

Primary Control in the Alexander Technique

The idea of a Primary Control is usually considered to be a central tenet of the Alexander Technique, indeed, Patrick MacDonald (esteemed first generation teacher) included it in his list of five items, which taken together, make the technique unique in his view; recognition of the force of habit, inhibition and non-doing, recognition of faulty sensory awareness, sending directions, and the primary control¹. Once the term was coined confusion has crept in due to slight inconsistencies in how it was written about (and we can no longer ask Alexander to clarify his choice of words) and it's an idea that he continued to develop over time. The present situation is that there is frequently disagreement between Alexander teachers as to what exactly they mean when they use the term.

It's interesting to note that Alexander had been working for over 25 years before he made any reference to the primary control in print, and given his reputation for a lack of verbal explanations during the first teacher training schools, it's not unreasonable to assume he didn't mention it to his pupils either. During this time he had written a number of pamphlets as well as the books *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (MSI) and *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual* (CCCI). These writings all include the other staples of Alexander terminology: directing, inhibition, end-gaining, means-whereby and faulty sensory appreciation.

The first reference to the Primary Control was made in a lecture to the Child-Study society in February 1925 (fifteen years after MSI was first published and two years after CCCI). In this lecture Alexander quoted the work of pharmacologist and physiologist Rudolf Magnus:

Regarding the central control: in the technique I am using, it will interest you to know that during the past fifteen years, Magnus has worked to explain the scientific significance – as has been brought to our notice recently by Sir Charles Sherrington – in connection with that very control which I have been using for twenty-five years. The direction of the head and neck being of primary importance, he found, as I found, that if we get the right direction from this primary control, the control of the rest of the organism is a simple matter.²

I'd like to draw attention here to the word 'direction' with regards to the head and neck; it's suggestive of something more than simply a postural/positional relationship, although much of his writing at this time does not imply this.

In July 1925 Magnus made his first public address in English to the annual Croonian Lecture to the Royal Society where he stated:

¹ As I see It, p. 86 – Patrick MacDonald

² Lecture: "An Unrecognized Principle" (1925) in *Articles and Lectures* by F. M. Alexander (Mouritz, 1995, London), p. 148

*... in the brain stem, from the upper cervical cord to the mid-brain, lies a complicated central nervous apparatus that governs the entire body posture in a co-ordinated manner. It unites the musculature of the whole body in a common performance.*³

Alexander was keen to publicise perceived scientific justification for his work, and continued to reference Magnus for many years, including a letter to the British Medical Journal published in July 1932, his book *The Use of the Self*⁴(UoS), also published in 1932, and 14 years later in his book *The Universal Constant in Living*⁵ published in 1946.

Magnus also gave credence to the importance of the head, neck and back relationship:

*The mechanism [of a decerebrate preparation] as a whole acts in such a way that the head leads and the body follows. The attitudes impressed upon the body by a certain head position in the decerebrate preparation closely resemble the natural attitudes shown by the intact animal during ordinary life.*⁶

The italics are mine, this being an oft quoted phrase within the Alexander community. There needs to be some caution in relating the behaviour of an animal whose brain has been removed to one that is intact, but it does point to the idea of an automated reflex system.

The problem with this is that Alexander appears to have misunderstood Magnus' findings. In describing a reflex control centre in the brain stem, independent of the cortex and therefore conscious control, this in no way corroborates Alexander's belief in conscious control over the vital relationship he had observed in the head, neck and back.

*I emphasized that my work is solely concerned with the restoration and establishment of a trustworthy sensory appreciation of the use of the psycho-physical mechanisms, by means of a technique which depends upon the employment of a consciously directed primary control*⁷

Alexander's original understanding of the primary control appears to be a far more postural relationship between the head, neck and back, and not a neurological structure:

in short, that to lengthen I must put my head forward and up.

*As is shown by what follows, this proved to be the primary control of my use in all my activities.*⁸

The underline for emphasis being mine, also:

*This primary control, called by the late Professor Magnus of Utrecht the "central control," depends upon a certain use of the head and neck in relation to the use of the rest of the body*⁹

³ Animal Posture – Proceedings of the Royal Society of London. Series B. Vol 98339-353, p.653

⁴ P.65

⁵ P.109

⁶ The Lancet, September 11, 1926, pages 531-536, and September 18, 1926, pages 585-588.

⁷ Articles and Lectures by F. M. Alexander (Mouritz, 1995, London), page 133

⁸ The Use of the Self by F. Matthias Alexander (Methuen, 1932, London) page 14

⁹ The Use of the Self by F. Matthias Alexander (Methuen, 1932, London) page 59

Which further highlights Alexander's misunderstanding of Magnus' work and suggests that it was a very mechanical/positional structure in Alexander's mind at this time. Although, the word 'use' in the above quote is very open to interpretation particularly with regards to the idea of psycho-physical unity, in the same way that 'direction' did previously. There is no question here of doubting Alexander's discovery of the importance of the relationship between the head, neck and body, but I would like to propose that at this stage in the term's development it pointed more to a "mechanical advantage" than an overriding mechanism for the whole human organism.

