
ALEXANDER, Hartley Burr (1873–1939)

Hartley Burr Alexander was born on 9 April 1873 in Lincoln, Nebraska. His mother Abby died when he was very young; his father George Sherman Alexander, a Methodist minister, later operated a newspaper in Syracuse, Nebraska, where Hartley was raised. He received his BA from the University of Nebraska in 1897. After some graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania studying with William R. NEWBOLD, Alexander transferred to Columbia University, where he received his PhD in philosophy in 1901. His dissertation was titled "The Problem of Metaphysics and the Meaning of Metaphysical Explanation: An Essay in Definitions." Finding no teaching position, Alexander moved to Boston and was an editor on dictionaries and encyclopedias with the Merriam publishing company from 1903 to 1908. During that time he continued to write, publishing some philosophy articles, his dissertation in 1902, and *Poetry and the Individual* in 1906.

In 1908 Alexander accepted the chair of the philosophy department at the University of Nebraska and held that position until 1927, when he was hired as professor of philosophy to establish the philosophy department at the newly founded Scripps College in Claremont, California. He also occasionally taught at the University of Southern California. Alexander was head of the Scripps philosophy department from 1927 until his death on 27 July 1939 in Claremont, California. His son, Hubert Griggs Alexander, became a professor of

philosophy at the University of New Mexico, and his grandson Thomas M. Alexander is a professor of philosophy at Southern Illinois University.

Alexander was highly respected among his philosophy colleagues in both America and Europe. Along with James H. TUFTS, Alexander has the unusual distinction of being elected to the presidency of all three divisions of the American Philosophical Association: the Western Philosophical Association in 1917–18; the American Philosophical Association (now Eastern Division) in 1918–19; and the Pacific Division in 1929–30. Alexander was invited to lecture at the Sorbonne in Paris in 1905 and again in 1925, when he was awarded with France's Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur. Alexander also received Columbia University's Butler Medal in 1917, was made an honorary member of the American Institute of Architects, and was an active member of archaeological and art organizations. At the 1939 commencement, the University of Nebraska awarded him the honorary D.Litt. degree.

Alexander was a prolific writer and lecturer, and was said to understand humanity completely. He worked on philosophy, religion and mythology, anthropology, poetry, and the interpretation of symbols. He focused on North American Indian art, lore, mythology, and philosophy. Alexander was the first non-Indian philosopher to seriously study and publish on North American Indian art, mythology, and philosophy. During his university career he also wrote several books and many essays on metaphysics, religion, ethics, social and political theory, and education.

Early in Alexander's career, he decided on the foundations of his philosophy: metaphysics and all fields of knowledge are ultimately grounded in human experience, which must be philosophically ultimate yet mediated by culture. Unlike idealism, which wrongly equates consciousness with experience, Alexander's view sets individual consciousness within the wider setting of human experience of the world, so that reality is always reality-for-us, and the sig-

nificance of our intellectual achievements is measured by their ability to satisfy our purposes. In a way similar to John DEWEY's empirical pragmatism, Alexander rejected both absolute idealism and materialism as excessively rationalist, and rescued values from epiphenomenal status by locating them in the experienced world, instead of private consciousness. Alexander's "moral idealism" turns philosophy away from its alliance with the quest of physics to discover the ultimate unchanging quality, towards the dynamic drama of life. In his "Drama as a Cosmic Category" (1930) he asserts the Drama is the ultimate mode of explanation.

Alexander's philosophy was anthropological, ethnological, and symbolic. Alexander explored the multifaceted complexities of reality made manifest in the symbols of our basic belief systems. Therefore, the arts and religions of all cultures connect us to reality just as much as "objective" science, yielding for Alexander a profound ability to deeply sympathize with and understand many other cultures. Alexander's own broadly Christian religious faith, as he describes in "Apologia Pro Fide" (1920), is grounded in a fundamental moral dualism of good and evil, and a promise of salvation. His last two books, *Truth and the Faith: An Interpretation of Christianity* (1929) and *God and Man's Destiny: Inquiries into the Metaphysical Foundations of Faith* (1936), develop a philosophical theology defending basic Christian creeds and values.

Alexander applied his philosophy in his collaboration with the principal architect on the Nebraska State Capitol building. Alexander's philosophical ideals and study of mythology are evident in his choice of decorative schemes and inscriptions. His inscription over the main entrance of the Capitol declares, "The Salvation of the State is Watchfulness of the Citizen." The success of this work brought him commissions to help design other notable structures, including the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha, the Oregon State Capitol, the Rockefeller Center in New York, and the Los Angeles Public Library.

Alexander explored democracy in several interesting philosophical works. His writings during World War I, collected in *Liberty and Democracy, and Other Essays in War-time* (1918), represent both his support for the war, and his dismay at the downfall of traditional democracy, as America discovered the hollowness of romanticized laissez-faire freedom and Europe reinvented the tyrannical machinery of state-worship. Alexander suggests a conception of freedom as rational control of one's abilities. Such freedom will foster genuine individualism, with only sympathetic understanding to hold individuals together. The solution to the problem of maintaining a spiritual community is art, decided Alexander in "Art and the Democracy" (1918), since it is art's function to energize and sustain the common symbols of both religion and politics.

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