VITAL SYMBOLISM: HARTLEY BURR ALEXANDER'S BASIS FOR A NATURALISTIC LOGIC

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It is the purpose of this paper to introduce briefly the life, works, and thought of Hartley Burr Alexander, and then to focus upon one very central and original doctrine of his, the theory of "Vital Symbolism" which provided grounds for a "naturalistic logic."

Though the majority of Alexander's work is philosophical, anthropology was also a dominant interest of his and influenced his philosophical thought in a significant manner. Growing up in Nebraska in the period between the Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Massacre at Wounded Knee, he quickly became concerned with the loss of a unique and unrecognized native American culture. Upon investigation, he concluded that not only did the American Indian's culture have philosophical import of great value, but that many of its ideas and ideals were basically the same as those of Christendom.[1] These two moments, primitivism and idealism, are key notes in the thought of Alexander. The insight to be found in primitive thought is in its anthropomorphism and animism. On a philosophical level this implies that man fundamentally comprehends his world in terms of metaphors of his humanly embodied experience. The unfleshed abstractions of science lose the vital content and import of the world, though they may preserve its structure. Moreover, the world is not only to be conceived aesthetically, but dramatically, that is, as an action which attempts to surmount conflict for the attainment of ideals.[2] Ideals, and their realization or failure, are for him as much facts of nature as electrons and organic processes. Ultimately, therefore, meaning in the world is to be articulated in terms of man's own vital experience.

In examining Alexander's philosophy, it must be noted that it is difficult to classify it under any one rubric without being misleading. Dr. Werkmeister[3] has used the name "Aesthetic Idealism" to describe Alexander's philosophy, but this is by no means to ally him with the followers of Bradley. Indeed in Alexander's first book, *The Problem of Metaphysics and the Meaning of Metaphysical Explanation*, Bradley's thought is extensively criticized, especially for its "dualistic" theory of reality. There is such an enormous disparity between the reality of the Absolute and the reality which is revealed in our appearances, that, in effect, according to this doctrine no knowledge can come from our experience. "The Real," writes Alexander, "one might say barely kisses its ghostly counterpart in my perception."[4] He vigorously opposed any philosophy, psychology, or science, be it materialistic or idealistic, which did violence to the truth of

human experience in its vital context. The danger of all rationalisms and reductionisms is that while they are valid as abstractions from our organic experience, they cannot be substituted for it.

Going beyond this, Alexander argues that experience is only intelligible because it is *human* experience; that is, intelligibility is measured by the degrees to which experience is interpreted on the analogy of human functioning: physical, psychical, and mental. In his first book, he wrote:

> We cannot say that nothing can be which is not experience, but we can say that nothing can have meaning for us which is not experience. And further we can say that nothing can have a sufficient and adequate reason which is not interpreted to us in the language of our own motives and aspirations. No fact can be sufficient unto itself, and no change or action can be understood except on the analogy of human motive and intention. Hence it is that the most satisfactory of all our explanations of the world are animistic. They are such as describe nature in the one language we can grasp, the language of human emotion and impulse. Hence, too, all our philosophy and all science which is to amount to anything must be anthropocentric and psychomorphic.[5]

This early statement is at once key and kernel of Alexander's subsequent thought, especially of the doctrine of Vital Symbolism.

Alexander found support for his position in the psychological, pluralistic theories of James and Bergson and in the relativistic metaphysics of Poincaré.[6] James and Bergson argued for the importance of "lived experience," replete with its vital, moving content, over the abstract and rationalized desiccations of it in most philosophy and psychology. Just as reason, as well as other psychological functions, is a dynamic, goal-oriented activity, so on a metaphysical level Poincaré and the new physics proposed a concept of nature which stressed the continuous, dynamic, and relativistic aspects of the world as process. Thus in Alexander's thought, one may find strands of Idealist, Vitalist, Naturalist, and Organist positions.

