

Four dimensions of Use

Ron Dennis

EDITOR'S SUMMARY

The author proposes an assemblage of concepts that express different qualities of Use (as defined by F. M. Alexander), and capture in a more focused and differentiated way what the greater concept of Use involves. It is published here as a think piece, with the hope that it will stimulate further discussion. Thoughtful responses will be published in *Poise*.

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INTRODUCTION

The purposes of this article are:

- generally to clarify the concept of 'Use' as it has come down to us; and
- particularly to give full access to the term 'posturality' as equivalent to Use when speaking about the Technique, especially to the public.

By 'full access' I mean our ability to employ 'posturality' without mental reservation as to whether it expresses the whole content of Use – it doesn't – but, in so doing, also to be aware of that whole content; and further, to be using a part of it consciously as a practical communicative expedient, call it 'public relations' and/or 'marketing' if you will.

By way of preview, the other three dimensions of Use to be introduced are: 'actionality', 'ethicality', and 'attitudinality' – more of those anon – and together these four permit an understanding of Use as a comprehensive psycho-physical unity in thought and action.

'POSTURALITY'

Elsewhere I've argued that Use, despite its elegance and sufficiency as a concept, has not successfully proclaimed the domain of Alexander's Technique because of its being a technical, esoteric, and generally unfamiliar term in the field of posture and movement.^{1,2} There, I gave the origin, meaning, and significance of my original term 'posturality', before which we had no concept for referring directly to the quality of posture, the suffix '-ity' referring, according to Webster, to 'the state or quality of something', as in 'personality', 'mentality', 'physicality'. Also, I've defined 'posture' as 'the flow through space and time, both reflex and willed, of all activity of bodily support and movement in the course of living.'³ This definition was necessary in order to give a movement dimension to posture, typically thought of statically in terms of position. It is clear from F. M. Alexander's writing that he considered his work primarily relevant in terms of the postural aspect of Use, considered in its true sense of movement through time,⁴ which is why I advocate 'posturality' as a more readily understandable usage for public consumption.

¹ Ron Dennis, 'The Posturality of the person', *AmSAT Journal*, No. 2 (Fall 2012), pp. 10, 12. Key ideas are discussed at greater length in my *The Posturality of the Person* (Atlanta: Posturality Press, 2013): see particularly the 'Introduction' and 'Conceptual Foundations' (pp. 1–19).

² Even conservative STAT has acknowledged that the Technique's traditional language may need revision: 'The secret is to first talk about the AT and what you do in relationship to things people understand. People do not come to us for the AT principles, but for us to help them. And the way we will present that will make all the difference.' (Illia Daoussi, 'An overview of the

new STAT brand', *Statnews*, Vol. 9, Iss. 11 (September 2018), pp. 4–5 (p. 4).)

³ Ron Dennis, 'Posture, postural education, and the Alexander Technique', *AmSAT News*, No. 81, Winter 2009, pp. 15–16.

⁴ Alexander's writings amply reflect John Dewey's thumbnail sketch: 'His observations and experiments have to do with the actual functioning of the body, with the organism in operation, and in operation under the ordinary conditions of living – rising, sitting, walking, standing, using arm, hands, voice, tools, instruments of all kinds.' From 'Introduction' to F. Matthias Alexander, *The Use of the Self* (Mouritz, 2026 [1932]), pp. xiv–xviii (p. xv).

‘ACTIONALITY’

A requirement of conceptual parallelism makes necessary the ‘qualitization’ of the other dimensions of Use, the first of which – in arbitrary order – I call ‘actionality’, meaning the quality of action. ‘Action’ as used in movement studies refers to voluntary and goal-directed movements, as contrasted with random or reflex movements. For example, sitting down in a chair is an action, while reflex blinking is a movement, as also would be instances of movement during full sleep. Another way to say it is that all actions involve movements but not all movements are actions. So to what am I referring as the ‘quality’ of action? Surely not as to whether the action accomplishes its purpose, however significant; that’s more a matter of quantity than of quality – indeed, the action is successful to some degree or it’s not, relative to its end, hardly a qualitative distinction.

Rather, it is in how the action is performed that it is assessable in terms of its quality, and the essence of that how is notably contained, if somewhat awkwardly expressed, in F. M. Alexander’s dichotomous conception of ‘end-gaining’ vs. ‘means-whereby’. For, as we Alexandrians all know, everyone can ‘sit down’ to a chair successfully in terms of getting there, but relatively few can do it without some degree of structural compromise, as well as in standing, walking, bending, and the other common actions of daily life. For these actions to be carried out not only successfully – accomplishing their ends – but also not ‘strainfully’ (‘stress’ being the price of living, ‘strain’ when the price is too high), due attention must be given to the requisite process, preferably through experience with an Alexander teacher. The concept of actionality thus captures the matter of quality in the teleological (ends) and organizational (means) aspects of Use, just as posturality does in the structural and executional ones.

The foregoing is not to say that all ends are justified only in terms of their means (please dodge a careening skateboarder or other danger by any means possible), but rather that the intelligent co-evaluation of means and ends ongoingly and rigorously is a desirable outcome of Alexander study (or any other) on a societal as well as on a personal basis. The fact that the word ‘actionality’ already exists – if rather forlornly, in the dictionary

definition of ‘relating to action or an action’ – is all the more reason, for our own understanding, to imbue it with the rich significance suggested here.

‘ETHICALITY’

Also in ‘The posturality of the person’, I raised the issue of an implicit morality – here called ‘ethicality’ – in Use: ‘For to use something at all – certainly the Self – implies not only the manner of this use but also its purpose, always subject as voluntary action to moral judgment’. While it is true enough that many of one’s daily actions are ethically neutral, both in individual and societal impact, they certainly are not always so relative to the individual’s health, well-being, and productivity. And surely certain of one’s actions can be impactful socially – for better or worse – regardless of the manner of Use in implementing them. Thus we may plausibly speak of one’s ‘use ethic’, comparable to one’s ‘work,’ ‘play,’ or other, ethic. The quality of all these ethics – their ethicality – would seem to be a function of the degree and manner in which they partake of the aspects both of ends-and-means – as in actionality – as well as of individual-and-society – as in ethicality.

‘ATTITUDINALITY’

My original discussion of the dimensionality of Use ended with the three concepts discussed above. Recently, prompted by a suggestion from fellow Alexander teacher, Spencer Chandler, I decided that I now add a fourth dimension of Use: that of one’s characteristic psychical or affective disposition as reflected and revealed through one’s posture, namely, the ‘attitude’ – qualitatively, the ‘attitudinality’ – as in hauteur, depression, exuberance, modesty, and so forth. The basic argument is unaffected by this addition, and indeed it is necessarily completed thereby.

CONCLUSION

And so we arrive at the fractionated paradox of all unities as dissected verbally and analytically – in the present case, of Use, which we may yet ‘think’, familiarly, ‘one after the other and all together’: posturality, actionality, ethicality, attitudinality. Surely we now can appreciate all the more Alexander’s words, ‘Talk about a man’s individuality and character: it’s the way he uses himself.’⁵

⁵ F. Matthias Alexander, *Articles and Lectures*, 3rd edn, ed by Jean M. O. Fischer (Mouritz, 2022), p. 270.

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COMPETING INTERESTS

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