
Review Article

DAVID BEST, *The Rationality of Feeling*,

The Falmer Press, London, 1992, pp.211

David Best's *The Rationality of Feeling* marks the further progress—indeed, in some sense, the culmination - of work Professor Best began with his publication of *Expression in Movement and the Arts* (Lepus Books) and *Feeling and Reason in the Arts* (Allen & Unwin) 1984. This new work marks the latest and most powerful statement of Best's views on a number of matters crucial to Arts Education and, given the arrival, implementation and requirements of National Curricula all over the world, it could not have come at a more opportune time.

- - Professor Best is concerned to expose and refute two "Myths", the continuing prevalence, promulgation and projection of which - not least by members of the Arts Education community themselves - he believes to be severely damaging and potentially fatal to the place and standing of the Arts as indispensable elements in the curricula of educational institutions. The first "myth" Dr Best attacks is that of subjectivism; this is a thesis that takes two forms: (a) the belief that there are some experiences that are purely private and amenable only (presumably by some kind of introspection or direct and privileged self-knowledge) to the one having the experience (this is a manifestation of, and often goes along with, a fierce tenure of some kind of dualism, of which Mind-Body dualism is perhaps the most common); and (b) the belief that value judgments (particularly artistic judgments) are merely expressions of private taste and personal preference-in sum, simply whether one "likes" a work of art (or, come to that, a piece of behavior) or not is held to be sufficient justification for making a judgment about it. The second "myth" is that of "scientism", which we may see as the continued privileging of a form of positivism or verificationism; this view holds that, in contradistinction to the supposedly "soft" of "highly subjective" realms of the arts, morality or religion (the cognitive status of which amounts to little more than expressions of belief or even prejudice, the natural sciences and mathematics are paradigms of neutrality, objectivity and knowledge.

Both Myths are subjected throughout this book to devastating refutation by Best, who in the best philosophical tradition - shows that there are much better, securer and more objective arguments, that can be deployed so as to underpin the case for the arts in education, and urges that these should be embraced and propounded by arts educators, as a way of ensuring that the

curriculum is humanised and made a focus for the educational endeavor of a community concerned to secure its culture and give meaning and value to its life.

Professor Best is concerned to argue from the beginning of his book onwards that "artistic experience is as fully rational, and as fully involves cognition or understanding, as any discipline in the curriculum, including the so-called core areas of the sciences and mathematics". He wishes to "insist that artistic feeling is itself cognitive and open to objective justification."

He maintains that the roots of artistic understanding are our natural responses to and engagement in the arts and related activities. Our natural responses to, actions involved in, and activities of, the arts give sense to the reasons with which we objectify our artistic judgments. The roots of artistic, as of any form of understanding, are to be found in what is involved in a child's learning, in the natural ways of responding and acting which are the preconditions of learning. ACTION lies at the root learning - action which takes place in and inseparably from a social context, and which is an expression of cultural practices. But of course action itself is..... inseparable from feeling, cognition and rationality.

Professor Best's principal target is what he calls the fallacious, mischievous and educationally disastrous doctrine of subjectivism. He argues that a major source of subjectivist assumptions in and about the arts is a misconception regarding the nature of objectivity, knowledge and learning. He develops a powerful version of objectivity and maintains that artistic appreciation, like understanding in any sphere, allows the indefinite but not unlimited possibility of interpretation and of the extension of understanding which gives sense to interpretation and judgment. Knowledge and objectivity of any kind, he shows, rest on underlying conceptual grasp and human judgment. He concedes that artistic appreciation is certainly an individual matter, in that fully to appreciate a work of art one must have experienced and thought about it for oneself. But so far from implying subjectivism, that amounts to a repudiation of subjectivism - for what can thought amount to if it is not thought about the work ?

Best makes the important point that differences of opinion and even debating with oneself about the interpretation and evaluation of what is expressed in a work of art are central to the character of artistic appreciation. He argues that this inevitable and desirable range of individual variations in response, interpretation and evaluation is not incompatible with objectivity, rationality and the possibility of reaching understanding and perhaps agreement. It mistakes the

character of rationality & objectivity to suppose that a separate category of a relativistic kind is necessary for such debates and differences.

His attack on subjectivism and individualism he develops by maintaining that in the arts, language and many other aspects of human life, the possibility of individual development in thought and experience, so far from being restricted by, actually depends upon the learning of the disciplines of objective publicly shared cultural practices. The commonly assumed polarity between freedom to express oneself and the learning of disciplines he claims is completely misconceived and potentially disastrous educationally. Pupil progress in the arts and language depends crucially upon the activities of first class teachers, who are prepared to intervene and give direction. To fail to intervene is to fail to educate.

Best takes this argument further with respect to "creativity". He points out that it is unintelligible to suppose that learning can be achieved without the imposition of any expectation and therefore limitations at all. It follows from this that the notion of being creative in a vacuum is no just impossible; indeed it makes no sense. The very sense of creativity is given by the medium, discipline, and criteria of the relevant subject or activity. Elsewhere Best refers to Martha Graham's dictum that one needs at least five years rigorous training in the discipline to be able to be spontaneous in dance. The same might be said with respect to creativity.

Apart from the powerful and forceful anthropological argument developed in Chapter 2, which underpins the whole case presented in the book, probably the finest, most complex and most convincing argument in the whole of the book is that on "Feeling" put forward in Chapter 8. In an extended essay in the philosophy of mind and language, Best argues, in a passage reminiscent of a point of Strawson's on *Individuals*, that, while a physical body is not the kind of thing that can have feelings, a human being is; so, similarly, while a physical object is not the kind of thing that can express feeling, a work of art is. Best maintains that the feeling is a quality of the art object and that is why a work of art has an expressive quality; in our learning to understand an art form, we are at the same time learning to understand the criteria for the feelings expressed in it.

