

## REFLECTING UPON RON DENNIS' *CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS*

By Michael Protzel

F.M. Alexander believed he had opened up a “new field” of inquiry. (*UoS*, page 1) Marjory Barlow recalls Alexander saying he had only “scratched the surface of the egg.” (*AEL*, page vii) To penetrate deeper, we need individuals willing to assume a beginner’s mind, willing to re-examine fundamental perceptions and ideas, willing to question accepted premises. Ron Dennis is one such willing individual.

*Conceptual Foundations*, a 45-page compilation of essays written mostly by Dennis is one of the few places in Alexander literature where you can actually find a critical discussion of core Alexander principles. To have these writings all together, one after the other, heightens the impact of each. It is must reading for all serious students and teachers of the Technique.

*Conceptual Foundations* is actually two distinct but related trilogies. In the first trilogy, Dennis speaks to the confusion that follows in a field of study when a key concept is not clearly defined. In the second trilogy, Dennis provides his own definitions supported by meticulous explanations. The first trilogy leads off with Dennis’ *Primary Control and the Crisis in Alexander Technique Theory* (1999). Here Dennis questions the credibility of “primary control” as a theoretical foundation. He does so convincingly from various perspectives. Among other arguments, he cites the ambiguity of the word ‘control’ which can function as either a noun or a verb; and he reminds us that “FMA’s famous account of primary control...came some 35 years after the alleged discovery itself.” (*CF*, page 8) The second article is a rebuttal by fellow Alexander Technique teacher, David Langstroth (2000). Langstroth asserts that the problem is not in Alexander Technique theory, but in people’s failure to understand it. The Alexander Technique, he says, is first and foremost a practical method that works. Although he does not regard theory as very important, Langstroth references movement science literature that in his mind validates the concept of primary control by recognizing the importance of head/neck activity in human coordination. Completing the first trilogy is Dennis’ *Reply to a Reply* (2000). Here Dennis, in addition to answering Langstroth point by point, acknowledges a problem in his own original article — a lack of clarity in his use of the word ‘theory.’ He remedies this with a fascinating exploration into six distinct meanings of the word.

The second trilogy is composed of Dennis’ most recently composed works. *Defining Primary Control* (2004) defines Primary Control as “the process, as primary task, of bodily adjustment to gravity.” The second article is entitled, *The “Other Half” of Primary Control* (2004), which introduces the concept of “correlative control...the ‘goal-oriented’ aspect of Use...The violinist playing a concerto and the computer programmer at her computer exercise both Primary Control relative to gravity...[and] other control relative to the specific activity” (*CF*, page 33). The final article is *Defining the Alexander Technique* (2005). He defines it as: “the teaching that imparts the meaning of *the use of the self*.” (*CF*, page 38) The ‘self’ he defines as “that I-am whose being-in-the-world comprises a field of concern organized by sensory-motor skills.” (*CF*, page 44)

Dennis probes for a deeper understanding of historic Alexander Technique concepts. Each definition includes a discussion of each component-word so that its meaning is clear. He is passionate about words and their power. Only a precise and penetrating language, he believes, can communicate fundamental ideas. Dennis leaves no stone unturned in a search for the most authentic and meaningful words to describe our work.

I wholeheartedly recommend this booklet. It is erudite, thought provoking and never dull. Dennis draws from many diverse and stimulating sources. He gives careful attention to all of the many ideas he

presents and dissects. I most appreciate Dennis' willingness to go his own way, *in his own way*. He and I share a perception that there is within the Alexander Technique community a "tendency toward adulation of [FMA's] person and uncritical acceptance of his thought." (CF, page 45) We both see this as a threat to the health and well-being of our work and our profession.

I want to thank Ron for inviting me to comment on his writings. I consider it a privilege. His passionate expression deserves a response in kind. What follows is how *Conceptual Foundations* resonated within me, and helped me gain deeper insight into my own work.

## THEORY VS. PRACTICE

What most stimulated my thinking in reflecting upon *Conceptual Foundations* was its frequent juxtaposing of theory and practice. A few examples from the text:

"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 his self-chosen heirs to raise the level of the theory to that of the practice." (CF, page 13)

"We not only do the founder highest honor, but also best advance our profession, by bringing to his rich and fundamental insights not only the practical expertise, but also the theoretical clarity, that they surely deserve." (CF, page 45)

"I maintain that our language should be as precise and relevant as the use of our hands." (CF, page 24)

"Alexander put practice before theory...Many practices are based on assumptions or theories which themselves are not proven. The Alexander Technique, however, is the other way round. Alexander started by discovery something that works and then later coined a term to describe it." (CF, Langstroth, page 19)

