Kinetic Thinking: A New Look at Orders and Direction in the Alexander Technique

By William Conable

You ask me to lift that chair. If I give consent that is all I can do.
"Teaching Aphorisms" in *Articles and Lectures* by F. M. Alexander (Mouritz, 1995, London), page 193

This is a whole new field of thinking.
Marjorie L. Barstow, personal communication

This essay floats on the surface of an ocean of inquiry that is very deep indeed. It does not deal with questions about the nature of thought and consciousness that have been and are now the object of a great deal of profound investigation in the fields of philosophy, particularly phenomenology and epistemology,[1] and in both theoretical and experimental psychology, particularly as regards Alexander's discoveries.[2] I am essentially ignoring this important and fascinating work here. Instead, I am asserting that we all know quite a lot about thinking from a practical standpoint and likewise, that we sometimes make some assumptions about it that are unnecessarily limiting. I am proposing a revised map of some kinds of thinking that we do, adding what I am calling kinetic thinking to the usually acknowledged verbal, visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and other types of thought. This has immediate practical advantages in clarifying some Alexander Technique concepts that can be confusing, and incidentally may suggest productive lines of research, which could eventually lead to a reevaluation of what I am saying here. Even acknowledging its highly limited scope however, I believe that considering what we do as teachers and students of Alexander's discoveries in the light of this revised map can be constructive and revealing.

One of the most puzzling concepts in Alexander's presentation of his discoveries is the idea of "orders." Alexander Technique teachers often find communicating the concept of orders to students challenging. Students in their turn can be mystified by the concept and fall prey to the twin dangers of doing what teachers call "going for a feeling" or of verbally repeating "Neck free, head forward and up, back lengthen and widen" or some similar litany like a mantra, which sometimes seems effective but far more often fails. Perhaps Alexander meant something somehow different from simply repeating a verbal idea over and over until something happens.

People frequently assume that thinking is verbal: repeating or innovating words in the mind. It is useful to realize that there are many other types of thinking. Among them are the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. Visual thinking involves remembering or creating pictures in the mind; auditory thinking similarly embraces imagined or remembered sounds. These modes are said to have various subcategories or so-called submodalities. Within visual thinking, for example, these submodalities include among others color, brightness, focus, size, distance, and so on.

Kinesthetic thinking is a large category that includes any thinking that is concerned with the body. It includes thoughts about, memories of, or imagination of tactile feeling, visceral sensation, and emotions, as well as that complex of perceptions more usually and more precisely defined as kinesthetic: the sense of the position, mass, and movement of the body and its parts. There is, however, another important type of

1 See Varella, Gallagher, Thompson et al.

2 Cacciatore, Johnston, Cohen et al.

thinking. It could be included in the kinesthetic cluster, since it involves the body, but it is clearly different from kinesthetic thinking as more narrowly defined to refer to body sensations. This is the thinking that leads to movement. I call it kinetic thinking, and it is the subject of this brief essay.

Try this experiment: raise your right hand. This could also be done by modeling the movement and asking someone else to mimic it. Obviously, doing this voluntarily involves thought on your part. But the thought cannot have been only verbal because you can think the words "Raise the right hand" without actually carrying out the activity. Similarly, if the cue to act was visual, the thought cannot have been only visual, because you can picture yourself carrying out the act without actually doing so. Similar observations can be made about imagining the feeling of the action.

There must be another kind of thinking that leads to activity. We do it all the time, but we are mostly unaware of doing it and we have no common way to talk about it. For this reason, I have proposed a new term for it: kinetic thinking. Kinetic thinking is the thinking that leads to movement. In the simple experiment above, verbal (or visual) thoughts are translated by the brain into kinetic thoughts, which eventuate in movement. It is this mode of thinking that Alexander seems to have identified.

One important movement that he observed was what he first called "the Primary Movement" and later, "the Primary Control." He verbalized this movement as "Neck free, head forward and up, back lengthen and widen." This phrase is sometimes extended to include such things as "knees out and away." Making this movement leads to changes in specific activities as well as changes to sensations, but it precedes or supports those activities, and is not the same as the resulting sensations. As we have demonstrated with the "Raise your right hand" experiment, it cannot be manufactured as a feeling or by repeating words.

Alexander realized that in order to solve his problems he would have to practice what I am calling kinetic thinking, consciously and purposely. He called it "ordering," and in a real sense it was what he meant by "considering the means-whereby." This thinking would be necessary for restructuring habits of movement. It is also sometimes referred to as "directing," which brings its own problems, because "direction" has two senses. The first sense is direction in space or time, that is up, left, north, later. The second sense is instruction, which is the sense in which Alexander used it: "I direct (i.e. instruct) my head to move forward and up." Conflating the two senses often engenders confusion for Alexander practitioners. Is direction ordering, or is it "forward and up"?

You can sense the results of habits of movement by doing kinesthetic perception, as well as by watching yourself, for instance in a mirror. However, you can understand their cause only by being aware of the kinetic thoughts involved, and you can change them only by doing kinetic thinking. Alexander called this type of thought "giving orders" or "directing." Sometimes he also used the word wish: "I wish my neck to be free, etc." Getting students to be aware of this type of thinking and to be consciously fluent in it is implied in the title of his second main book, Constructive Conscious Control of the Individual. Lack of clarity about this concept is one of the main problems in teaching people to utilize Alexander's discoveries.

It is also noteworthy that some kinds of Alexandrian inhibition can be understood as a form of kinetic thinking. One can sit or lie quietly, and notice chronically tensed muscles and then purposely release them, as described, for instance, by Theodore Dimon in his recent online book *The Body in Action*.[3] While this chronic tension may arise many ways, this release is in itself a movement, and thus is accomplished by kinetic thinking.

3 https://www.alexandertechniqueprinciples.com/chapter02-exercises

Identifying kinetic thinking as a separate mode of thought has proven in my experience to be a helpful strategy. We need to learn to identify it and direct it consciously. When we do so, we stop trying to use Alexander's discoveries by means of other modes of thought. We don't try to make pictures, get feelings, or rehearse verbal instructions over and over. The part of the brain that talks about things is not the same part of the brain that is responsible for movement,[4] and when we try to use the talking part of the brain directly to produce movement, whether the so-called "Primary Control," or any other activity, we are bound to interfere with our natural freedom and efficiency. Realizing that orders are kinetic thinking, teachers can give much clearer instructions. Students can understand more clearly. And both can concentrate their efforts on the real issues: doing and practicing conscious and appropriately directed thinking, and inhibiting the old unsatisfactory habits that need to be changed.

4 I am obliged to Shawn Copeland for this formulation.