

Primary Control and the Crisis in Alexander Technique Theory

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To speak of crisis in that aspect of our work relegated by FMA himself to second place or worse—"the practice and theory of my work,"¹ "mere theorizing,"² as he was wont to say—may seem less than earthshaking to my staunch Alexandrian audience, yet there are firm grounds for doing so. In practical terms because of the increased visibility and demand for information about the Technique occasioned by the expansion in alternative health and regulatory issues, these grounds encompass no less the ongoing quest for truth. Specifically, I will argue that the concept of primary control, as articulated by FMA in *The Use of the Self* (1932) and as constantly touted since, is not credible as a conceptual foundation of the Technique, and that this "primary non-credibility," at such a late historical juncture, *indeed constitutes a crisis* in the Technique's self- and consequently public image.³

Let us immediately see a basic structural problem with this concept.⁴ As a word, 'control' functions either as a noun or as a verb. To control-as-verb something, for example an automobile, is totally different from a control-as-noun something, such as a thermostat: the one is a process, the other a thing. Such lurking ambiguity in the meaning of a word makes it ill-suited for the clear communication of fundamental ideas, which is the explicit purpose of theory. At the level of ultimate reality we apparently must, with Heisenberg, accept uncertainty, but at

¹ *UCL*, "Introductory."

² *US*, Chap. 1.

³ Moreso, I submit, than the issues of plagiarism, eugenicism, and racism as maintained by Jeroen Staring in his *The First 43 Years of the Life of F. Matthias Alexander* (Vols. I & II, self-published, Nijmegen, The Netherlands, 1996 & 1997) and elsewhere. While surely relevant to any full assessment of FMA, these issues were clearly tangential to the development and transmission of his practical work, as indeed evidenced by present day AT teachers' widespread ignorance of them, while primary control clearly was not, as evidenced by its general acceptance today as a defining element of the AT.

⁴ See my "Afterthoughts on Breath as Postural Process, *NASTAT News*, No. 16, p. 13.

the level of verbal communication, both with others and ourselves, about the AT, we should not continue to accept unnecessary confusion.

Virtually unmentioned upon in the AT literature to date is the fact that FMA's famous *account* of primary control ("Evolution of a Technique," in *US*) came some 35 years after the alleged discovery itself. Neither has anybody seemed to notice—truly amazing—that FMA wrote two prior and major expositions of his work (*MSI* and *CCCI*) without mentioning primary control once! And yet it was perfectly clear to Eric David McCormack in his 1958 Ph.D. dissertation that "This new principle of the 'primary control' then, *which represents the outcome of his experimental observations* [emphasis added], may be taken to be the centre or core of Alexander's entire system."⁵ Frank Pierce Jones advanced the explanation that "The doctrine of a 'primary control,' whether or not it was the same control as the one demonstrated by Magnus, provided Alexander with a parsimonious explanation for his findings, and he continued to use it, along with 'inhibition' and 'use,' when talking or writing about his technique."⁶

I submit that an unbiased observer, in possession of the above facts, would be hard pressed to conclude other than that primary control was not, strictly speaking, what FMA actually discovered, whatever that might have been,⁷ but a label attached retroactively to it. But the distinction is no mere quibble, for "speaking strictly" is what theory—good theory—is all about. A parsimonious explanation for the Master doesn't automatically make good theory for the Work.

Following FMA's lead, primary control—that relativity in the use of the head, neck, and other parts"⁸ as he succinctly if loosely characterized it—has been taken up almost universally by the AT community. Here are some examples from the literature:

1. Aldous Huxley: "Alexander's fundamental discovery was this: there

⁵ University of Toronto, pp 26-27.

⁶ *Body Awareness in Action*, p. 48.

⁷ I tend to agree with Dart in this regard: "The basic discovery Alexander made from 1888 onwards was the practice of deliberate conscious inhibition." Alexander Murray (ed.), *Skill and Poise: A Selection from the Writings of Raymond Arthur Dart*, paperback, n.d., p. 93.