Theory and practice are posited as separate animals whose evolution is distinct and somewhat unrelated. Practice, we are told, can be at one level, theory at another. A strong practice can emerge in spite of a less-than-strong theory. Dennis, however, provides a fascinating contrary reference. The English word *theory* is rooted in the Greek *theoria* which originally meant witnessing. Such witnessing, Dennis tells us, implies neither "separation nor abstraction but rather proximity and affinity." (CF, page 13) This way of understanding 'theory' is more in line with mine. Just as we all recognize the "indivisibility of the human organism", I also recognize the indivisible unity of Alexander Technique theory and practice. They both emerge from the same source: the observations of F.M. Alexander. To bring this point home, I will make a brief sojourn into the body of work known as General-Semantics. Bruce Kodish, an experienced Alexander Technique teacher who wrote the Introduction to *Conceptual Foundations*, is also an experienced General-Semantics teacher. He, together with Susan Presby Kodish, has written an illuminating book on the subject, *Drive Yourself Sane*. For the most part, I will let their words do the talking.

## General-Semantics

"General-Semantics was developed by Alfred Korzybski, a Polish engineer who settled in the United States following World War I. He was appalled by the massive war destruction and determined to answer the question of how humans so successfully advance technologically yet make such a mess of their general human affairs." (DYS, page 1)

"We recognize that in order for people to learn from their experience, they need an understanding of how their experience works. How can people best evaluate their experiences? How can they go beyond what they already know?...[s]o that [they] can make fuller use of [their] potentialities, learn more easily, cope better with uncertainty and change, achieve more of what [they] want and avoid more of what [they] don't want." (DYS, page 3)

“Korzybski developed a model, which he called the *structural differential*, to represent our experiencing process...[W]e and everything else are composed of very tiny ‘processes’... We call this whirl of activity the *event (process) level*...From the whirl of activity, we perceive and create our sense of what is happening in and around us...[E]ach of us perceives differently and so creates a different experience. At this perceiving level, we sense but have no words for our experiences...We call this the silent, *object level*...[Then there are the] *verbal levels*... We learn to label and describe what we perceive. We call this use of language the *descriptive level*, or the level of ‘facts.’... We also make inferences about our experiences...and theories [based on our inferences]...We call these the *inference level* and the *generalization level*...We can also...talk about our talking...Theoretically, this process can go on unendingly. So we say, *et cetera*...These different levels occur together.” (DYS, Pages 7-8)

All of our verbal descriptions and theories derive from, and are dependent upon, our object level perceptions of process level events. From these perceptions emerge our descriptions, inferences and theories. This verbal level analysis represents our “mapping” of a particular “territory.”

“The structure of maps and the mapping process gives us a way of talking about the structure of the world...An accurate map gives us some sense of predictability in dealing with the territory it represents...[Yet,] *no matter how much similarity of structure there exists between some map and its territory...the map is not the territory...Maps cannot include all of what they represent.* (DYS, page 51-53, italics added)

General-semantics advocates “extensional” thinking,

“...an attitude toward living which involves orienting ourselves primarily to non-verbal happenings and ‘facts,’ with the ability to use intensional approaches when appropriate.” (DYS, from the glossary)

“Intensional” thinking involves

“...living primarily according to higher-order verbal definitions, without reference to lower-order verbal statements and non-verbal experiences.” (DYS, from the glossary)

General-semantics recognizes that intensional thinking becomes problematic when we fail to distinguish verbal and non-verbal levels.

“[We have gone too far in the intensional direction when]...our maps become more important than what we are mapping...[o]ur inferences become more important than descriptions, our descriptions more important than non-verbal experience.” (DYS, page 70)

General-semantics recognizes that our moment-by-moment experience shapes our conceptual thinking:

“The non-verbal levels are given primary importance. The verbal levels have secondary importance and ultimately ought to direct us back toward lower-order, non-verbal [experiences], toward silent level observation.” (DYS, page 70)

### Self-Use Territory

Alexander Technique theory and practice, together, developed from Alexander’s mapping of self-use territory. Alexander recognized a self acting as a whole, whose actions are guided by habits that reflect both faulty sensory appreciation and a focus on ends over means. He also recognized that head, neck, back coordination is integral to our use. These understandings are profound. But in *Evolution of a Technique*, Alexander’s mapping of how we specifically mis-use ourselves — his descriptions and theories based on his object level perceptions of process level, self-use events — reflect his failure to observe something major.

Every moment of our lives we are falling down to earth. Even when we are sitting still or standing still, we are falling. That is the impact of gravity. Our falling, like the falling of any object, generates force. A human being generates substantial force.

