

Postures and Positionings

The Alexander Technique versus posture and positions

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ABSTRACT

F. M. Alexander's novel approach to the topics of posture and positions is set out and reviewed, and then compared and contrasted with various approaches to posture during his lifetime and later. The discussion includes his concept of a 'position of mechanical advantage'. The term 'posture' is considered, and a brief history of ideas and practices of posture since the late 19th century is outlined. Examples are given of how the subject of posture has been dealt with by a number of other teachers of the Technique. The drawbacks of a posture approach to human health and well-being as well as the advantages of Alexander's approach are summarised.

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INTRODUCTION

A recent book on the history of human posture, *Stand up Straight!* (2018) covers Alexander and his technique in about a page and a half. It manages both to get Alexander's technique wrong and not to understand Alexander's contribution to the subject of posture. In a single paragraph it states that Alexander's 1910 *Man's Supreme Inheritance*¹ 'stressed the correct alignment of head, neck and back' (it does not), resulting in a cry for a 'long spine' throughout 'Alexander studios across the world', and describes the Technique as a 'postural therapy' for curing the body (sigh).² The next five paragraphs merely report on Alexander's criticism in *Man's Supreme Inheritance* of drill and posture training in the army and in schools.³ In a book on the history of posture one may forgive the author for only focusing on that aspect of the Technique that fits his subject-matter as he sees it, but at the same time it is symptomatic of a general trend that Alexander's novel approach to the topic of posture escapes people's comprehension.

As the significance of Alexander's approach continues to be misunderstood this paper will

revisit and re-examine Alexander's arguments, and compare and contrast them with various approaches to posture then and now.

ALEXANDER'S ARGUMENT

Alexander repeatedly and emphatically stated that positions and fixed postures are counterproductive to the freedom and flexibility his technique is aiming to develop. In his technique posture is organised indirectly, as a consequence of conscious inhibition and direction by the individual, bringing about the optimal expansion and supple muscular tonus for that individual, appropriate at that particular time.

The problems inherent in any posture training may be summarised as:

1. imitating a position which may be 'right' for someone else may not be right for you;
2. relying on observations which are solely guided by your past experiences limits your conception of what a 'right' position is to what you already know and expect;

¹ Titles and abbreviated titles of Alexander's works cited here are shown below. Full bibliographic details are provided at the end of the article.

- *Articles and Lectures*.
- *Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual*; abbrev: *Constructive Conscious Control*.
- *Letters: Volume II 1943–1955*.
- *Man's Supreme Inheritance*.

○ *The Universal Constant in Living*; abbrev: *The Universal Constant*.

² Sander L. Gilman, *Stand Up Straight! – A History of Posture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), p. 165.

³ Alexander's criticism of the military standing-at-attention posture in *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (p. 91) was repeated in the 1941 *The Universal Constant* with the picture of the 'Sgt. Major' (fig. 4 and pp. 53–54).

3. translating the idea of a 'right' position into practice by muscular adjustments that are relying on habitual movements and accommodations which are dependent on familiar feelings is unreliable as a guide when it comes to doing something new and contrary to your usual habit;
4. attempting to maintain by the use of muscular effort what has been deemed the 'right' position interferes with harmonious movement as we continuously move and adjust ourselves; and
5. maintaining a fixed position impedes the processes of ongoing growth and development, i.e. a position which may be right for you today, may not be 'right' for you tomorrow.

These points have been made many times by Alexander in his writings, lectures, and teaching. The first time this theme occurs is in regard to the 'Fixed Larynx System' in his 1900 booklet, 'The human voice'. In a list of criticisms of clavicular breathing, Alexander contends, among many other points, that it fixes the larynx in one position instead of allowing the larynx to move freely.^{4,5} As his attention over the next few years turned more and more to the optimal conditions for breathing and vocalisations he emphasised the influence of the use and functioning of the whole organism upon all specific activities. His criticism of any fixed positions and postures became more pronounced. For example, in 1906 he criticises the typical faults of students of singing and breathing, such as their standing position, their stiffening of their arms, and their 'stiff-set position of lips, cheeks, tongue, etc., combined with undue depression and fixity of larynx'.⁶

By 1908 he lists the instructions typically given to a pupil of 'deep breathing' before proceeding to criticise the implicit assumptions made in

instructing a pupil to adopt a certain standing position; a criticism which applies to the assumption of any posture:

Now to examine these instructions in order: . . . in the first place, to allow a pupil to assume, of himself, a certain standing position, means that his own perceptions and sensations are given the sole onus of bringing about the co-ordination upon which such standing position depends – an onus which they are quite unable to bear. The perceptions and sensations of all who need respiratory and physical re-education are, as I shall show later, absolutely unreliable. It is the teacher who should have the responsibility of certain detailed orders, the literal carrying out of which will ensure for the pupil *what is then the correct standing position for him*. I emphasize this last, because no one stereotyped position can be correct for each and every pupil. When a person so employs the different parts of his body that one can speak of his 'harmful position in standing or walking,' it is only by causing the physical machinery to resume correct and harmonious working gradually, thus changing the position from *time to time*, that serious harm can be averted and satisfactory results secured.⁷

This point is reiterated in 1909, but now with the addition that any position is subordinate to the coordination of the musculature (he would later replace 'coordination' with 'use').

. . . There can be no such thing as a 'correct standing position' for each and every person. The question is not one of correct position, but of correct co-ordination (i.e. of the muscular mechanisms concerned).⁸

By the time of the 1923 *Constructive Conscious Control* Alexander emphasises the need for personal growth and development:

A correct position or posture indicates a fixed position, and a person held to a fixed position cannot grow, as we understand growth. The correct position today cannot be the correct position a week later for any person who is advancing in the work of re-education and co-ordination.⁹

This point is repeated in his 1925 lecture:

I hate the word 'position,' because in practice it brings about a static condition, for once you fix a position, you repeat it, and growth is then hardly possible.¹⁰

⁴ 'The human voice cultivated and developed for speaking and singing by the new methods' (1900) in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 14–49), p. 22.

⁵ François Delsarte, a French singing teacher and a coach of bodily expression of emotions, was a promoter of the fixed larynx system; he favoured keeping the larynx in a lower position. See Delsarte 'Histoire de la voix sombrée et de la découverte que s'attribuent MM. Diday et Pétrequin dans leur mémoire de 1840', in Alain Porte, *François Delsarte: Une anthologie* (Ressouvenances, 2012 [1992]), p. 156–72.

⁶ Points 1, 2, and 9 in 'Introduction to a New Method of Respiratory Vocal Re-Education' (1906) in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 76–86), pp. 81–82.

⁷ 'Why 'deep breathing' and physical culture exercises do more harm than good' (1908) in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 110–115), pp. 112–13.

⁸ 'Why we breathe incorrectly' (1909) in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 128–139), p. 131.

⁹ *Constructive Conscious Control*, p. 114.

¹⁰ Lecture: 'An unrecognized principle in human behaviour' (1925) in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 200–221), p. 209.

Among Alexander's aphorisms from the 1930s Alexander is contrasting his approach with that of trying to achieve a right position:

There is no such thing as a right position, but there is such a thing as a right direction.¹¹

Direction and directing indicate moving, but not arriving; they indicate a process, not an end. (Similarly, the head-neck-back relationship is a relationship, not a position. As Irene Tasker expressed it in her notebook after a lesson with Alexander: 'Let the head *tend* forward + up' and then 'there is no fixture'.¹²) A second aphorism points out that what feels like a 'right position' is determined by current sensory appreciation:

He gets what he feels is the right position, but when he has an imperfect co-ordination, he is only getting in a position which fits with his defective co-ordination.¹³

The above are only a selection of quotations from Alexander's writings on posture and positions.¹⁴ More examples could be adduced, such as Alexander's discussion of how people habitually react to the injunction to 'stand up straight' in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*,¹⁵ a discussion taken up and referred to as a 'matter of physical posture' by John Dewey in his *Human Nature and Conduct* (1922).^{16,17}