Another important feature is Alexander's Humanism. With F. C. S. Schiller, Alexander adopted the ancient dictum of Protagoras that "Man is the Measure of all things." In one of his latest works Alexander wrote:

> The living man, as I conceive, is no chance play of the colour of creation, but is himself form-giver and colour-giver and indeed world-shaper; this is not because of any increate being which is his, but just from the fact that physically and psychically and in the full use of his native endowment, he reads nature and reality in the language of his own life. His worlds are anthropomorphic for the very reason that the only cosmos he can know is known through his own experience; apart from the shapes which his body renders and the forms which his thought assumes all is chaos. . . . Man is the measure of all things, of what is that it is, of what is not that it is not: we revert to this saying of Protagoras, only conditioning it to make sure that the man who is designated as the measurer and judge of reality must yet be man in the richest and fullest expansion of his powers, having in him every *human* part—life along with body, mind along with life, and soul or self or personal identity as the foundation and fulfillment of these.[7]

This humanistic relativism is developed along the naturalistic lines that it is man as a whole living organism which provides the structure to experience. It is not just the structure of the mind which shapes experience, as Kant had maintained. Nor is the relation of mind to body to be conceived as the relation of Siamese twins attached at one mysterious place, as Descartes had done. Rather it is the "psychophysical" whole, the organic unity of distinct functions, which determines what we sense, how we interpret what we sense, how we respond and act, and so on.[8] Alexander firmly believed that by examining these psychophysical structures and functions we would find those "naturalistic categories," or ultimate genera of human activities, that render experience intelligible. This does not mean that we *must* examine the minutia of the nervous system before we can understand experience. Rather, it is the structure of our body and of our conscious life *as we experience it*, that gives us the key metaphors of the world's intelligibility.

Thus, based upon the initial tenet that man is the measure, Alexander maintains that all meaning, intelligibility, and significance are expressed as metaphor, and the source of all metaphor is the psychophysical structure and functioning of the human orgainism.[9] This leads us to the theme of symbolism. A symbol is that which has meaning or significance because it acts as a mediator or surrogate of something to a subject. It is at once representational and relational: it is a *συμβολή*, a coming together, an engaging. While it mediates between subject and object, it also connects them. Our understanding is essentially symbolic because its fundamental concepts are abstracted from those vital roots or core structures that are the general modes in which we relate to the world, hence "vital symbols." Our vital functions are activities of relating. Thus our experience itself is "symbolic" of the larger reality, without being "unreal" itself, as Bradley had said. Our eyes respond to a limited range of the light-wave spectrum, though any spectograph shows that there are vast ranges of unsensed ultraviolet rays, x-rays, cosmic rays, etc., extending in one direction, and radio waves and electrical waves extending in another. But this does not make our range any the less real. We are not "cut off" from an external reality, but are dynamically related to nature; we have a true, though limited, insight into the world.

Beyond the merely biological and psychological functions of human beings, we must recognize the realm of human ideals. Indeed, if we are to respect human experience *as it is experienced*, we must affirm that the

elements of our conscious life, the aesthetic, moral, social, and religious aspects of experience, predominate over our visceral organic functions. It is in this sense that Alexander is rightly classified as an Idealist. All organisms to survive must exhibit some form of selective behavior; they must, as it were, abstract the significant aspects from experience and respond to them. Therefore the ground of ideals is present in the least organic behavior. For Alexander, as for James and Dewey, to ascertain the significance of something is also to provide a ground for action.

> The reality of things is their significance and the being of significance is promise. Our very perceptions are biases; and what we name "facts" are but situations seized and defined with reference to some perceptual interest.... No activity is possible without the exercise of selective power, and selection is the beginning of idealization.[10]

As James said, "the mind is at every stage a theatre of simultaneous possibilities,"[11] but selectivity among these possibilities, according to Alexander, must ultimately be due to which ideals govern choice. Ideals form the ultimate teleological and entelechal direction of human life; and therefore, as ultimate goals, give life its fullest significance. In man, the presence of moral, religious, and philosophical ideals constitutes a fundamental primary domain of selectivity in conscious experience.