⁸ *US*, 3rd ed. (Re-Educational Publications Ltd., 1955) p. 9.

exists in man, as in all the other vertebrates, a primary control conditioning the proper use of the total organism. When the head is in a certain relation to the neck, and the neck in a certain relation to the trunk, then (it is a matter of brute empirical fact) the entire psychophysical organism is functioning to the best of its natural capacity."⁹

2. Patrick MacDonald: "One of Alexander's discoveries and one which has immense significance in the learning of the Technique is what he called 'The Primary Control.' This is a master reflex of the body, so that by organizing it one can modify all the postural relationships throughout the body."¹⁰

3. Giora Pinkas: "So to me, what F.M.A. emphasized is not an aspect, but the core, the central control mechanism, located in the brain, and related to the spinal cord. Being primary, by its natural hierarchical function, it governs other, secondary patterns, down the line, to the fingers and toes."¹¹

4. Alexander Murray: "When this [starting on the toes] is done with the assistance of a skilled teacher, the primary control is activated and the whole system is toned."¹²

5. Missy Vineyard: "But we claim to enhance in students something we call the primary control, and we claim that this is a physiological mechanism rooted in a reflex system that all possess."¹³

6. Freyda Epstein: "Primary Control: Rediscovering our built in reflex which governs poise and posture."¹⁴

Not that the chorus has been totally harmonious. A faint cautionary note:

7. Eleanor Rosenthal: "Attempts have been made to explain the primary control in neuromuscular terms; I don't find them entirely satisfactory. Nevertheless, I do know that if I use Alexander's model, and work on the

⁹ *Saturday Review of Literature*, Oct. 1941.

¹⁰ *The Alexander Technique As I See It*, p. 6.

¹¹ *NASTAT News*, No. 5, p. 6.

¹² Alexander Murray (ed.), *Skill and Poise: A Selection from the Writings of Raymond Arthur Dart*, paperback, n.d., p. 73.

¹³ *NASTAT News*, No. 24, p. 15.

¹⁴ Workshop advertisement, n.d., author's possession.

hypothesis that there is a primary control that can be activated by improving the relationship between the head, neck, and torso, I will get results reassuringly similar to Alexander's."¹⁵

Audible skepticism:

8. Wilfred Barlow: "Few people would find it helpful nowadays to talk about a primary control, although in the past the phrase did emphasize the prime importance of a proper USE of the head and neck, at a time when anatomists and physiologists had no very clear account to give of the factors underlying balance."¹⁶

And patent discord:

9. Frank Meulendijks & Loes Bredius: "Primary Control Can Not Be Located."¹⁷

In Nos. 1-6 can be clearly seen the tendency toward elaboration and particularly toward *reification*—"regarding or treating an abstraction or idea as if it had concrete or material existence"—of FMA's original notion. *It is this reification of primary control, via the uncritical appropriation of 'control' in its sense as a noun, that is the most damaging consequence of FMA's belated and actually specious introduction of primary control into the Alexandrian canon.* A reified primary control puts the AT community in the embarrassing and ultimately untenable position of having to explain a neural mechanism that has no evident basis in empirical research. I personally have looked at a fair amount of movement science literature since I began doctoral work in 1984, and have found nothing to indicate the kind of overarching mechanism implied by primary control.¹⁸ At the 1996 NASTAT AGM I

¹⁵ *Medical Problems of Performing Artists*, June 1987, p. 54.

¹⁶ *The Alexander Technique*, p. 16.

¹⁷ *NASTAT News*, No. 30, p. 4. This perceptive article may be read with profit both on its own terms and for its relations, too complex for further comment here, to the present text. See also in the same issue "The Primary Control: A New Look at Alexander's Discovery" by Chris Stevens and Ariane Hesse, pp. 7-9.

¹⁸ Lest I be hoist with my own petard, there is in fact just one instance in my scientific reading of an hypothesis suggestive of primary control, although clearly offered by N. Bernstein, the eminent Soviet movement scientist, as speculation about the role of tonus of the neck and trunk musculature in organizing movements. See my "A Modern (footnote continues next page)

publicly asked Chris Stevens, the Ph.D. physicist-AT teacher-researcher, if there were any way in which he would be prepared to explain primary control to a neurologist. He replied, with only the briefest pause to consider, "No." Deborah Caplan, who could attest to this exchange because she later commented to me on it, does not mention primary control at all in her book.¹⁹ Even FMA himself eventually saw this huge problem with reification, admitting in a post-1940 letter to Frank Pierce Jones, "There really isn't a primary control as such. It becomes a something in the sphere of relativity."²⁰

How FMA could put forward, so late and without qualification, primary control as *the* discovery upon which his technique was based, is a serious question, and certainly one that all Alexandrians should reflect upon. Jeroen Staring's voluminous research leaves little doubt that FMA was less than forthcoming in matters relating to early sources and influences on his work.²¹ In conversation with Staring, Walter Carrington has acknowledged that FMA was, with regard to the revision in later years of certain of his texts, "lazy."²² All things considered, it is difficult not to see a decided tendency toward loose linguistic behavior on FMA's part.