POSITIONS OF MECHANICAL ADVANTAGE

Alexander's photographs of himself and a woman (fig. 1), first published in 1910 and then incorporated into the 1918 edition of *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, have caused confusion as some people considered them a recommendation of a correct standing position. However, Alexander made it clear that (1) copying the picture is not enough: the task of obtaining the position 'by each individual has still to be undertaken'; and (2) it was an example, not a universal ideal, because 'the ideal position varies slightly according to the idiosyncrasies of the person concerned'.¹⁸

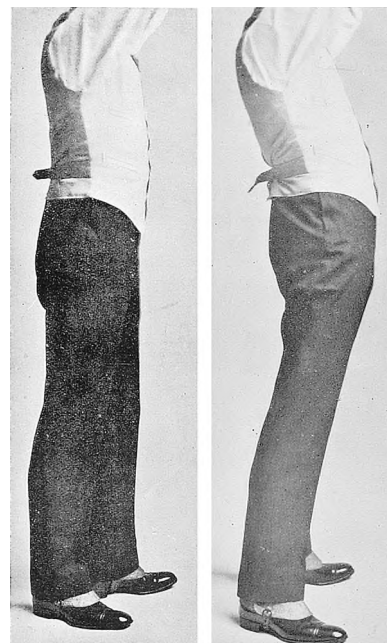


Fig. 1. Alexander demonstrating a position of mechanical advantage when standing and a position of mechanical disadvantage. From *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, fig. 1a-b.¹⁹

He stated this first in 1909 (and repeated it in the 1918 *Man's Supreme Inheritance*) when criticising a doctor's pictures of the correct standing position:

I may mention – since these photographs depict a subject in different standing positions – that I have explained in detail in my pamphlet 'Why 'Deep Breathing' and Physical Culture Exercises do more Harm than Good' that there can be no such thing as a 'correct standing position' for each and every person. The question is not one of correct position, but of correct co-ordination (*i.e.* of the muscular mechanisms concerned). Moreover, anyone who has acquired the power of co-ordinating correctly, can re-adjust the parts of his body to meet the requirements of almost any position, while always commanding adequate and correct movements of the respiratory apparatus and perfect vocal control – a fact which I demonstrate daily to my pupils.²⁰

The phrase 'position of mechanical advantage' has also caused confusion. Here, it is a case of struggling to find the right word:

¹¹ 'Teaching aphorisms – I (1930s)' in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 252–271), p. 257.

¹² Entry for '2 November 1946' in Regina Stratil, *Irene Tasker – Her Life and Work with the Alexander Technique* (Graz: Mouritz, 2020), pp. 263.

¹³ 'Teaching aphorisms – I (1930s)' in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 252–271), p. 270.

¹⁴ For more quotations see
<<https://mouritz.org/library/fma/concept/posture-position-poise>>.

¹⁵ *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, p. 170.

¹⁶ John Dewey, *Human Nature and Conduct* (New York: Henry Holt, 1922), pp. 27–35.

¹⁷ Alexander in turn quoted from John Dewey's passage in *Human Nature and Conduct* in *The Universal Constant*, p. 46fn.

¹⁸ *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, p. 169.

¹⁹ *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, between pages 91 & 92.

²⁰ 'Why we breathe incorrectly' (1909) in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 128–139), pp. 131–32.

Readers of *Man's Supreme Inheritance* will remember that when I used the phrase 'position of mechanical advantage,' I pointed out that I did so because a better one was not forthcoming, and I mentioned then that I had called to my aid a number of scientific and literary friends.²¹

The concept of 'mechanical advantage' implies a balance of forces – and balance invokes something dynamic, not fixed, and hence it lends itself to the concept and realisation of a supple, adaptive tonus of the musculature. It includes the factors Alexander regards as important in this context, 'the equilibrium of the body, the centre of gravity'.²² A 'position of mechanical advantage' is not a fixed position, but an *initial position* – a transit position – which facilitates the changes and coordinations Alexander seeks.

The position of mechanical advantage, which may or may not be a normal position, is the position which gives the teacher the opportunity to bring about quickly with his own hands a coordinated condition in the subject. . . . The placing of the pupil in what would ordinarily be considered an abnormal position (of mechanical advantage) affords the teacher an opportunity to establish the mental and physical guiding principles which enable the pupil after a short time to repeat the coordination with the same perfection in a normal position.²³

The same point is made again elsewhere in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*:

I do not therefore, in teaching him, actually order him to lengthen his spine by performing any explicit action, but I cause him to rehearse the correct guiding orders, and after placing him in a position of mechanical advantage I am able by my manipulation to bring about, directly or indirectly as the case may be, the desired flexibility and extension.²⁴

And again, this time specifying how mechanical advantage leads to the optimal posture for the individual:

. . . the teacher must himself place the pupil in a position of mechanical advantage, from which the pupil, by the mere mental rehearsal of orders which the teacher will dictate, can *ensure the posture specifically correct for himself*, although he is not, as yet, conscious of what that posture is.²⁵

There is nothing surprising about this: it is easier to demonstrate the Technique to a pupil who is already adopting a fairly neutral starting position,²⁶ such as sitting or standing, rather than a pupil who is holding a stiff position or is collapsed in an awkward position. There are positions which make the work of inhibiting and directing easier than others. There are positions that facilitate the process of lengthening and widening.²⁷ It can be argued that the classical procedures feature such positions and that they therefore are positions of mechanical advantage. For example, when working with people in front of a chair Alexander made sure that the pupil would have the feet about hip-width apart and not too close together.^{28,29,30} This is an example of starting with a reasonably neutral position from which the teacher can more easily and readily promote the necessary changes.

ALEXANDER'S VIEWS COMPARED

Alexander went against the current by discarding such concepts as a *predefined position*, *posture*, 'being right', and replacing them with *use*, *process*, and *prevention*. And rather than teaching specific corrective exercises, he placed means over ends. How different his approach is will become clearer by looking at some posture fads current in Alexander's lifetime as well as some more recent trends. First, a brief note on the word 'posture'.

²¹ *Constructive Conscious Control*, p. 112.

²² 'The theory and practice of a new method of respiratory re-education' (1907) in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 88–105), p. 95.

²³ *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, pp. 118–19.

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 133.

²⁵ *Ibid.* p. 169.

²⁶ Elizabeth Reese and others use the term Normal Neutral Posture which they have observed from their work with horses and which they propose exists for all animals. See 'Postural rehabilitation' in *The Congress Papers 2015* ed. by Rachel Gering-Hasthorpe (London: STAT Books, 2016), p. 289.

²⁷ The caption to the 'correct' and 'incorrect' standing positions in *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (figs 1a and 2a) is illuminating in this respect: the feet are to be placed 'in the ideal position for obtaining perfect equilibrium of the human machine, and for permitting the maximum activity of the functioning of the whole organism'.

²⁸ Note that Alexander changed his views of the feet position for chair work. In *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, for standing up, one foot is 'slightly under the seat of the chair': p. 175.

²⁹ Walter Carrington, Seán Carey, *Explaining the Alexander Technique* (London: Mouritz, 2004), p. 50.

³⁰ See the caption for plate 1 in *The Philosopher's Stone* ed. by Jean M. O. Fischer (London: Mouritz, 1998).

ON THE TERM 'POSTURE'

As can be seen from the above quotations, Alexander addressed fixed positions and positioning and generally avoided the term 'posture'.³¹ Position is easier to define; posture is a problematic term. Posture is notoriously difficult to define.³² At its most general, it is the position of the body at any given moment, whether 'still'³³ or in movement.³⁴ Commonly understood it is used about a more or less consistent fixed pose assumed for a particular purpose: people adopt one posture or position for scything, one for horseback riding, one for lifting, one for fencing, one for standing, one for walking, one for sitting (although it is typically called 'sitting position' rather than 'sitting posture'), etc. They all involve some movement but people recognise a general, underlying pattern of bodily carriage in each of them. One can rarely separate posture from its purpose. Apart from a posture that people consciously or unconsciously assume for a particular task, there are stylised postures which are more or less taught for the purpose of promoting health, beauty, confidence (and other psychological effects), efficiency (e.g. time-motion studies, physical ergonomics), deception ('posturing'), acting, the army (drills), and a vague grouping which may be called general good (or bad) social manners. The lines between these many uses of posture have always been blurred and are becoming increasingly so as posture continues to be refashioned.