In summarizing Alexander's position, I have noted that metaphysical explanation must be founded upon experience, but this experience must be construed in terms of our *lived* experience. In cosmic terms, given that the world described in the new physics is an event rather than a "stuff," we must read nature in terms of our own lives if it is to be meaningful. Human life as goal-oriented action is basically dramatic, striving for attainment of ideals. In viewing the great processes of nature, in astrophysical and galactic evolution as well as biological, we opt for "drama" as the "cosmic category."[12] With Whitehead,[13] Alexander believed that nature is evolving toward progressive "disembodiment." This does not mean that nature will or can abandon its "physical pole." By "disembodiment" or "spiritual" Alexander refers to the ability of organically founded consciousness to surmount the sensory here and now. Thus, memory and foresight, imagination, conceptual thinking, and ideals are factual instances of disembodiment.

Given the conceptions of a dynamic, man-shaped experience, and of nature as a creative process, Alexander believed that it is necessary to dispense with the old systems of categories, such as those of Aristotle and Kant. They are too abstract, rationalistic, and static; they can only set the stage for the drama of man and nature, so to speak.

> But for such an end, the old categories cannot suffice, and we must rid ourselves of their tyrannous prepossessions. The abstraction which is in

> number gives structure to science. The abstraction which is in logic gives structure to conceptualism. But neither of these is capable of giving more than the setting of a scene; they have to do with properties of the world rather than with its moving image.... Truly to open our minds to this, truly to *see into* the world's huge deed, we must pass beyond the categories of number and logic, and discover some more profoundly native mode of understanding.[14]

Logic and its categories need to have a naturalistic foundation. In other words, those fundamental modes or ways in which experience is given structure, relation, and meaning, that is, logic, must be correlated with the fundamental modes in which the psychophysical organism interacts with and thereby is aware of its environment.

> The idea is essentially to found a *naturalistic logic*, conceiving this from the point of view of human nature of course—an extension of the *homo mensura* of Protagoras. We think in terms of our *experience*,—which is most intimately our experience of our *embodied selves*—ourselves here on earth, in just this day and age, with just this equipment of sense-organs, motives, and possible actions. Can we find a *fundamental order* in these which will give us a humanly embodied *reason*, a rationality born of our own modes of life? This I should answer in the affirmative (subject to all the conditions that go with the relativity of our life and humankind); and I would further state that in my judgment all that has been found convincing in reason and in science is due to the fact that it has covertly relied upon *symbols drawn directly from our psychophysical life*, i.e., vital symbols.[15]

Let us turn then to the theory of of Vital Symbolism itself. Vital Symbolism is a mode of Intelligence, that is, of action-directed behavior in which the organism relates to its environment and renders that environment meaningful. More explicitly, Vital Symbolism is that mode of Intelligence in which experience becomes *consciously* meaningful, and the modes in which Vital Symbolism articulates meaning will be the "naturalistic categories." But Vital Symbolism is not the only mode of Intelligence. Alexander describes five basic levels, some uniquely human, some common to all sentient creatures. In human experience all five modes are organically present in *an* experience. "With the vital moment in view, neither object nor subject is present, but only the whole fact of perceived significance, which can be nothing less than our whole organic, human, being-in-that-moment."[16] However, this significance is only self-consciously meaningful, and thereby communicable, on the level of Vital Symbolism.

The five levels of Intelligence are (1) the level of Consciousness, (2) the level of Reason or Structure-Sense, (3) the level of Imagination or Architectonic Ideas, (4) the level of Vital Symbolism, and (5) the level of Cultural Tradition. The level of Consciousness "embraces any grade of feeling, percipience, or self-apparent experience. It is 'sense' in the most generalized meaning of this term."[17] The level of Reason gives awareness

of structure in objects, events, or ideas. It is basically pragmatic or problem-solving in nature, and it implies an ability for analytical selectivity of certain facets of experience as well as a capability of synthetic applicability of modes of behavior to a variety of instances. It may function consciously, as in man, or instinctively, as demonstrated in the migratory and nest-building habits of animals.

The level of Imagination is the first level to differentiate man (as far as we know or can guess). It is the "mind's power of vicarious composition of experience, whether in the form of fantasy or ideas, whether sentimentally vital or logically abstract."[18] The selection of all conceptual schemata, such as sets of axioms, assumptions of postulates and hypotheses, are fundamentally imaginative acts. Peirce's "abduction" is a prime example of what is meant here for science. In art, corresponding to selection of sets of hypotheses and experiments by a scientist, there is the selection of dominating artistic ideas, medium, and style by an artist. Imagination is "architectonic" because its acts select the basic rules which govern a creative activity. It, therefore, can manipulate the structure-sense creatively, giving us Riemannian as well as Euclidian geometry, for example.

