Review essay: *The Essential Dewey.*

The *Essential Dewey*, volumes 1 & 2, edited by Larry Hickman and Thomas Alexander, have now been available for two years, which provides ample time to reflect on their contents and organization relative to other works in the field and the needs of today's students, scholars, and other interested parties. I intend in this brief review to compose just such a reflection. It is easy enough to note that no other anthology of John Dewey's own writings is as expansive as this two-volume collection. However, it is still a good exercise to ask three important questions: (1) How do these collections compare with other volumes, and thus what value do they serve? (2) What omissions from the collection may be lamentable? (3) What might be done in future publications of Dewey's writings?

In answering these three questions, I must note that this approach entails my need to avoid direct commentary on Dewey's own work (commentary that has been and is still being done by many others in the field), instead focusing primarily on editorial choices and marketability.

**Comparison & Value**

Setting aside what might be called the "ultimate collection" of Dewey's writings, *The Collected Works of John Dewey* in 37 volumes (SIU Press), several anthologies of Dewey's writings exist in publication and a few others are still available through used and out-of-print dealers. Still in-print are such collections as John McDermott's two volumes, *The Philosophy of John Dewey* (U of Chicago Press), James Gunlock's, *The Moral Writings of John Dewey* (Prometheus), R. Archambault's, *John Dewey on Education* (U of Chicago Press), Morris/Shapiro's, *The Political Writings* (Hackett), and one volume collected by Dewey himself, *The Influence of Darwinism on Philosophy & Other Essays* (Prometheus & forthcoming by SIU Press). Of those no longer in print, the most well known are probably two volumes by J. Ratner, *Intelligence in the Modern World* (Modern Library) and *Philosophy, Psychology and Social Practice*, as well as Richard Bernstein's *On Experience, Nature and Freedom* (Bobbs-Merrill), and Dewey's own collections, *Essays in Experimental Logic* (U of Chicago Press, Dover, and forthcoming SIU Press), *Philosophy and Civilization* (Minton and Capricorn), and *Problems of Men*. However, having produced such a list, it seems only fair to compare apples to apples, as it were. This means that, depending on need; we are seemingly left with only the McDermott as a viable option (I will consider the first Ratner collection as not viable precisely because it is no longer in print).
Quickly noticed, McDermott's collection (though originally published in two separate volumes) has a decided advantage over Hickman/Alexander in size—both page length and dimensional volume. For the professor looking to assign Dewey in his/her class, this is not an unimportant consideration given that students often balk at large texts. However, there is clearly no rule that forces the purchase of both volumes, which means that depending on the needed emphasis, either volume 1 or 2 might be enough.

Of course, for many breadth and depth, rather than physical size, are probably more important considerations. In this respect, no other collection matches the Hickman/Alexander volumes. Although the McDermott has long been (rightly, I believe—it was the first Dewey I ever read) the standard with its 44, well organized selections on experience in all its many facets, the availability of the entire critical edition of Dewey's work a generous publisher at Indiana Univ. Press allowed Hickman/Alexander to put together 85 articles and chapters from Dewey's immense corpus, and they have done so (like McDermott before them) without having to resort to editing down the pieces (this was a truly frustrating problem with the Ratner volume).

To the extent that Hickman/Alexander attempt to organize their survey of Dewey's writings into such categories as "Pragmatism, Education, Democracy" in volume 1 and "Ethics, Logic, Psychology" in volume 2, other collections of Dewey's writings come into play; and it may behoove us to mark the success or failure of the Hickman/Alexander collections in any particular subject matter.

The foci in Volume 1 of The Essential Dewey, "Pragmatism, Education, Democracy," may best be compared with the Morris/Shapiro (soci-political) and Archambault (education) collections. Of course, there should be no comparison as two books should be capable of capturing their respective aspects of Dewey's work better than one. But herein lies the value of the Hickman/Alexander editions: Connecting issues of reconstruction and metaphysics with pedagogy and political theory helps illustrate the important philosophical integration of these issues that Dewey himself was constantly highlighting. Analogously, a similar argument can be made for the triumvirate in volume 2, "Ethics, Logic, Psychology." For example, clearly Gouinlock's anthology of Dewey's writings on morality and Ratner's now hard to find group of psychology articles better this new work if each of these aspects of Dewey's thought is taken in isolation from the other; however, Hickman/Alexander's choices and organization help us grasp the relationship among Dewey's discussion of habits, conduct, inquiry, and valuation—no small prize to win.
Having made a brief case for the value of the two volumes of *The Essential Dewey*, it is helpful to ask (as it is in any process of selection) what has been left out that might be lamentable. It is a truism that any collection short of a reprint of the entire *Collected Works* must leave many works of value behind. Thus, in no way do I fault Hickman and Alexander for any omissions; on the other hand, a survey of some of those works omitted may be of use for those considering purchase of these books and, for that matter, any considerations of a second edition should that become a possibility. (Of course, an obvious caveat in all of this is that I can only provide my own perspective, which will itself fall under the same concerns stated above.)