'Posture' is therefore an elastic term; it is not so much about what posture is – objectively, physically – but the meaning and implication of the bodily arrangement; what function it has for the person who adopts it, and what it signals to the people who observe it. Hence, when reading about posture one has to first untangle in what sense the word is being used, and be open to a multitude of shifting

meanings. The *word* posture has proved to be more flexible than the *practice* of posture.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF POSTURE

In the 19th and early 20th century good posture was fashionable, respectable, and aspirational. It had already been *de rigueur* for the aristocracy, but by the late 18th century it was increasingly pursued by the new middle class who wished to emulate the manners and education of the upper classes.

In addition, it was taken for granted that a good posture was not only healthy, but character building. Standing up straight went hand in hand with being morally upright. This connection between posture, health, and good manners was constantly being remade to fit prevailing fashions and ideas. For 17th–19th century teachers of deportment, posture mirrored character; a graceful upright carriage was the embodiment of moral rectitude and discipline; an upright citizen was a master of himself. In other words, posture indicated self-control – or lack of it.³⁵

By the late 19th century, the development of writings on posture took on two distinct – but not mutually exclusive – lines: health and behaviour, i.e. the physical and the psychological aspects of posture. I shall confine my discussion to a comparison between Alexander's approach and other approaches to those two categories, however crude they are.

THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POSTURE AND HEALTH

Posture was presented as a – if not *the* – central element in health in the late 19th century and first half of the 20th century.

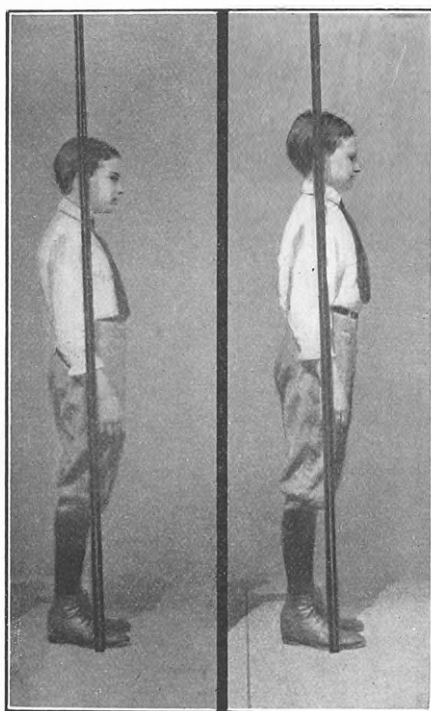
³¹ As Alexander wrote to Jones in 1946: 'The pamphlet you include seems good but don't use the word posture in any of your matter. That word has such a bad meaning nowadays.' F. M. Alexander letter to Frank Pierce Jones, 8 January 1946, no. 345, in *Letters: Volume II 1943–1955*, p. 388.

³² Wilfred Barlow also acknowledges the many different meanings of 'posture' in Wilfred Barlow, 'Posture and Rest', published in *Health Education Journal* vol. 19, December 1961, pp. 174–90. Also in Wilfred Barlow, *Postural Homeostasis*, ed. by Jean M. O. Fischer (London: Mouritz, 2014), pp. 194–210, especially p. 195.

³³ There is of course no complete stillness, but there are positions which are more still than others, for example in some kinds of meditation, during sleep, when people are collapsing in front of a television, etc.

³⁴ G. E. Coghill, in his 'Appreciation' in *The Universal Constant*, makes a clear distinction between posture and mobility; for him proprioception precedes postures which in turn precedes and determines movement. See p. xix.

³⁵ For a summary overview of the history of posture, see Sander L. Gilman, *Stand Up Straight! – A History of Posture* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018).



FIGS. 3-4. — The vertical line test made by holding a window pole beside a pupil: poor posture and its correction.

Fig. 2. Teaching children good posture in 1913. Note that the ideal vertical 'line of gravity' (indicated by the wooden stick) is further forward through the feet than standard plumb-line theory.³⁶

Almost any exercise book pre-WWII endorsed the stereotypical stand-at-attention posture: feet together, arms by the side, chest forward, shoulders back, chin up or chin in.³⁷ This would be the starting position for deep-breathing exercises,³⁸ remedial exercises, body building, and gymnastic or calisthenic-type work such as Swedish gymnastics. There were exercises to maintain and improve good posture and exercises to remedy faulty postures. The 19th century saw systems such as German *Krankengymnastik* (a precursor to modern physiotherapy) develop the concept of pathological deviations from normal posture, distortions indicat-

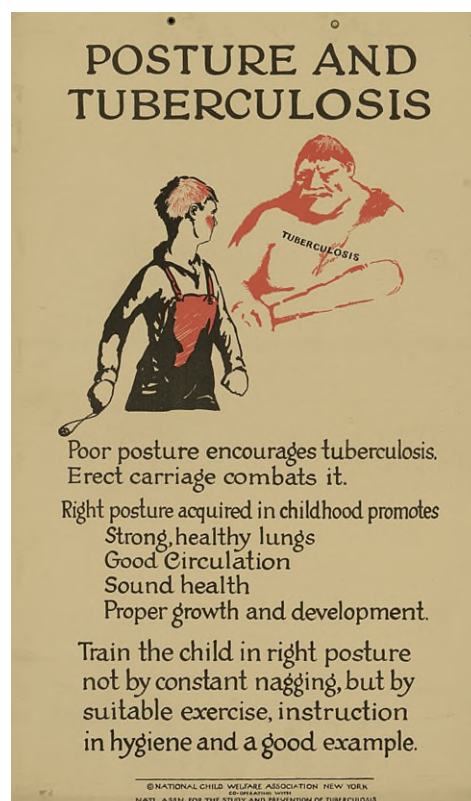


Fig. 3. Posture as disease prevention (New York, around 1920–23).³⁹ Alexander had argued for his 'art of breathing' – not posture – as a preventative against 'consumption' in 1903.⁴⁰

ing ill-health in some form or another. (See for example the reference to osteo-arthritis of the cervical spine as a 'postural disease' by Dr Caldwell quoted by Alexander in *The Universal Constant*.⁴¹) Good posture was sometimes seen as being beneficial for everything: breathing, voice, digestion, circulation, and – especially – fitness.^{42,43} Swedish gymnastics and its derivations all adopted a postural approach to exercises, a trend which also informed the nascent development of modern yoga

³⁶ Jessie H. Bancroft, *The Posture of School Children* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1920 [1913]), p. 10.

³⁷ In many cases a 'good posture' is a caricature of good use (see *The Universal Constant* for Alexander's criticism of the 'Sgt. Major' stand-to-attention posture, reference in note 3 above).

³⁸ Deep-breathing exercises were criticised at length by Alexander in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, pp. 17, 90–91, 125, 183.

³⁹ National Child Welfare Association (New York) produced this poster around 1920–23: 'Posture and tuberculosis'. <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2014647542>>. Retrieved 18 August 2023.

⁴⁰ 'The prevention and cure of consumption' (1903) in *Articles and Lectures*, pp. 51–58.

⁴¹ *The Universal Constant*, p. 17, pp. 20–22.

⁴² M. A. Banfield, in his *The Posture Theory*, proposes that many aches and pains which have no discernible physical causes and therefore have been classified as hypochondria actually have postural causes. See his *The Posture Theory – The Physical Basis for Hypochondria* (Australia: published by the author, 10th edition 1999 [1994]), pp. 24–25.

⁴³ E.g. the front cover tag line to *Posture Makes Perfect* reads 'The missing link in health and fitness'. Dr Victor Barker, *Posture Makes Perfect* (New York: Japan Publications, 1993).

in the early 20th century.⁴⁴ The exercises started and ended with standing upright, and the regimented, structured movements had arms and legs in positions of straight lines. No wonder that Alexander, in *Constructive Conscious Control*, in a passing remark, lists posture with exercises and similar methods.⁴⁵

There were reactions to this fixation with straightness from various quarters. In setting out his ideal classroom John Dewey wrote in 1899:

There is little order of one sort where things are in process of construction; there is a certain disorder in any busy workshop; there is not silence; persons are not engaged in maintaining certain fixed physical postures; their arms are not folded; they are not holding their books thus and so.⁴⁶

Within dance there was a growing shift away from the formal, orderly, upright style of dancing (e.g. waltz, classical ballet) to freer, unstructured movements, although these were still avant-garde developments in the early 20th century.⁴⁷ An example of this was the ‘free expression’ dancing which Alexander criticised in *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*.^{48,49} For Alexander the solution to rigidity and fixity (mental as well as physical) was not the other extreme of being uninhibited and relaxed to the point of being malcoordinated.