Alexander failed to observe:

- that he controlled the force of his own falling;
- that he had an habitual manner of directing the trajectory of his falling; and
- that, in response to his subconsciously initiated, mis-directed falling — which would drive him off balance for an instant — he had an habitual manner of muscularly bracing and righting that stopped his momentary topple and kept his head relatively level.

What Alexander did observe was that, in the act of reciting, his head tilted back and his torso shortened in front. What initiated this mis-use, he believed, was his idea to recite.

[T]his instinctive misdirection leading to a wrong habitual use of myself, including most notably the wrong use of my head and neck, *came into play as the result of a decision to use my voice; this misdirection, in other words, was my instinctive response (reaction) to the stimulus to use my voice.*  
(Alexander's italics, UoS, p 13)

Alexander did not report noticing any prior mis-use. I contend that this reflects his faulty sensory appreciation. Not only was Alexander acting according to his habitual manner of use in the 'simple' acts of sitting and standing (how else could he have been acting?), but it was his unrecognized mis-use in these activities that set the stage for his reciting misuse. This prior mis-use included the muscular leg and pelvic tension that was holding him in place, and the upper body tension that enabled him to approximate full stature. When he began to recite, he let go of some of this tension to facilitate expressive movement. This let loose his underlying falling. The result was what he saw in the mirror, what we have come to call 'pulling down.'

An accurate mapping of self-use territory must include the force of our falling and our habitual manner of mis-directing it. Recognition of these factors can lead us to a cogent explanation for why we tilt our heads backwards, and shorten and narrow our torsos.

### Coming to Grips with a Particularly Bad Habit and Its Impact

From a young age, we all learn to mis-direct our falling in the common act of sitting back against a chair support. We do this repetitively for years, without thought or awareness. Falling backwards, if unchecked, is a potentially life threatening act. Thus, its onset generates immediate, subconscious, self-protective, muscular adjustments. The trouble is, we feel neither the falling nor the myriad adjustments we make in response — despite the fact that falling backwards literally bends us out of shape.

How is it that we can be so out of touch with the effects of toppling backwards in sitting, considering it is such an egregious mis-use of the self? I postulate that our faulty sensory appreciation was in play *from the very first time we sat back*. In fact, I believe we laid the groundwork for our kinesthetic disconnect well before we ever engaged in the act.

As infants, we are intelligent creatures. We see all the big people sitting back in chairs. We very soon recognize it as an utterly normal act. We know that someday we will be doing it ourselves. Eventually we do. Convinced of its normalcy, we regard all sensations that accompany the act as normal too. There is no objective perspective from which we can assess that what we are feeling in our necks as we first fall backwards into a chair support is indeed *not* good. We don't see anyone struggling with the act of sitting back, or regarding it as a problem. We have absolutely no reason to regard it as such. Thus, we don't. We don't question any of the neck-tensing, torso-shortening sensations we experience. We regard everything about the act as normal. We simply do it...again...and again...and again. Thus is born our habitual manner of use.

Falling backwards with regularity throws our internal balancing processes totally out of whack. In acclimating to the bracing and righting reactions that are a part of our falling backwards, our kinesthetic sensitivity diminishes. Moreover, we lose access to our innate uprighting system. This eons-old, exquisitely efficient, deep-seated system depends for its activation upon our body mass falling straight down and then tipping *forwards* — into the feet in sitting, into the balls of the feet in standing. Far from an “anti-gravity reflex,” as Alexander sometimes called it, our innate uprighting system is in fact powered by the very force of our falling. It would be better called a ‘gravity reflex.’ It works at peak performance, however, only when we capture the full force of our falling, as we did in first learning to sit and stand. In habitually directing our falling backwards, we send the force in the exact opposite direction it needs to go. This activates a far less efficient, effort-filled manner of uprighting.

### Our Disconnect from Our Falling

We are all, of course, cognizant of the existence of this thing called ‘gravity.’ Yet, as I see it, the way we talk about gravity reflects our kinesthetic disconnect from the actual, very real event that the word represents.

Dennis defines Primary Control as “the process, as primary task, of bodily adjustment to gravity.” (CF, page 27) He also states: “Whatever else we are doing, we are a priority, ongoingly, and actively managing ourselves in a gravitational environment.” I am in complete agreement with the overall concept being presented in these statements. Yet, I call attention to how ‘gravity’ is being conveyed. It is an example of what I believe is a culture-wide disconnect. It is in no way particular to Dennis.

To speak of “bodily adjustment to gravity” or of a “gravitational environment,” suggests that there is one thing, a ‘me’ (a ‘body’), and another separate thing, ‘gravity’ (a ‘gravitational environment’). Gravity is portrayed as an *outside* force to which we respond.