One assumption made in these books is that the “essence” (more on this term later) of Dewey is found only after his “turn” from idealism. Thus, the first obvious omissions are works written before 1890 (the year of publication of the highly influential work *The Principles of Psychology* by James) and a total of only four before 1900. One reason that this is important is that it can be argued that that which makes Dewey what he becomes after 1891 must be taken in full sight of where he starts prior to 1891. That is, his “essence,” in good pragmatist fashion, must be historically situated. I take this to be the point of Volume 1, Part 1, “Dewey in Context.” But if we take the record seriously, as Murphey and Flowers point out, Dewey was no great autobiographer. Thus, for example, no matter how marvelous and illuminating Dewey’s essay “Absolutism to Experimentalism” is, it might be better to include also actual early writings. As Ratner explains, “Dewey’s espousal of Hegelianism...undoubtedly left a ‘permanent deposit’ on his mind.”

In this light, works such as “Psychology As Philosophic Method” (1886), “Knowledge As Idealization” (1887), and “How Do Concepts Arise from Percepts?” (1891) may be useful in grounding Dewey’s early idealism while beginning to demonstrate the turn to functionalism and instrumentalism. A particular favorite of mine, sadly omitted, which demonstrates Dewey’s “turn” is “The Theory of Emotion” (1894) in which he does the James/Lange theory one better.

Of course, this idealist (early) phase is only one aspect of Dewey’s career, and the choices of Hickman/Alexander for articles after 1900 are quite extensive. However, wonderful pieces written between 1900-1952 which are unfortunately missing include “Experience and Philosophic Method” and “Existence As Precarious and As Stable,” chapters 1 & 2 from *Experience and Nature*, “Education As Growth” and “The Democratic Conception of Education,” chapters 4 & 7 of *Democracy and Education*, the very long but highly important “Introduction” to *Essays in Experimental Logic*, “Having
an Experience," chapter 3 in Art As Experience, "The Unity of the Human Being" (LW13), the possibly overused "The Construction of Good," chapter 10 from The Quest for Certainty, and "The Analysis of a Complete Act of Thought" from the 1910 edition of How We Think (which I would place side by side with "Analysis of Reflective Thinking" from the 1933 edition that is included already). Also, no matter how much I love the book—and I do so love it, seven pieces from Logic: The Theory of Inquiry may be a bit much when works like Individualism, Old and New, Construction and Criticism, and Theory of Valuation are omitted entirely. Of course, there are many more that others and I could mention, but I leave the above as merely examples of lamentable omissions.

**Future**

It is now left to discuss what might be future considerations for anthologizing Dewey. To this end it must be pointed out that The Essential Dewey is not The Exhaustive Dewey, and selective emphasis allows for a great many more collections to come. Cutting across the corpus at ever changing angles can yield more and fruitful volumes. It may, for example, be a good idea to rethink Ratner’s selections on psychology from Dewey’s early years lengthening the timeline and thus broadening the selections to run throughout Dewey’s career. It may, too, be time to re investigate Dewey’s ethical writings in light of the complete works. Also, I must admit my own disappointment with Archambault’s, John Dewey on Education and Morris/Shapiro’s, The Political Writings, and would, therefore, call for a new look into these areas. But aside from going back to previous collections in specific topics, it might be more important imaginatively to conceive of new ways of collecting Dewey’s writings. One unique slice is suggested by the final section (Part 4) of Volume 2, where Hickman and Alexander offer articles and chapters of Dewey’s interpretations/critiques of other (primarily American) philosophers. More could certainly be done here, but I use this primarily as an example of a novel organization for anthologizing Dewey’s 13,000 pages of publications.

Allow me to mention, before I conclude, one pet peeve that irks me about these new volumes. Why The Essential Dewey? The very idea of essentialism is antithetical to much of Dewey’s own work (for that matter this too bothers me about the two volumes of The Essential Peirce). If by essence it is meant “a flavor or fragrance” (as in “the carnation’s or the orange’s essence”), then I can accept that these works give the “smell” or “taste” of Dewey. Unfortunately, the term ‘essence’ in philosophy rarely admits of this more colloquial sense but instead refers to a kind of Aristotelian ontological substratum, an objective reality at the
"core" of Dewey's own being. Reconstruct this term all you like, and it will, I fear, still carry the "essentialist" definitional baggage with it.

This being said, it is a minor point relative to the great service done here. The Essential Dewey is a marvelous collection of writings, thoughtfully selected and arranged, generously filled to the brim without being unduly burdensome in size (though admittedly some may still balk). We should be thankful for such fine and diligent work.

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