52

³⁸ See for example *Experience and Nature*, where all too clear-cut oppositions between theory and practice are dismantled (Dewey 1925: 268) or also *Logic. The Theory of Inquiry*, where the importance of (intelligent) habits for (doing) science is worked out (Dewey 1938/1939: 19).

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