THE RECIPROCAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POSTURE AND BEHAVIOUR

That certain postures would induce corresponding mental states is an enduring notion.^{50,51} The observation that there is a correlation between body poses and facial expressions and mood is ancient as it is part of our evolutionary heritage.⁵² Darwin proposed evolutionary origins for human emotions in his *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), arguing for a universal nature of expressions: humans and animals ‘express the same state of mind by the same movements’.⁵³ Actors studied how inner feelings were outwardly manifested, and in the 18th and early 19th century there was a one-to-one relationship between the two.⁵⁴ William James proposed a reciprocal relationship in his *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) when he argued that bodily states give rise to emotions and that control of our body would therefore be an indirect way of self-control:

... if we wish to conquer undesirable emotional tendencies in ourselves, we must assiduously, and in the first instance cold-bloodedly, go through the outward movements of those contrary dispositions which we prefer to cultivate.⁵⁵

James’s theory is more nuanced than this quote would indicate, but his views were interpreted

⁴⁴ Mark Singleton, *Yoga Body – the Origins of Modern Posture Practice* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁴⁵ See *Constructive Conscious Control*, pp. 39–40:
Swedish drill became the fashion and also different types of exercisers and dumb-bells which were used in the performance of muscle-tensing movements of all kinds, and succeeding experiences in connection with posture, calisthenics, plastic dancing, deep breathing, ‘Daily Dozens’ and other specific methods cannot evidently be considered satisfactory, as the search for the ‘great unknown or unrecognized’ still continues.

⁴⁶ John Dewey, *The School and Society* (The University of Chicago Press, 1913 [1899]), p. 30.

⁴⁷ One may also note the various counterculture movements of the 20th century whose proponents deliberately avoid assuming a ‘good’ posture.

⁴⁸ *Man’s Supreme Inheritance*, pp. 74–76.

⁴⁹ For more details on this episode consult Regina Stratil, *Irene Tasker – Her Life and Work with the Alexander Technique* (Graz: Moutz, 2020), pp. 31–35.

⁵⁰ ‘A crooked man walks a crooked mile’ as the old saying goes. It is similar to Immanuel Kant’s: ‘... from such crooked wood as a human is made of, nothing perfectly straight can be built.’: pp. 19–20 in ‘Idea for a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View’, in Kant, *On History*, ed. by Lewis White Beck et al. (The Liberal Arts Press, 1963), pp. 11–26, translated

by Beck from Kant, *Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht* (1784) in *Gesammelte Schriften Vol. VIII* (Königlich Preußische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1912), pp. 15–32.

⁵¹ Jane E. Brody ‘Posture affects standing, and not just the physical kind’ in the *New York Times*, 28 December 2015. Available at: <https://archive.nytimes.com/well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/12/28/posture-affects-standing-and-not-just-the-physical-kind/>. Retrieved 22 August 2023.

⁵² Alexander makes a reference to this in *The Universal Constant* (p. 88):

The dog manifests a similar change in use and functioning when reacting to some stimulus which arouses his fighting instinct; the hair on his back is raised, his eyes roll and glare, the lips are contracted to show the teeth, and the angle of his head, attitude of his body, and the particular action of his limbs are all manifestations of his desire to quarrel and fight.

⁵³ Charles Darwin *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (New York: D. Appleton, 1899 [1872]), p. 351.

⁵⁴ See for example Henry Siddons, ‘Practical illustrations of rhetorical gesture and action’ (London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1822).

⁵⁵ William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, Volume 2 (New York: Henry Holt, 1905), p. 463.

simply. For example in 1932 his views were summarised as:

James maintains that the erect posture keeps up the spirits and tends to banish fear, despondency and depressing thoughts; that bodily postures definitely influence the emotions.⁵⁶

As Greek statues were frequently the role model for good posture, people would copy them in *tableaux vivants* ('living statues') – a popular pastime between the 1890s and the 1930s. It was believed that duplicating the poses of selected Greek statues would recreate the noble spirit embodied in the original. Diana Watts starts her book, *The Renaissance of the Greek Ideal* (1922), thus:

Of all the lost secrets of antiquity, perhaps the most important is that which produced the enormous physical superiority of the Greeks over any other race of human beings known to us either before or since their time. They proved for all time that this condition of physical excellence was possible in a human being.⁵⁷

And, later, she writes that the ancient Greeks knew 'the intimate connection between a perfect physical development and its moral sense of well-being. . .'.⁵⁸ That such assumptions are made, without any argument, testifies to a time when everything from ancient Greece was still held in high regard, when people were taught that ancient Greece was the birthplace of democracy, philosophy, arts and, generally speaking, of Western culture, and that – equally undisputed – the assumption was that such characteristics could be emulated and embodied by replicating Greek poses. The main part of the book describes how the reader can attain this exalted state; the Greeks – according to Watts – did it by

will-power acting on some special physical condition which resulted in a complete restoration of exhausted powers, taking away all sense of fatigue, and placing the body once more under an alert control.⁵⁹

This is achieved by reproducing the poses of ancient Greek statues (fig. 4).⁶⁰ Her book is an example of the unquestioned assumption that physical and mental dispositions were mirrors of each other. (The practice of imitating some supposed paragon of posture continues to this day.)

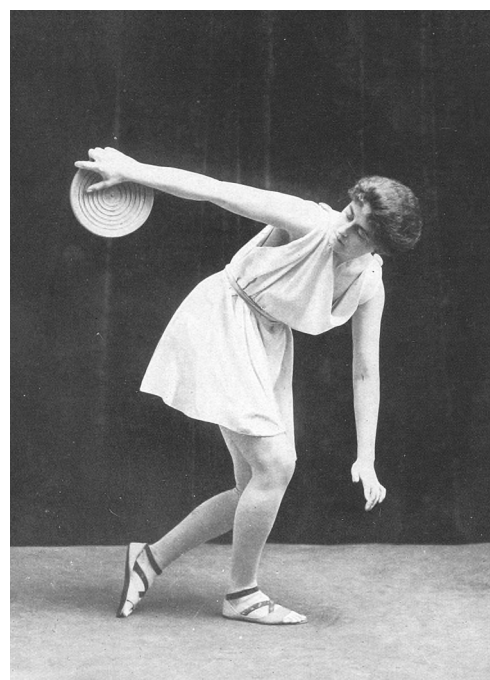


Fig. 4. Channelling the Greek spirit.⁶¹

In the 1920s two developments happened simultaneously which were to influence how people thought about postures: psychosomatic medicine and psychoanalysis. Both, in their own ways, saw the body as an unconscious voice expressing the mental life of a person. Psychosomatics focused on physical disorders and psychoanalysis focused on mental disorders, but both interpreted these disorders as symptoms of underlying stresses and strains, traumas and other unresolved or unacknowledged 'mental' issues. This gave rise to the view that bad posture was a manifestation of unresolved mental issues.

Such ideas – the connections between health and posture – were recast later according to prevailing psychological theories and developed further by several body therapies. Wilhelm Reich, the originator of the concept of 'body armour', popularised the notion that muscular tension reflected repressed emotions. Stanley Keleman declared in 1975 that 'mental attitudes and body attitudes are identical'.⁶² Keleman went on to suggest that our emotions shape our body in very

⁵⁶ 'The relation of body mechanics to health' in White House conference on child health and protection *The Growth and Development of the Child – Part I, General Considerations* (New York: The Century Company, 1932), p. 190.

⁵⁷ Diana Watts, *The Renaissance of the Greek Ideal* (London: Heinemann, 1922), p. 1.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 103.

⁵⁹ Ibid. p. 3.

⁶⁰ I have been told that *tableaux*, performed in togas, still took place in some English girl schools in the 1960s.

⁶¹ Diana Watts, op. cit., adapted from plate VII.