Hopefully contributing to a broader understanding of this vexing issue is a remarkable notion brought out by Lawrence A. Cremin (an educator who, incidentally, was a student of Dewey's) in his book *Public Education*.²³ Cremin is discussing James Olney's theory of autobiography as applied to educational biographies, in particular the concept of "metaphors of self." I follow Cremin in quoting Olney at length: Metaphors, Olney says

are something known and of our making, or at least of our

Theory of Coordination and Its Significance for the Alexander Technique," *The Alexandrian*, Vol. II, No. 2.

¹⁹ *Back Trouble: A New Approach to Prevention and Recovery*.

²⁰ In response to Jones' first published article on the AT ("The Work of F.M. Alexander as an Introduction to Dewey's Philosophy of Education," *School and Society*, No. 1462, 1943). Cited by Marian Goldberg, *NASTAT News*, No. 4, p. 7, copy of original letter in possession of Alexander Murray.

²¹ Staring, *The First 43 Years of the Life of F. Matthias Alexander*.

²² "Objectionable Remarks", *Direction* (Vol. I, No. 6), p. 234.

²³ New York: Basic Books, 1976, pp. 42-43.

choosing, that we put to stand for, and so help us understand, something unknown and not of our making; they are that by which the lonely subjective consciousness gives order not only to itself but to as much of the objective reality as it is capable of formalizing and of controlling.²⁴

Cremin goes on to point out that "such metaphors as they appear in autobiographies are ordinarily retrospective and hence far more *clear, simple, and certain* [emphasis added] than what Olney refers to as the 'objective reality' of the life." Certainly, FMA's "Evolution of a Technique" is nothing if not an educational autobiography. Certain was his need to put the story down in *some* coherent and manageable fashion, and certain as well the events and effects of many, many intervening years. We may profitably inquire with Cremin, I think, "What metaphors of self did the subject seem to choose or *come to believe* [emphasis added]?" Surely in this light primary control appears more plausible as retrospective metaphor than as primordial discovery.

Needing to be made clear at this juncture is that criticism of FMA's later theory, rooted so doggedly in primary control, by no means implies criticism of his work as a whole. "Fortunately the 'primary control' hypothesis did not hold up the development of Alexander's practical teaching methods," Wilfred Barlow said.²⁵ "Talk is cheap, it takes money to buy whiskey," the old woman said.²⁶ There can be little doubt that all the people who paid FMA's fees—including the present writer, by proxy so to speak—(1) were not totally gullible and (2) cared more for his hands and the practical help he gave them than for his current theoretical notions. In their likewise sharp criticism of Freud, Daniel Yankelovich and William Barrett observe pointedly, "Contradictions of this sort do not mark the end of the road for any discipline; on the contrary, they can be immensely productive, calling as they do for a basic shift in thinking."²⁷ What FMA actually gave the world was a sustained, forceful, and—yes—beautiful example of effective hands-on work for personal psycho-physical change. Now, in the present historical moment, in a world dominated by the critical/scientific outlook, it surely behooves us

²⁴ *Metaphors of Self: The Meaning of Autobiography*, Princeton Univ. Press, 1972, p. 30.

²⁵ Barlow, *The Alexander Technique*, p. 16.

²⁶ Franklin A. Brainerd, *Raingatherer*, Minnesota Writers' Publishing House, 1973, p. 22.

²⁷ *Ego and Instinct*, Random House, 1970, p. 88.

his self-chosen heirs to raise the level of the theory to that of the practice. Which brings us to the question, What then if not primary control? But first a few words, not from our sponsor (who is our sponsor, anyway?), but about theory.