Ironically, he missed the point that a reflex system justifies the use of *inhibition* in that for the right thing to do its self, by inhibiting the wrong, there needs to be an underlying reflex system to coordinate the musculature:

When an investigation comes to be made, it will be found that every single thing we are doing in the Work is exactly what is being done in nature where the conditions are right, the difference being that we are learning to do it consciously.

Common sense would dictate that we have some such reflex system; Magnus' work simply identified it anatomically.

George E. Coghill was another scientist who helped to cement the use of the term. Although Coghill didn't hear of Alexander's work until 1939, from 1922 he had been performing a detailed study of the way amblystoma (the larval form of a salamander) developed and behaved. His work showed that there was a total pattern of response in the behaviour of these simple creatures, including the all-important head, neck, back relationship. The two men met in 1941 giving them the opportunity to discuss their findings and find a mutual admiration, such that Alexander asked Coghill to pen an appreciation for his next book, *The Universal Constant in Living* (UCL). There's two points of interest with regards to UCL. Firstly, Primary Control is mentioned some thirty times (UCL is admittedly a larger book), as opposed to the seven in his previous book, *UoS*, potentially showing the confidence Coghill had given Alexander. Secondly, the idea of a total pattern of behaviour has crept into the understanding of the Primary Control.

Primary Control is an unfortunate term in that it is neither primary, nor controlled, "control should be in process, not superimposed¹⁰". One would be forgiven for thinking that it is a physiological condition rather than something to be employed and that it overrides all other considerations (at least if a mechanical view is taken). Alexander went to great lengths to explain the over-riding importance of psycho-physical unity, or the "indissoluble unity of the human organism¹¹" as he put it:

It is impossible to separate 'mental' and 'physical' processes in any form of human activity.¹²

As such, the purely mechanical aspect of the head in relation to the torso can in no way be considered primary as is indicated by:

¹⁰ Aphorisms – F.M. Alexander

¹¹ *The Universal Constant in Living* by F. M. Alexander (Mouritz, 2000, London), page XXXI

¹² *The Use of the Self* by F. Matthias Alexander (Methuen, 1932, London) page 1

*This primary control is made up of the processes which control the use of the head and neck in relation to the body, and enables us to use ourselves in the right way.*¹³

This being declared only two years after the publication of *The Use of the Self* and showing his growing understanding. Writing some twelve years later:

*I found that in practice this use of the parts, beginning with the use of the head in relation to the neck, constituted a primary control of the mechanisms as a whole, involving control in process right through the organism, and that when I interfered with the employment of the primary control of my manner of use, this was always associated with a lowering of the standard of my general functioning.*¹⁴

One can clearly see that the Primary Control had become a far more encompassing concept than just the relationship of the head and neck and including mental aspects as shown by “control in process”. Coghill’s influence here can also be surmised. It’s clear that there had been an evolution in Alexander’s thinking with regards to the Primary Control in the eleven years between publishing his last two books, but it should be noted that he continued to work intensively for another fourteen years after his final publication. Alexander always considered his technique to be a work in progress, a continuing exploration of human behaviour; unfortunately we have no written record as to how his understandings continued to grow.

The Alexander Technique could be said to be a method for the prevention of unconscious reactions to stimuli. As such, if the relationship of the head, neck and back are already undisturbed, one would consider the prevention of it becoming so would be primary, and this would be a more mental process. With this in mind, it would be a fairer use of the term Primary Control to mean ‘the self’, being the entire psycho-physical organism; although this clearly isn’t how Alexander first envisaged it I propose that it was closer to his final understanding. Admitting in a letter to Frank Pierce Jones in 1945, Alexander wrote “There really isn’t a primary control as such. It becomes a something in the sphere of relativity.”¹⁵

As the ultimate self-promoter, the preface and appendix to *UoS* being a good example, Alexander wasn’t shy of using a catchy phrase based on the work of others to help promote his work, unfortunately it has sometimes obscured the genius of his discoveries.

References

All quotes containing the term Primary Control were referenced from Mouritz Publishing’s excellent resource to be found at <http://www.mouritz.co.uk/6.31.quo.primary.control.html>

¹³ "Bedford Physical Training College Lecture" (1934) in *Articles and Lectures* by F. M. Alexander (Mouritz, 1995, London), page 179

¹⁴ *The Universal Constant in Living* by F. M. Alexander (Mouritz, 2000, London), page 8

¹⁵ Cited by Marian Goldberg, *NASTAT News*, No. 4, p. 7, copy of original letter in possession of Alexander Murray. <http://www.unique-technique.com/Folder1/crisis.htm#twenty>

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