⁶² Stanley Keleman, *Your Body Speaks Its Mind* (Center Press, 1981 [1975]), p. 62.

distinct ways that could be mapped.⁶³ The 2007 book, *The New Rules of Posture*, also suggests that particular emotional issues manifest themselves in specific bodily locations.⁶⁴ Some teachers of the Alexander Technique follow in this tradition by looking for purely psychological origins for patterns of misuse.

In contrast to the above, Alexander saw the wholeness of mind and body as more subtle and more profound than the exterior, cosmetic theories for a one-to-one relationship between bodily and emotional–mental states. Alexander regarded the human organism as an indivisible unity, and for him it was the total state of the organism which expressed itself in use and functioning, most noticeably in the primary control, and in the manner of acting and reacting. There are numerous examples in his books, but two quotations from his aphorisms make the point:

You translate everything, whether physical, mental or spiritual, into muscular tension.⁶⁵

You say it is wrong for the boy to be frightened. I say you are wrong in saying so. I should say it would be serious if he were not frightened when he is in the condition he is.⁶⁶

Irene Tasker, in her notebook of working with Alexander, reports that he connected a lack of equilibrium in standing with fear.⁶⁷ Naturally, if the organism is not well balanced some compensatory mechanism (often muscular tension) has to be at work in order to stop the entire structure from falling over, but that may not prevent any fear of

falling. Walter Carrington also talks about the reciprocal nature of fear and postural responses.^{68,69,70} Frank Pierce Jones acknowledges the general association of muscular tension and emotional states.⁷¹

Good posture continues to be seen as desirable today for psychological reasons: there are self-improvement techniques (or ‘life hacks’) such as ‘power poses’ (i.e. expansive bodily displays), and similar sentiments are expressed in a number of different ways. For example in the 2018 bestseller, *12 Rules for Life*, rule number one is ‘Stand up straight with your shoulders back.’⁷² Some of these techniques cite scientific research for credibility. Although there has been much research into finding a reciprocal relationship between the motor system and affective and behaviour outcomes (e.g. negative or positive psychological states), results have been sketchy. One meta-analysis concluded that there is not enough evidence to assume that expansive displays have positive outcomes, but does indicate that the absence of contractive displays (i.e. anything that makes the body shorter and smaller and hence more contracted than normal) has a positive effect.⁷³ A case for the principle of prevention?

Posture has also been given a make-over with modern alignment teaching which, typically, is informed by the field of biomechanics. Unfortunately, in popular discourse it all too frequently comes across as the plumb-line method

⁶³ Stanley Keleman, *Emotional Anatomy – The Structure of Experience* (Center Press, 1986).

⁶⁴ For example: ‘Often, though not always, tension around the shoulder blades is partnered with emotional restraint.’ (p. 28); and ‘Poor neck alignment often has to do with perception – with straining to see, hear, or understand. It can also reflect an attempt to block perception, as when we seek privacy by staring at the ground.’ (p. 30), in Mary Bond, *The New Rules of Posture* (Rochester, VT: Healing Arts Press, 2007).

⁶⁵ ‘Teaching aphorisms – I (1930s)’ in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 252–271), p. 270.

⁶⁶ Ibid. p. 258.

⁶⁷ Notebook B, 12 March 1931, in Regina Stratil, *Irene Tasker – Her Life and Work with the Alexander Technique* (Graz: Moutitz, 2022), p. 222.

⁶⁸ Walter Carrington, ‘Balance as a function of intelligence’ (London: The Sheildrake Press, 1970). Also in Walter Carrington and Dilys Carrington, *An Evolution of the Alexander Technique*, ed. by Jean M. O. Fischer (Sheildrake Press, 2017), pp. 22–36.

⁶⁹ Sub-section ‘As I understand it’ by Walter Carrington in ‘Notes and Drafts’, *An Evolution of the Alexander Technique* (op. cit.), p. 241.

⁷⁰ ‘Fear of falling is the primary human fear’, in sub-section ‘Balance’ by Walter Carrington in ‘Notes and Drafts’, *An Evolution of the Alexander Technique* (op. cit.), p. 244.

⁷¹ See notes nos. 8 and 9 in ‘A mechanism for change’ in Frank P. Jones, *Collected Writings on the Alexander Technique*, ed. by Theodore Dimon Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Alexander Technique Archives, 1998), p. 76.

⁷² Jordan B. Peterson *12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos* (New York: Random House, 2018).

⁷³ Emma Elkjær et al., ‘Expansive and contractive postures and movement: A systematic review and meta-analysis of the effect of motor displays on affective and behavioral responses’ in *Perspectives on Psychological Science* vol. 17, issue 1 (2022), pp. 276–304.

of posture recast.⁷⁴ Alignment methods make people think in terms of position as if there is a 'right' alignment to achieve. Of course, balance is partly a question of mechanics: there is a weight to balance on two feet with a skeleton which is inherently unstable, but the 'how' of balancing is still a psychophysical process and cannot be reduced to perpendicularity.

(In *The Universal Constant* Alexander quotes from a book by Anthony Ludovici. In this quote Ludovici quotes from the 1934 book, *Body Mechanics*, as scientific support for Alexander's technique.⁷⁵ However, Alexander wrote in his 'Introductory' to *The Universal Constant* that he refrains from using terms such as

. . . 'postures', 'mental states', 'psychological complexes', 'body mechanics', 'subconscious', as these terms make for separation of our unified psychophysical self, and complicate our understanding of ourselves.⁷⁶)

The physical ergonomics of sitting is another example of the pursuit of a right posture.⁷⁷ Chair designers promise this or that chair will give you the best sitting position, but, whatever the design, it is a position imposed from the outside. In *Man's Supreme Inheritance* Alexander writes that an ideal chair – even if it were to exist – would not solve the underlying problem of habits, of attitude, of conscious adaptation to changes in our environment.⁷⁸ To this one might add, more prosaically, that instead of thinking of chairs which give us the right position it is useful to think of chairs that facilitate the process of looking after our own use. Adopting a preventive attitude means avoiding chairs that make such a process more difficult than it need be.

While the public is being fed posture advice by people from a variety of different backgrounds, scientists are trying to understand how the neuromuscular system operates to create the postural tone which is the basis for any posture, any position. The neuroscience of posture is informative, but complex, and beyond the scope of this article.⁷⁹

The above are only selected examples from the continuing history of posture. The power of the ideal posture never wanes, it just evolves and takes on new shapes and meanings, but when compared with the Alexander Technique nothing has changed.

WILFRED BARLOW'S BEFORE-AND-AFTER POSTURES AS EVIDENCE

It was natural that some Alexander teachers would follow up on the connection between psychological and physical states. Wilfred Barlow, who trained with Alexander 1938–45 and qualified as a doctor in 1941, was familiar with the then current thinking on the influence of posture on psychological health.⁸⁰ Realising that Alexander's technique casts a new light on the subject, he wrote several papers examining the relationship between posture and psychological health. He also tried to come up with a measure of good use, by using before-and-after photography of people having a series of lessons in the Technique.⁸¹

Barlow first used before-and-after pictures in his lecture 'Postural Homeostasis', published in July

⁷⁴ Katy Bowman, *Alignment Matters* (Washington State: Propriometrics, 2016), pp. 110–12. Or look at the front cover.

⁷⁵ *The Universal Constant*, p. 37.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* p. xxxii.

⁷⁷ The school headmaster, Jack V. Fenton, was inspired by the Alexander Technique to conduct research into school children's postures in England, and suggested teaching school children the right postures and positions for a variety of tasks – i.e. physical ergonomics – in his book *Choice of Habit* (London: Mouritz, 2010 [1973]).