It is a misconception to see ourselves as simply *responding* to gravity. We are not only object, but subject as well. It is we, ourselves, who are falling. We manage not only our *response* to our falling, but the very falling itself. Gravity alone is not responsible for our falling. Gravity and our consciousness *work together* to produce our falling. In standing, when our weight is falling straight down, through each talus equally, we have one set of uprighting responses. When we fall laterally and backwards in the very common ‘standing on one leg’ position, however, we have a different set of uprighting responses. The difference is significant.

Dennis objects when Alexander Technique teachers interpret “primary control” as some kind of a controlling *mechanism*, rather than a *process* of controlling. (CF, page 10) He calls this *reification* — treating an abstraction as if it had material existence. I see a *reification-in-reverse* process happening in regard to gravity. We tend to treat a real event, of real impact (our falling) as if it were an abstraction (we live within a gravitational field). We tend not to see gravity for what it is: an activity in which we decisively participate.

The “gravitational challenge” (CF, page 15) should not be viewed as a burden to be overcome. It is not a matter of conquering an outside force that would otherwise drag us down. The “gravitational challenge” should be viewed as an opportunity — to figure out how to use the powerful force of our falling to our best advantage rather than to our detriment.

### Crafting a Practical Method

Alexander — cognizant of habit, faulty sensory appreciation, endgaining and corruption of head, neck, back — devised a strategy, inhibition, to interrupt our habitual misuse process. His disciplined

attention to self enabled him to transform his use. But his faulty sensory appreciation regarding the force of his falling kept him from recognizing that mis-directing this force generates *automatic uprighting responses that cannot be inhibited*. When the force of our falling drives us off balance, we have no choice but to tense our necks and shorten our spines. Our will to be upright mandates it. The will to be upright is a survival stimulus, continually operative in all sitting and standing activities. We fall. We upright. Constantly. And it is the quality of our falling that determines the quality of our uprighting.

Not including these events as part of his self-use map had a decisive impact on the practical method Alexander established. Had Alexander's observations included the force of our falling and our control over it, he would have devised means to teach others about these important phenomena. He would have evolved a completely different practice.

Alexander created a hands-on practice. In his conception of teaching self-use, hands-on was absolutely necessary. Hands-on enabled Alexander to cut right through a pupil's habitual manner of use, to "give" the pupil a "sensory experience" (CCCI, page 51) in line with the simultaneously spoken words, "neck free, head forward and up...(or the like)." Placing two sensitive, skilled hands on the head/neck of a pupil — hands which are attached to a grounded human being — interrupts a pupil's habitual manner of falling. It lessens the pupil's condition of toppling, reducing the pupil's need for muscular bracing and righting reactions. The pupil can free up. But this state of relative freedom in the pupil should not be confused with innate coordination. *Innate coordination — which allows for independent uprighting with minimal effort, sustainable indefinitely — requires a self that is capturing the full force of his falling. Support supplied by an outside power source is no substitute.*

Dennis' interest in "raising the level of theory to that of the practice" overlooks that theory and practice are but two sides of the same coin. Theory implies practice. Practice reflects theory. To the extent that observations fail to grasp self-use territory, inadequacies in theory and practice are bound to follow. How could it be otherwise? Ignoring vital self-use events renders their very real impact inaccessible kinesthetically. And, as Alexander taught us, faulty sensory appreciation leads to incorrect conceptions. (CCCI, page 54) Conversely, when we genuinely change our beliefs after becoming aware of phenomena we had previously ignored, our practice has to change accordingly.

## Conclusion

In waxing philosophical about the essence of our work, Dennis writes:

"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." (CF, page 14)

Current Alexander Technique theory and practice suggest that we can enhance our skill without kinesthetic appreciation of the force of our falling and our control over it. To me, this places a needless restriction upon our growth as a field of inquiry.

We are self-use professionals. We are also self-use scientists. We cannot be shackled to one particular theory and practice, even Alexander's. Alexander's map overlooked integral aspects of self-use territory. Fully acknowledging them is to our benefit, and the benefit of our students. It will raise our level of constructive conscious control.

Our map should not be more important to us than the territory it seeks to be mapping.

Reference Abbreviations

*UoS* - Use of the Self, Centerline Press Edition

*AEL* - An Examined Life

*CF* - Conceptual Foundations

*DYS* - Drive Yourself Sane

*CCCI* - Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual,  
Centerline Press Edition

*Michael Protzel* has written three other articles: *Down To Earth* (1999); *Why Do We Tense Our Necks?* (2003) and *Alexander's Error* (2004). They are all accessible at [www.kinestheticventures.com](http://www.kinestheticventures.com).