

# **Rejoinder to Craig A. Cunningham, David Granger, Jane Fowler Morse, Barbara Stengel, and Terri Wilson, “Dewey, Women, and Weirdoes”**

## **Terry Fitzgerald**

It is a mixed pleasure to see F. Matthias Alexander acknowledged in the fall 2007 issue of *Education and Culture* (“Dewey, women, and weirdoes: Or, the potential rewards for scholars who dialog across difference,” 23[2], 27-62). As a professional descendant of Alexander who has been teaching the Alexander Technique (AT) for 30 years, I am glad to see Cunningham et al. including him in the list of positive influences in John Dewey’s life. However, I believe Cunningham’s contribution to this article, “Shared explorations of body-mind: The reciprocal influences of Dewey and F. M. Alexander,” falls short in its acknowledgement of Alexander and in one important aspect is incorrect. In this response, I hope to set the record straight and briefly illustrate how the reciprocal influences of these two educators have continued to grow in the near-century since they first met.

To begin, the title, “Dewey, Women, and Weirdoes” is troubling. The writers seem first to have created a clever title for their article and then felt the need to justify the alliterative epithet “weirdoes” by highlighting the eccentricities of the two male nonphilosophers they write about, namely, Albert Barnes and Alexander. I can’t speak for Barnes, but I would like to challenge three of Cunningham’s implications about Alexander and his work. The first is his inappropriate and incorrect assertion that Alexander was “homosexual or at least bisexual” (p. 49), the second is his construal of Alexander’s work as lacking in intellectual and scientific credentials, and the last is his unreferenced use of terms like “quack” (p. 48) and “hucksterism” (p. 49) in his representation of Alexander.

As for Alexander’s supposed sexual preference, Bloch’s (2004) biography tells us that around 1900, while still in Australia, Alexander began a 15-year relationship with Edith Tasca-Page, an actress whose husband was seemingly complaisant. He then married the widowed Edith and cohabited inconsistently with her for another

15 years in London. This was followed by a 25-year relationship, and a son, with his married housekeeper, Gladys (nicknamed “Jack”) Vicary, which lasted until her death not long before his own in 1955 at the age of 86. In his later years, Alexander simultaneously partnered Margaret Goldie, a practitioner of his Technique.

Bloch's (2004, p. 232) revelation that Alexander enjoyed “the intimate friendship” of both Jack and Margaret during this period could easily lead to the mistaken idea that he was homosexual or bi-sexual. Beyond these known relationships, as Bloch (personal communication, 8 January 2009) puts it, “[Alexander] found women constantly falling at his feet and he did not discourage them.” Roberta Dewey need not have worried about her husband’s affection for Alexander.

Cunningham calls Alexander “a practitioner of an art with questionable scientific and intellectual foundations” (p. 48). This might have been true in 1916, when Dewey started lessons with Alexander and their friendship commenced. Having begun his innovative work barely two decades before, Alexander had by then published only two short books and a number of pamphlets. After meeting Dewey he produced four more comprehensive books (all of which are still in print), with Dewey introducing the first three (1918; 1923; 1932).

Dewey’s enthusiastic endorsements, along with subsequent scholarly articles acknowledging Alexander’s influence on him, are now a substantial component of the intellectual capital of the AT. For examples, see Boydston (1986; 1996), Goldberg’s (2009) web site, and Murray’s (1991) edited compilation. In addition, based on Staring’s (2005) work, I estimate that at least 27 doctoral dissertations have been written about Alexander and his Technique since 1953. It is difficult to imagine none of these acknowledging Dewey, without whom I doubt the AT would have survived, let alone thrived, these ninety-five years.

The scientific foundations were slower to build, however. Dewey was keen to reduce his peers’ incredulity about Alexander’s work and wanted it submitted to empirical scrutiny, but became increasingly frustrated by Alexander’s refusal to do so lest he lose control over it (Boydston 1996). Eventually, in the 1940s, AT teachers and researchers Frank Jones (1976) of Tufts University, who was encouraged by Dewey, and Wilfred Barlow (1973) in the UK began independent research programs. Others followed and there is now a large portfolio of scientific evidence for the physiological and psychological benefits of the AT, including most recently a publication in the *British Medical Journal* on its value for helping back pain (Little et al., 2008). Some three thousand AT practitioners worldwide are able now to advertise that their work is firmly grounded intellectually and scientifically.

I cannot find the word “huckster” in a search of my AT library. “Quackery,” however, appears in reference to Alexander’s successful pursuance in 1948 and 1949 of a libel action against South Africa’s Director of Physical Education, Dr Ernst Jokl, who had published in 1944 defamatory remarks accusing Alexander of “quackery” and expressing contempt for him and a number of his supporters, among them Dewey. Awarding Alexander financial damages, the judges allowed that his books

displayed medical ignorance but not dishonesty, which is one of the implications of quackery (Jones, 1976, pp. 85-86; Bloch 2004). If Cunningham drew on this event for his term, an explanation of the outcome of the court case would have been helpful.

Having just made my three challenges, I should also acknowledge that Alexander had his limitations as a social commentator and as a writer. In particular, his ethnic prejudices continue to embarrass AT practitioners and his syntax often perplexes them. Cunningham is correct to say that Alexander "would seem an unlikely person to deeply affect the thinking of an influential philosopher" (p. 49). Nonetheless, he did affect Dewey, and his contribution continues to be noticed by contemporary Deweyans such as Boydston (1986; 1996), Zigler (1998), Shusterman (2000; 2008) and, thanks now to Cunningham, the readers of *Education and Culture*.

Richard Shusterman (2008, 2000) provides the most detailed and cogent critique of Alexander's writings and pedagogy, and his analysis of the Dewey-Alexander relationship honors its flaws as well as its richness. Drawing particularly on Alexander's early publications, Shusterman (2008, p. 193) sees him as a "perfectionist" and a "racist," as well as a "genius" whose teaching helped Dewey to realize "undeniable, enduring practical improvements in somatic functioning and the resultant surge in psychic energy and mood." At the same time, Shusterman (2008, p. 183) suggests, Dewey's somatic theory could have benefited by "distancing itself more clearly from some of Alexander's one-sided, rigidly rationalistic views."

Along with many fellow Alexandrians, I too approach Alexander's writings with critical skepticism while employing and adapting his practical principles. The AT is a pleasure to teach and, more than 50 years since its founder's passing, still provides immense value to those willing to engage with it. My understanding of the AT has been helped considerably by reading Dewey and other scholars such as Jim Garrison and those already mentioned. While I appreciate Cunningham's contribution to this literature, I believe the designation "weirdo" diminishes the shared legacies of both Alexander and Dewey.

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