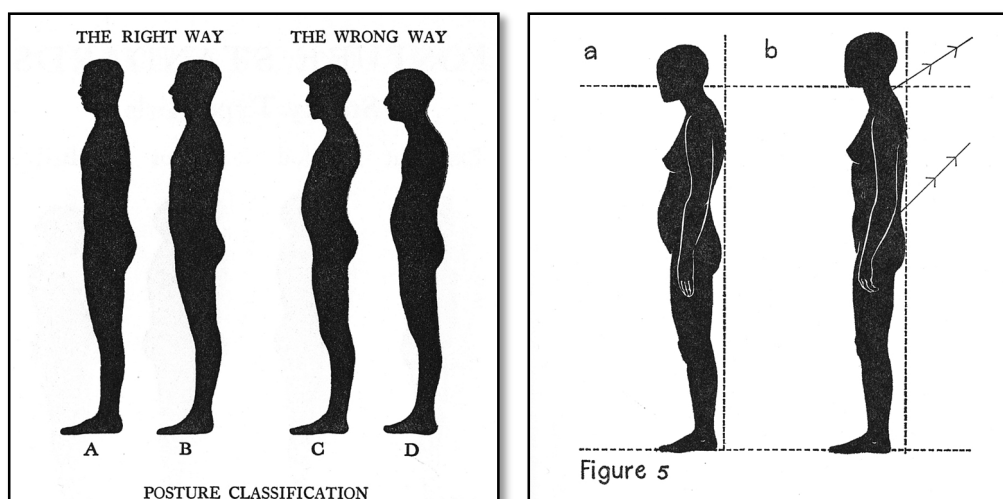
⁷⁸ *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, pp. 93–94.

⁷⁹ T. D. M. Roberts' *Understanding Balance – The Mechanics of Posture and Locomotion* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1995) provides an overview of some

of the many factors involved in posture and balance. His distinction between 'behavioural vertical' and 'gravitational vertical' is helpful when discussing posture (pp. 95, 175). For more up to date scientific articles, see <<https://www.postureunderground.org>>. Accessed 10 July 2023.

⁸⁰ In addition to Dr Barlow one could also mention Eric de Peyer, who in 1962 wrote 'Certain bodily habits go with certain mental habits. Depression is a literal physical fact, as well as a mental one. Hence, if we habitually adopt a depressed posture, we are already depression-prone.' Eric de Peyer, 'The Alexander Technique and back disorders' in *More Talk of Alexander*, ed. by Wilfred Barlow (London: Mouritz, 2005 [1978]), p. 289.

⁸¹ Sorry, no pictures are here reproduced because all the subjects are naked.



Figs. 5a & 5b. Silhouettes of good and bad postures, from 1932 (left) & 1973 (right) (see footnotes 92 & 91 respectively)

1952.⁸² It is probably this article which Alexander refers to in a letter (undated⁸³) to Wilfred Barlow where he discusses the use of photographs as evidence:

In regard to photographs as guides or proofs I hold the same view [as on the principle and procedure of books on physiology]. If the conception, inhibitory, and direction side of the matter could be photographed it might prove of some value, but I doubt it.⁸⁴

And a little later in the same letter:

Basic and lasting help can come to the human being only through knowledge in practice and theory of the manner of use of the self and its influence upon psycho-physical functioning, and that knowledge cannot be conveyed by use of photographs or any other means which are not based on the principles and procedures which in practice involve inhibition, direction and due reliance upon all that is implied by Shakespeare's words, 'There is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so,' and manner of use that exercises beneficial effect upon psycho-physical functioning, is that which results from the kind of thinking that is basic in making this or it so.⁸⁵

Photography is a snapshot and is a crude measure as it does not capture people's thinking and

attitude. In addition, one might add, photography may provide misleading information as people after lessons know what is expected of them in terms of position and so try to do it in order to please the researcher.⁸⁶

Barlow was keen to provide scientific evidence for the Technique, and despite Alexander's objections he continued using the same research methodology, probably because it was an accepted form of evidence at the time. He was also in accord with popular views by stating that 'there is an intimate relationship between states of anxiety and observable states of muscular tension'.⁸⁷ However, he departed from the norm by (1) arguing that the Alexander Technique,⁸⁸ by changing people's 'postural model' (i.e. 'body image' or 'postural schema'), provided lasting change to people's posture compared with typical postural correcting exercises; and (2) that we operate with a 'postural homeostasis', an underlying state which is a starting point for all voluntary motion.⁸⁹ In his use of 'right' and 'wrong' silhouettes of postures, Barlow

⁸² Wilfred Barlow, 'Postural homeostasis.' Paper read at the Annual Meeting of the British Association of Physical Medicine on April 26, 1952. Published in *Annals of Physical Medicine* [now *Rheumatology*] vol. 1, no. 3, July 1952, pp. 77–87. Also in Wilfred Barlow, *Postural Homeostasis*, ed. by Jean M. O. Fischer (London: Mouritz, 2014), pp. 79–96.

⁸³ Dated 3rd September but no year is given. F. M. Alexander to Wilfred Barlow in *Letters: Volume II 1943–1955*, pp. 576–77.

⁸⁴ Ibid. p. 576.

⁸⁵ Ibid. p. 577.

⁸⁶ 'Response bias' or 'reporting bias' is a now a well-known phenomenon.

⁸⁷ Wilfred Barlow, 'Anxiety and muscle-tension pain' in *The British Journal of Clinical Practice* May 1959, vol. 13, no. 5, pp. 339–50. Here quoted from Wilfred Barlow, *Postural Homeostasis*, ed. by Jean M. O. Fischer (London: Mouritz, 2014) (pp.115–144), p. 173.

⁸⁸ Barlow rarely used the term 'Alexander Technique', but preferred terms such as 're-educational method' (e.g. p. 121 in *Postural Homeostasis*.)

⁸⁹ Wilfred Barlow, 'Anxiety and Muscle Tension', in *Modern Trends in Psychosomatic Medicine* Volume 1 ed. by Desmond O'Neil (London: Butterworth, 1955). Here quoted from Wilfred Barlow, *Postural Homeostasis*, ed. by Jean M. O. Fischer (London: Mouritz, 2014) (pp.115–144), p. 120.

continued a long tradition.⁹⁰ Compare Barlow's diagram from his 1973 book⁹¹ with that of a 1932 US report on body mechanics and health⁹² (see fig. 5, above).

Like Alexander, Frank P. Jones was critical of changes in posture – of the before-and-after photographic approach – as evidence for any substantial change to people's use and function. In a 1973 lecture on the criteria for what makes the Alexander Technique unique he says:

Posture is another criterion which seems promising at first but must, I believe, be rejected (if by posture you mean the three-dimensional arrangement of the parts of the body which can be recorded by instantaneous photography). Everyone has an idea of what 'bad' posture is (though 'good' posture is more difficult to define). After lessons in the Alexander Technique bad posture usually improves in a striking way, and it may be useful to take photographs before and after a course of lessons to demonstrate the improvement.

Unfortunately again, practitioners of other methods produce similar before-and-after photographs, and it would be difficult to prove from the photographs alone that their results are inferior to those achieved by the Alexander Technique. I once showed some of these still photographs to a doctor at Harvard and he assured me that in the Physical Education Department they made these changes all the time.

If you cannot use posture as a criterion, then what can you use? I believe that the distinguishing criterion should be the movement pattern itself. As I understand it, the Alexander Technique is not concerned with three-dimensional but with four-dimensional posture, in other words with movement. A. R. Alexander refused to judge a person's posture as good or bad until he had seen him move or until he had put his hands on him. I have seen the magnificent posture disintegrate in an instant. Athletes and dancers can go into a postural collapse when they are through performing. On the other hand, I have seen people with atrocious posture who move quite easily, and as they moved their posture improved. An American college professor who was a pupil of the Alexanders during the war had a posture that could not be changed. He was an arthritic; his spinal column was ankylosed and his head fixed in position. As you can imagine, he was a difficult pupil,

but the Alexanders (the two of them worked with him together) succeeded in teaching him, and he profited tremendously from the Technique. Still photographs, however, would not have recorded the change.⁹³

Posture and positions being unreliable indicators of use and functioning, Alexander was keen to observe people's use through their movements, as he made reference to in a 1925 lecture:

The consequence is that my first attention is given, when the pupil comes into the room, to the different little things he or she happens to be doing, walking and so forth, and then when he comes into my room at first, I ask him to sit down in the chair – and we all do that, it is a matter of etiquette – and when he has sat down in the chair, I have the history of his life's use of himself.⁹⁴

Alexander also made a point of not equating good posture with good use, as in this story related by John Nicholls:

I've heard of a story of Alexander telling the students on his teacher training course that he was expecting his best student for a lesson and they should look out for her in the waiting room. A few minutes before the lesson was due to start, all the trainees went along and peeped into the waiting room to see the best student but couldn't see her. So they came back to Alexander and said, 'No, she's not there.' Alexander said, 'Yes, she is. I saw her come in.' The trainees replied, 'No, no. There's only some old woman who's all bent and stooped in the waiting room.' To which Alexander replied, 'Yes, that's her. That's my best student.'⁹⁵

VARIOUS APPROACHES TO POSTURE WITHIN THE ALEXANDER TECHNIQUE

Although 'good posture' was never a part of the Alexander Technique the allure of it continued. When Beaumont Alexander – F. M. Alexander's youngest brother – in effect inherited Alexander's estate in 1955, he produced some new editions of some of Alexander's books. The only change was the insertion of some pictures of 'incorrect' and 'improved' postures, with captions describing what was wrong and what was improved in the postures.⁹⁶ Some of these pictures were also used

⁹⁰ For example, Dr Scanes Spicer, a pupil of Alexander, used silhouettes against a grid to demonstrate his breathing methods in an article in the *British Medical Journal*, in 1909. See fig. 7 and note 165 in *Articles and Lectures*, pp. 398–401.