Best carries the weight of this argument forward to expose the unintelligibility and futility of subjectivist claims that "feeling" and "creativity" must lie there somewhere, behind or embodied in the human being or the work of art; rather he claims feeling is what art necessarily expresses. The intention of the artist cannot be characterised independently of the concept of art. This entails that feeling can be learned, both in the arts and indeed generally. The education of

feeling in the arts, Best avers, consist in giving reasons for, and encouraging people, to recognise for themselves, different conceptions of a work of art. He goes on to make a point about artistic detachment or spontaneous engagement, and avows that the objectivity, the rationality, of artistic experience necessarily involves feeling: artistic responses are rational and cognitive in kind, whether spontaneous and excited or not. With respect to the "Particularity of Feeling", he notes that an appropriate emotional response in the arts is possible only for someone with at least some grasp of the criteria of the particular medium of art. Those criteria constitute the limits of the sense and appropriateness for the possibility of an individual emotional response.

Best uses this point to demonstrate that his argument for the objectivity, rationality and cognitive character of artistic experience and response is not in the least opposed to the idea of spontaneous and individual response: the concept of art, he shows, would be unimaginably impoverished without the wealth of individual differences of insight and sensitivity of response. The final Chapter of the book on "Art and Life" is devoted to showing how the responses we have in life can be heightened and refined by seeing the ways in which feelings are expressed in powerful works of art. Best uses two telling examples to show that the reality of feeling in the arts is inseparable from the possibility of its expression *in the arts* : one is from Lucian Freud ("As far as I am concerned the paint is the person") and the other Wilfred Owen's insistence that it was not that the pity was in the poetry but that the poetry was in the pity. Best comments that a work of art can reveal the character of sincere feelings and in that way give the possibility of deeper and more finely discriminated emotional experience. In that way reasoning in the arts can give a richer possibility of feeling, not only in the arts, but in life.

Best tackles all the major themes in the arts, aesthetics and arts education throughout the book and the above summary only gives a flavour of some of the themes he tackles and the deft, fine-drawn arguments he employs. He works away tirelessly, remorselessly and - to my mind - entirely successfully at major themes in the Arts, language, philosophy and education. Indeed this book could be usefully and appropriately adopted as required reading in courses not only in Arts Departments of higher education institutions, but in Philosophy Departments for their courses in Mind, Language and Aesthetics, and in Education Faculties for their work in Curriculum and its philosophical foundations. The student in any of these would pick it up and read it with fascination and enthusiasm : Best makes his points well - he has a fund of humorous anecdotes to en-liven and sharpen the points he makes; he draws on a rich fund of telling examples from

his own knowledge of and obvious love for the Arts; he is well and widely read on all the major literature in the area and is full of suggestions of further reading; he provides throughout a most useful guide to all the major controversies with which each area he tackles is replete; he proffers a veritable cornucopia of further questions for students to take on in their own study and group seminars; and above all he puts forward his own working out of his case and provides them with suggestions for answers to some of those questions, that gives them an example and exhibition of philosophical argumentation at work, of the very highest class. Best is no negative critic; far from it. He has a powerful counter-thesis of his own to put forward and the driving force of his argumentative power carries his readers along with him to a conclusion so irresistible that what is philosophy has become in itself a work of art compelling the most respectful attention and the highest admiration.

I certainly found myself quite persuaded by the case he makes. Indeed he and others can now read my own recantation. I was certainly one of those - I plead guilty ! who argued quite a few years ago that, for example, (a) an education in the arts was in some sense also an education in morality; (b) that sport was largely an activity to be judged primarily in aesthetic terms; and (c) that an education in at least one of the Arts in a school setting was, to a certain extent, an initiation into the whole aesthetic mode of thinking. Best's fine-drawn arguments and telling examples convince me that, if I was not mistaken in advancing these intriguing theses, then I should at any rate be willing now to subject them to the same kind of rigorous re-appraisal so well exemplified in this splendid volume.

In sum, Dr Best's book makes for one of the best, most sustained and most passionate defences of the role and importance of the Arts in our community's educating institutions at the present time and, for that reason, it should be made required reading for all those who are preparing themselves to teach, make policy and administer it in these fields. But it should also be placed prominently on the desks of all teachers (and not merely those in the Arts) principals of schools, system officials and local and national government authorities and politicians at all levels: a reading of this valuable work would perhaps convince them to give up some previously unexamined (even if long treasured) notions they might have otherwise continued to entertain, and to arm them with much better ones - much more redolent of the positive theses put out in this volume by Professor Best and much more strongly resistant to the kind of refutation of which his book was chosen by the UK Standing Committee on Studies in Education as "the

best book published in the year", for its doughty defence of the arts, philosophy and education it is one of the best books put out in a very long time indeed.

Perhaps one final passage might serve to illustrate the clarity and point of Best's powerful and compelling case :

Both Language and the arts are expressions of conceptions of life and value. The character of the individual thoughts and experiences of individual human beings is determined... by the culture of a community. And by culture I mean that inextricable amalgam of social practices, language and art forms which give man his conception of the meaning and value of life. It is in that highly significant sense that language, art forms, cultural practices actually create the character and identity of human beings. The immense responsibility and rich possibilities of those of us involved in education, at all levels, are clear, daunting and exciting.

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