The level of Vital Symbolism is the level in which Intelligence becomes aware of meaning and significance. While Reason provided a sense of structure and coordinated responses to it, and while Imagination was able to create alternative structures and behavior patterns, Vital Symbolism is awareness of the *meaning* of experience *per se*. Writes Alexander:

> By Vital Symbolism I mean the forms of understanding and of communication. These forms are in the main psychophysical, for the foundations of perhaps all intelligibility and certainly of all communication of thought are to be found in the human organism, structural and functional. . . . It implies the direct relationship of the forms of communication to the anatomy and physiology of our bodies as well as to the composition of our minds. . . .[19]

Meaning is dependent upon relation, and by way of Vital Symbols experience is consciously related to the dominant modes of our functioning as intelligent organisms. The structure and functioning of the organism gives shape and direction to experience on all levels of Intelligence, but on the level of Vital Symbolism these modes are consciously used as means of understanding and discourse. Vital Symbols are possible as means of discourse because in so far as all men share the same psychophysical structure in the same environment, so will their modes of Intelligence be shared. Moreover, logic itself achieves expression on this level:

> Every great domain of human intellectual enterprise, whether art or science, derives its order, and therefore its intelligibility, from a restricted set of forms of thought chosen by abstraction and developed as the frames or modes of the symbolic content by which the art or science exposits its truth—truth being in each case just the aptness or intelligibility of the symbolism. This is the great

> functional background of human intelligence, and an exposition of its principles might be regarded as the organic logic of human nature, itself parent and form for all the individual logics of the individual sciences and arts.[20]

The fifth level of Intelligence is that of the Cultural Tradition. "While the Vital Symbols characterize what is universally human in our natures, the directions which they give to expression vary continously with race and time. The symbolic modes prescribe the conditions of intelligibility but not the intelligible substance."[21] In so far as Imagination opts for this or that mode of expression, and this or that sort of conception, so do these modes get worked into a social and cultural tradition—for man is as much a social being and product of a social environment as he is an organic being and product of an organic environment. But in all these diverse manifestations of culture, the meaning and significance of these expressions derives from the universal background of Vital Symbolism. It is because of this that men are able to understand and appreciate the cultures of alien peoples.

Thus, sentiency and structure-sense are common to all organisms to some degree, their forms varying as the structure of the organism and its environment vary. In man there is the added feature of imagination which adds creativity to the structure-sense, providing the basis for creative behavior. But man is also a creature of *logos*, of meaningful discourse. Through his general functions which shape experience, man finds meaning in the world, he can communicate it to his fellow creatures, and he can develop societies and cultures. The "naturalistic logic" functions on all levels of behavior, for it becomes a means of discourse and understanding on the level of Vital Symbolism. Thus our lived experience is the key for understanding all human endeavor, "so that the work of the psychologist should be fundamental in formulating the logic of every science and of every art. . . . psychology should be concerned primarily with neither *psyche* nor *soma*, but with *physis*. . . . 'psychophysiology' might be the true name of the science. . . ."[22] Indeed, the work of Jean Piaget is an admirable illustration of this.

What exactly are these fundamental categories or psychophysical "roots"? How do they mold experience and how are they manifested as Vital Symbols? Alexander worked on this subject throughout his life, yet at his death there was lacking any comprehensive account. He had, however, tentatively proposed a list of seven psychophysical roots, i.e., structure-giving functions from which our "tropes" or figures of speech and understanding derive. These are (1) the skeletal, basically giving our sense of space, (2) the kinaesthetic or muscular activity, giving sense of motion, force, mass, etc., (3) the visceral and organic, giving sense of time (*durée*), desire, drive, etc., (4) the sensory, that is, our five basic senses,