⁹¹ Wilfred Barlow, *The Alexander Principle* (London: Gollancz, 1973), fig. 5 on p. 37, by Gwyneth Cole.

⁹² 'The relation of body mechanics to health' in White House conference on child health and protection, *The Growth and Development of the Child – Part I, General Considerations* (New York: The Century Company, 1932), p. 186.

⁹³ 'Learning how to learn: An operational definition of the Alexander Technique' in Frank Pierce Jones *Freedom to Change [Body Awareness in Action]* (London: Mouritz, 1997 [1976]) (pp. 187–193), pp. 189–90.

⁹⁴ Lecture: 'An unrecognized principle in human behaviour' (1925) in *Articles and Lectures* (pp. 200–221), p. 205.

⁹⁵ John Nicholls and Seán Carey, *The Alexander Technique in Conversation* (England: Brighton Alexander Training Centre, 1991), p. 44.

⁹⁶ *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (Re-educational Publications edition, 1957).

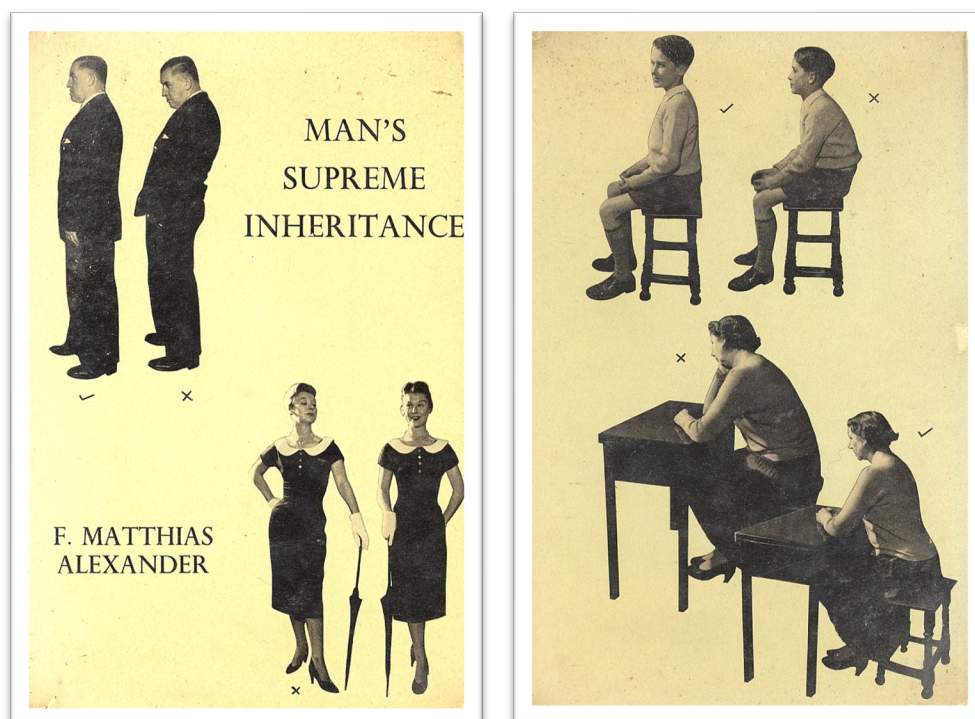


Fig. 6. Front and back covers of the 1957 edition of *Man's Supreme Inheritance*. See footnote 96.

for new covers (fig. 6). Beaumont had limited experience of the Technique but obviously believed that 'posture improvement' would sell Alexander's books.

The subject of posture is difficult to avoid altogether. Scientists talk of postural mechanisms, Magnus's research – referred to in both *The Use of the Self*⁹⁷ and *The Universal Constant* – investigated reflex postures, and people of all backgrounds refer to posture in a variety of contexts. The subject of posture comes up in teaching the Technique. Many teachers follow Alexander's lead and eschew it altogether or approach it indirectly. However, there are a number of exceptions. Dr Barlow diagnosed postural faults in his first interview by having prospective pupils strip down to their underwear and stand against a grid; he would then proceed to point out faults in posture.⁹⁸ His postural correction

teaching approach can be seen in a video where he teaches a young woman.⁹⁹ Some teachers, in their books, show right and wrong ways of sitting, standing, walking, etc, without discussing the problematic nature of the concept and practice of posture.¹⁰⁰ Others address the topic of posture head on, and in the process reframe the standard conception of posture. For example Walter Carrington, in his 'Balance as a Function of Intelligence', discusses 'upright posture' in terms of balance, efficiency, energy conservation, and the factors which will facilitate it.¹⁰¹ Another example is Ron Dennis's *Posturality* (a neologism referring to the quality of posture).¹⁰²

Some teachers refer to 'poise' instead of posture. Alexander used 'poise' in his early articles and in *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, but not later.¹⁰³ Raymond Dart, in his 1947 article, 'The

⁹⁷ F. Matthias Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (London: Orion, 2018).

⁹⁸ I experienced this for myself as my first contact with the Alexander Technique was with Dr Barlow, in 1983.

⁹⁹ 'The Alexander Technique by Dr Wilfred Barlow' DVD, available from <<https://www.concordmedia.org.uk/products/the-alexander-technique-by-dr-wilfred-barlow-210/>>. Retrieved 28 August 2023.

¹⁰⁰ A borderline example is Michèle Mac Donnell, *Alexander Technique (The New Life Library)* (Lorenz Books, 1999).

¹⁰¹ Walter Carrington, 'Balance as a Function of Intelligence' (London: The Sheildrake Press, 1970). Also in *An Evolution of the Alexander Technique* by Walter Carrington, Dilys Carrington (London: The Sheildrake Press, 2017), pp. 22–36.

¹⁰² Ron Dennis, *The Posturality of the Person – A Guide to Postural Education and Therapy* (Atlanta: Posturality Press/Alexander Technique of Atlanta, 2013).

¹⁰³ In his early articles there are occasional references to 'chest poise' (e.g. in the article 'The prevention and cure of consumption', 1903, in *Articles and Lectures*, pp. 50–58), or 'poise of the body' ('Re-education of the

Attainment of Poise', contrasts posture with poise. He suggests that – unlike posture – poise is either present or absent. Posture might be strained, unbalanced, etc., but poise

is a body state achieved only by steady and carefree education of the body and the maintenance of balance. Poise is a character of repose or rest in the good body, whether it is in the relatively static positions of lying, sitting, or standing or is actually in progressive motion during the activities of life's daily routine or of sport.¹⁰⁴ . . . It is characterised by mobile equilibrium and equanimity.¹⁰⁵

Dart favouring the state of poise as the *desideratum* was the result of his lessons with Irene Tasker.¹⁰⁶ Walter Carrington also preferred the term poise when describing Alexander's work, and highlights the fact that it is the process (the attainment), not the end (poise) which is important:

[F. M. Alexander] had discovered the necessity of poise – of using the full height and lengthening in stature as a basis for all activity. Breathing, circulation and digestion, all the functioning of the body is dependent on poise – and poise is dependent on how you use yourself. His technique is about the attainment of poise – how you use yourself in all the activities of life.^{107,108}

However, the term 'poise' is not unproblematic: it is also a balletic term, and hence for many people may be associated with the appearance of elegance and ease rather than a reality of balance and composure.