The word 'theory,' though it lacks the sharp noun/verb dualism of 'control,' nevertheless has distinctions in meaning that need to be clarified and borne in mind. The ancient Greek *theoria* meant "witnessing," in the sense of "participation in the delegation sent to a festival for the sake of honoring the gods."²⁸ Such a delegate would naturally expect faithfully to report to his constituency what he saw, heard, and otherwise experienced. As Gadamer further points out, in this primitive sense *theoria* in no way implied separation and abstraction, but rather proximity and affinity vis-a-vis the subject. It is no doubt the particularly medieval sense of theory as abstract speculation, the revolt against which was the genesis of modern science, of which FMA and the modern mind in general were and are so suspicious. Even in the critical discourse of today, theory has two senses not always distinguished, the one *predictive* and the other *descriptive*. Predictive theory tells us what will *likely* happen based on a limited but relevant number of observations: "If Germ X is present, Disease Y occurs," etc. The quality of a predictive theory is its success rate. Descriptive theory, on the other hand, tells us more or less systematically what something is: "A major scale consists of two conjunct tetrachords," etc. Only by a fundamental misunderstanding could we say something like, "If two tetrachords come into conjunction, a major scale occurs." The quality of a descriptive theory is its understandability relative to its accuracy and its completeness. Closer to *theoria* than to predictive theory, descriptive theory can never tell the whole story completely accurately, but the conscientious witness does her best. (In the courts, the opposing attorney actively helps her to do her best.) It is also important to realize that while predictive theories may and probably must have descriptive aspects, the converse is not necessarily true. So much for theory in general.

Regarding AT theory in particular, I am of course aware that the Technique finds ultimate definition not in any theory, however cogent, but only within "that solitary individual's"²⁹ unique and ongoing experience. That said, would anyone seriously disagree that the only

²⁸ Hans Georg Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, MIT Press, 1986, p. 17.

²⁹ Kierkegaard, *Purity of Heart Is To Will One Thing*, "Preface."

ground upon which a profession can be solidly built is conceptual agreement on basic premises?³⁰ Or that the public can be reliably informed of our purposes and methods only in terms meeting general standards of rigorous discourse? Theory-wise, these terms need not be based solely or even primarily in empirical research, but they do need to reflect established knowledge to the extent that such knowledge bears upon, illuminates, and helps to communicate our work. That is to say, *good descriptive theory* will fill the bill. I note with pleasure "On Defining the Alexander Technique" by Joe Armstrong,³¹ who has carefully framed ten Alexander hypotheses that generally meet the standard of discourse described above and that, significantly, do not do so in terms of primary control (hallelujah, nowhere to be seen!). That I would take substantial issue with Mr. Armstrong on specific points as well as on the assumption that AT theory need be "based on what Alexander himself claimed it to be" must remain for another discussion, in view of my need to bring the present one to a close.

What then if not primary control? In a word, skill. Skill the rubric, the unifying concept, under which is comprised everything the Alexander teacher and student are seeking to accomplish both mutually and individually. Skill in bodily support and movement, skill in thinking, skill in the always mutual employment of both. Our Alexandrian practice is eminently describable in terms of skill, which has an extensive literature of its own waiting to be mined for corroborative findings and insights. It is astonishing to me how little the skill of the student—as contrasted with that of the teacher—is discussed or even mentioned in conventional AT texts. A model of skill acquisition establishes the continuity of our Alexandrian learning process to all the practical and fine arts, as well as to that of the conventional classroom. All the foregoing is not to say that the concept of skill is a panacea for the many communicational challenges attending the AT, but it is to say that, in terms of theory, the *terra firma* of skill is far more secure than the foggy marshes of primary control.

³⁰ Curiously, Walter Carrington, always eloquent in his elucidations of the Technique, appears to disclaim having any conceptual basis for it. Sean Carey: "You don't have a 'formal' doctrine of change, then?" Carrington: "No, not a bit. If I had one, that would mean I had a conceptual basis for the Technique, wouldn't it?" *Walter Carrington in Discussion with Sean Carey* [exact title?], galley copy without title page in author's possession, n.d., p. 64.

³¹ *NASTAT News*, No. 42, p. 20.

After all this fulmination against primary control, I want to close in acknowledgement that it can remain an important concept, *skillfully used*, for our Alexandrian practice if not for our theory. The crux of the matter lies in (1) knowledge of the term's noun-verb duality, (2) reflection on that fact in terms of real situations, and (3) practice in using this reflectively-modified knowledge in action. For example, in teaching there are times when it is appropriate to return a student to a global from a more focal awareness. On such occasions, a direction such as "Coming back to primary control ... ", accompanied by a hand at head/neck, is a succinct reminder of the primariness of a lengthening response to the omnipresent gravitational challenge as well as to the specific task at hand. Knowledge, Reflection, Practice, the elements of skill regardless of the activity to which applied. Let us hear once more these words of the founder: *"There really isn't a primary control as such. It becomes a something in the sphere of relativity."* That something, I submit, is skill, skill in that ultimate art of the use of the self.