giving rise to our understanding of quality, degree, contraries, etc., (5) the human growth cycle from birth to death, giving rise to such concepts as generation and death, development, metamorphosis, etc., (6) the sexual, giving rise to conceptions of gender, reciprocity, creation, etc., and (7) the "metaesthetic," or higher functions of thinking, communicating, having moral, social, and aesthetic feelings, and religious experience. This is not to say that any one concept is *solely* or *simply* derived from any one source or root: all functions are organically related and together generate experience. However, some sources may predominate over others in generating certain aspects of each concept. Thus, for example, time in its more formal aspect, i.e., mathematical time, is associated with the muscular and skeletal tropes, because number and measure largely derive from the structured body measuring the world (e.g., in terms of "foot," "pace," etc.). Time in its more vital or "lived" dimension is largely derived from the rhythms of the visceral functions, such as respiration and pulsation. Lived time does not remain evenly measured but speeds up or slows down with the rate of metabolic functioning. The rapid metabolisms of childhood or of a fever make time seem to pass slowly; conversely, the slower metabolic rates shorten time—as we grow older time itself speeds up.

Man's body and life are the cosmic metres. Our mathematical abstractions cannot escape their organic origin without losing all intelligibility. "What I propose to say in all this," writes Alexander, "is that the *rhythmic functioning of the body creates thing sense and also that it creates time*, both as form and as dimension. . . ."[23] Space derives its dimensionality from the upright skeleton, giving a uniquely human three-dimensional world: on the horizontal plane there are four directions of front-before, back-behind, and right and left-hand sides. On the vertical plane our upright stature gives us up, down, and the intersection of the vertical and the horizontal, the here. The quartering of the world is an ancient and universal feature of human culture, as is the sense of an upper and a lower world in addition to this one. These are but the mythic articulations of a natural human experience.

The full impact of the degree to which our human embodiment shapes our world is perhaps best illustrated by attempting to imagine what the world would be like for an intelligent millipede or jellyfish. For each of these, there would be a different world of space and time. All experience is relational and relative. But this is not to say that all experience is totally subjective, that reality is beyond our reach. Though our mode of experience is cast in terms that only humans will understand fully, we are nevertheless "relating" between the world and ourselves. In other words, we are in touch with a real world which manifests itself in a certain manner because *we* are in relation to it. Were another kind of creature in relation

to it, it might manifest different traits. As Alexander said: "The truth and beauty which men perceive is genuine, even if relative; it holds good for our part of Nature at all events. I think that it is absurd to maintain that our part is the whole, even in form; but I do not therefore question its validity as a part."[24] Our experience is symbolic, for just as a symbol mediates, relates, and renders intelligible, so our experience is a symbol of nature, phrased in human terms. As with all symbols, it limits as well as liberates, pointing beyond itself to a greater meaning, but anchoring us in its particular expression.

The theory of Vital Symbolism, as well as other equally central doctrines of Alexander's thought would require much more space for explication. His theory of meaning, while having much in common with the theories of such dominant figures in American philosophy as Peirce, Mead, James, and Dewey, diverges from them on the whole. For instance, Alexander would agree with Mead that the possibility for meaning as a social phenomenon depends upon a common human nature which allows us to sympathize successfully with each other, and that this meaning is largely read in the language of bodily gesture and metaphor. But for Alexander meaning is not merely social behavioral response; it arises in man's relation to nature as a whole wherein nature's meaning is read in human terms. We humanly identify with nature, as it were, if we indeed seek to comprehend it. For Peirce and Dewey, meaning arises from an interaction of organism and environment in which certain actions lead to consequences; meaning is the network of consequences arising from the activity of the organism in nature. While Alexander would largely agree with this, he would stipulate that these relations are given basic structures by the modes of functioning, mental and physical, and these structures are expressed metaphorically in communication. Moreover, meaning for Alexander is ultimately an issue of *values* as well as of mere formal relations. The values and ideals of mankind do not lead to a Jamesian will to believe, isolated from fact or experience. Values and ideals are ultimate facts of human existence, and in so far as we interpret nature by our own lives, where nature is not meaningless chaos, it is value, evil as well as good.