Another approach worth mentioning is that of Frank P. Jones who introduced the concept of 'postural sets' to indicate 'a preliminary change in the level and distribution of tension as a preparation for movement'.¹⁰⁹ The argument is that we typically have a consciously adopted posture – taught or not – but we may also have unconsciously adopted positions and postures in everyday life and work. In preparation for a particular task we easily get into a 'set' position, a readiness position, an attitude (mental and physical). This is obvious to see when

people approach a task they have done many times before, like a musician setting him- or herself up for playing. These are rarely consciously adopted positions and postures, and, unless carefully thought out in advance, they all involve a certain amount of rigidity and fixity. Jones referred to these as 'postural sets'. Even when people are not pursuing any particular posture or position they still might adopt a particular position in readiness for a particular task. These, Jones argues, have to be inhibited in order to avoid a stereotyped 'set' that will determine and shape the response, thereby stifling spontaneity.

Jones's paper on 'postural sets', first published in *Psychological Review* (1965), attempts to get a scientific handle on the Technique, meaning he was trying to identify a measurable and typical component of human reaction. A postural set is, however, a segment of a larger response pattern and so does not include all aspects of what is involved. For Alexander posture (or a postural set) is only a manifestation – one of many – of use, and use is psycho-physical. Positions and postures are just temporary points in the ongoing flux of movements, which in turn are generated by the general psycho-physical state of being, of the use, function and structure of each individual, at that point and time. The issue of posture and positions is therefore one of living from moment to moment, of responding to stimuli as any stimulus might – or might not – cause a postural set, which may be replaced by another postural set moments later. As with 'posture', the term 'postural set' may detract from the more organic fluidity and mutability which is typical of the continuous processes of acting and reacting.

PROBLEMS WITH A POSTURE APPROACH

Any discussion of good posture must include a definition, and since posture by definition is the position and arrangement of body parts, it is visible

kinæsthetic systems', 1908, in *Articles and Lectures*, pp. 116–123). In *Man's Supreme Inheritance* he equates the 'true poise of the body' with the 'principles of mechanical advantage' (p. 53).

¹⁰⁴ Raymond Dart, 'The Attainment of Poise', in Raymond A. Dart, *Skill and Poise* (London: STAT Books, 1996) (pp. 109–51), p. 114.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p. 110.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p. 122.

¹⁰⁷ Walter Carrington's description in *F. M. Alexander 1949–50*, DVD narrated by Walter Carrington (London: Mouritz, 2010).

¹⁰⁸ This paragraph was the inspiration for the title of the *Poise* journal.

¹⁰⁹ F. P. Jones 'A method for changing stereotyped response patterns by the inhibition of certain postural sets.' First published in *Psychological Review*, 1965, Vol. 72, pp. 196–214. Also in Frank P. Jones, *Collected Writings on the Alexander Technique*, ed. by Theodore Dimon Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Alexander Technique Archives, 1998), pp. 249–76.

and can be illustrated. However, such pictures – frequently contours – of good postures easily create another stereotyped and culturally defined ideal of beauty, an appearance-based value. The term ‘good’ posture is value-laden, it implies something you are supposed to have (who doesn’t want to be good?). This sets up a conflict between what we perceive ourselves to be and what we think we ought to be, of right and wrong, of success and failure, with all our concomitant complex reactions which those thoughts provoke. The pursuit of an idealised posture may result in distress and adversely affect people’s sense of self-worth; it may encourage conformity where there should be individuality; it may pathologise normal variations in postures.

The concept of posture as a guide to the movements and demands of everyday living is a hindrance, not a help, because (a) posture is habitually seen as something set, static, even frozen, rather than a mobile, fluid, ongoing adjustment to the task in hand, the act of living; and (b) posture – as people ordinarily understand it – is an end, not a process, and without attention to the means – whereby any adoption of a posture is endgaining, purely dependent on existing habits of moving and thinking.

In practice the pursuit of a certain posture frequently means people getting stuck in a tension-relaxation cycle: using tension to achieve a position, using relaxation to correct the tension, losing the position, repeat. The approach of holding a right position – whether conscious or unconscious – fixes everything and makes people rigid because it compels people to check whether they have the ‘right’ posture, whether they have achieved it. This is backward-looking. In the process it fractures the unity of the self as people become preoccupied with only a specific image – a specific part – of themselves. If people’s need for a good posture does not start as an expression of insecurity it will often end in it.

Adopting a posture by using the muscles in a habitual shortened and contracted way will do nothing to change the muscular tonus – how the muscles are used – or to change the thinking, the attitude, the approach to the self.

The generic ideal posture is a mirage, a projection of beliefs, of needs.

The term posture comes with so much baggage – a myriad of different associations and preconceptions – that it is highly problematic and therefore rarely suitable in the context of teaching and understanding the Alexander Technique.

ALEXANDER’S APPROACH

Alexander’s innovative approach arose indirectly, as a result of him wanting to solve his voice problem; he was not interested in or preoccupied with posture per se. Posture was never part of the Technique in the first place.

Alexander offered a paradigm shift by reframing the whole way we think about and direct our self: means instead of ends, the general instead of the specific, the indirect instead of the direct, prevention instead of doing, a conscious, reasoned-out response instead of an unconscious, habitual response, and allowing for the unknown instead of replicating the known.

In *The Universal Constant*, Alexander’s last book, where his many years of teaching practice and of development of his concepts and vocabulary come to the fore, he highlights the contrast between a ‘right’ posture approach and his approach:

Hence ideas or methods which lead to fixed right postures do not meet the needs of those who desire to change conditions which are associated with unsatisfactory use, functioning, and postural defects. A satisfactory technique for making the changes we are considering must be one in which the nature of the procedures provides for a continuous change towards improving conditions, by a method of *indirect approach* under which opportunity is given for the pupil to come into contact with the unfamiliar and *unknown* without fear or anxiety.¹¹⁰

As posture is subsumed under a process of constant growth and development it takes care of itself. Hence, there is no posture as such to achieve, no posture destination. Aiming for a ‘good posture’ is about conforming to a predefined ideal, what it should look like, what it should feel like. The Alexander Technique is about prevention, about indirect change through individual development and growth. The difference – the stark contrast – could not be greater.

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¹¹⁰ Ibid. p. 79.

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Fig. 1. Illustrating 'correct' and 'incorrect' feet positions in relation to standing. Photographer unknown.

For full captions refer to F. Matthias Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance*, between pages 91 & 92

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Fig. 2. 'Poor position and its correction', Figs 3–4 in Jessie Bancroft, *The Posture of School Children* (New York: The MacMillan Co., 1920 [1913]), p. 10. Photographer unknown.

Fig. 3. 'Posture and Tuberculosis'. Artist unknown. Produced by National Child Welfare Association, co-operating with the National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis (New York, 1920?–1923?). Digital image from the Library of Congress, <<https://www.loc.gov/item/2014647542>>.

Fig. 4. Adapted from Plate VII, 'The author's reproduction of the discobulus: The swing back' in Diana Watts, *The Renaissance of the Greek Ideal* (London: Heinemann, 1922). Photographer unknown.

Fig. 5a. Adapted from 'Posture Classification', source Department of Hygiene and Physical Education, Harvard University, illustrator unknown, in White House conference on child health and protection, *The Growth and Development of the Child – Part I, General Considerations* (New York: The Century Company, 1932), p. 186.

Fig. 5b. Figure 5 (untitled) by Gwyneth Cole, in Wilfred Barlow, *The Alexander Principle* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1973), p. 37.

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Fig. 6. Front and rear dust jacket illustrations from F. Matthias Alexander, *Man's Supreme Inheritance* (London: Re-educational Publications, 1957). Creators unknown.

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WORKS BY F. MATTHIAS ALEXANDER

References to Alexander's writings in this essay are to the current editions as listed below, unless otherwise stated. Original dates of publication and any abbreviations used in the text are also indicated.

Articles and Lectures, ed. by Jean M. O. Fischer (Graz: Mouritz, 2022 [various]).

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

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