Though much critical and expository work remains, nevertheless I think there is an inescapable element of truth in this account of meaning. Meaning cannot be limited to a grammarian's game of "analytic" and "synthetic" statements. Nor is meaning to be sought from the esoteric and complex regions of metaphysical speculation without a human basis. Meaning is a human product, selected, shaped, and shared by all men. But man is more than bone and muscle. Meaning is ultimately part of our living intelligence, and is possible because we are able to find significance and value in our experience, be it sensory, aesthetic, moral, or religious experience. It was the hope of Hartley Burr Alexander that by recognizing our

common humanity beneath our cultural diversity we would find a bond and a respect for other peoples and cultures. This would be no passive appreciation, moreover, but would be a call for the renewal of the striving for those ideals which give the greatest meaning to human life.

NOTES

[1] Cf. H. B. Alexander, *The World's Rim* (Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1953), p. 232: "Yet in the examination of American Indian rituals there repeatedly comes to mind, as it more than once recurs in the letters of the early missionaries, that phrase of Tertullian's which best summarizes the universality of nature's inner teachings: *Exclamant vocem naturaliter Christianam.*"

[2] Cf. ibid., pp. 230-231: "underlying the cosmogonies is almost universally the theory of an experimental creation of life, or, as we should say, an evolution. Only the Indian demands that this evolution be motivated by a moral end."

[3] W. H. Werkmeister, *A History of Philosophical Ideas in America* (New York: Ronald Press, 1949), pp. 307-316.

[4] H. B. Alexander, *The Problem of Metaphysics and the Meaning of Metaphysical Explanation* (Columbia Univ. Press, 1902), p. 44.

[5] Ibid., p. 129.

[6] Cf. H. B. Alexander, "The Socratic Bergson," in *Nature and Human Nature* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Co., 1929), pp. 301-318.

[7] H. B. Alexander, *God and Man's Destiny* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1936), pp. 153-154.

[8] "Psychophysical" here is quite analogous to Dewey's use of the term. Cf. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (New York: Dover, 1958), pp. 254-255: "If we identify . . . the physical with the inanimate, we need another word to denote the activity of organisms as such. Psycho-physical is an appropriate term. . . ."

[9] Cf. Alexander, *Nature and Human Nature*, p. 6: "all expression is metaphor, and the core of all metaphors is in the body and soul of man." Compare with William James, *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Dover, 1950), Vol. I, p. 471, where James says that the only thoughts that could resemble their objects are sensations, the stuff of all other thoughts being symbolic.

[10] Alexander, *Nature and Human Nature*, p. 72. Cf. James, *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. I, p. 284: "what are our very senses themselves but organs of selection?" and p. 287: "Reasoning is but another form of the selectivity of mind."

[11] James, *Principles of Psychology*, Vol. I, p. 288.

[12] Cf. Alexander, *God and Man's Destiny*, p. 35: "The theory of relativity does for us then one very valuable thing. It puts the *Physis* back into the class of thinkable worlds . . . and therefore it makes the World conceivable as *an Action*; . . . [it] now becomes not a *thing*, but a *deed*. . . . Thereunto the quantum theory appears to add another important asset, namely, the possibility of re-introducing the idea of *causality* in the only sense in which causality may be significant, which is *dramatic causality*." Also p. 45: "That [our mode of understanding the world] must have form . . . this I concede. But I would ask that this form be the most comprehensive and vital of all the ideal modes that we may know; and that most comprehensive of forms I hold to be the dramatic. It is for this reason that I have named *Drama* as the cosmic category."

[13] Cf. A. N. Whitehead, *Religion in the Making* (New York: Meridian, 1960), p. 153: "The universe shows us two aspects: on one side it is physically wasting, on the other side it is spiritually ascending."

[14] Alexander, *God and Man's Destiny*, p. 44.

[15] From one of Alexander's unpublished notes.

[16] From an unpublished essay entitled "Vital Symbolism," p. 13.

[17] From an unpublished essay entitled "Living Mind," p. 5.

[18] Ibid., p. 8.

[19] Ibid., p. 9.

[20] Ibid., p. 10.

[21] Loc. cit.

[22] "Vital Symbolism," p. 6.

[23] Ibid., p. 18.

[24] Alexander, *Nature and Human Nature*, p. 210.

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