Review Essay

The Rationality of Feeling. **DAVID BEST.** 1992. The Falmer Press, 4 John St., London WC1N 2ET [U.K.]; The Falmer Press, Taylor & Francis Inc., 1900 Frost Road, Suite 101, Bristol, PA 19007 [USA]. xvii + 211 pp., including bibliography (pp. 204-207); subject and author index (pp. 208-211). Paperback edition, $34.00. ISBN 0-7507-0056-4. Hardback edition, $95.00 ISBN 0-7507-0057-2. **REVIEWER:** Drid Williams.

Although many of *JASHM's* readers are familiar with some of David Best's writing in the articles listed below,

1. Free Expression, or the Teaching of Techniques? *JASHM*. Vol. 2(2): 89-98, 1982,
2. Culture-Consciousness: Understanding the Arts of Other Cultures, *JASHM*, Vol. 4(3): 124-135, 1987,
3. Physical Education is for Human Beings, *JASHM* 6(4): 141-145, 1991,
4. Body Mind, and Sport, *JASHM* Volume 7(4): 201-218, 1993,

his recent book, *The Rationality of Feeling*, deserves special attention.

Someone new to *JASHM*, or not familiar with Best's work generally, has a treat in store for them. Apart from that, a brief introduction may be helpful. Best is Professor of Philosophy, University of Wales, and one of England's most distinguished writers in the philosophy of the arts. He is noted for his work in the performing arts, especially the dance. His books include *Expression in Movement and the Arts*, London: Lepus Books (1974); Philosophy and Human Movement New York: Allen & Unwin (1978) and *Feeling and Reason in the Arts*, New York; Allen & Unwin, (1985).

The Rationality of Feeling was the main prize winner for academic book of the year (1993), an award given by the *Standing Conference of Studies on Education* in Britain. The Chairman of the Book Committee (in his speech presenting the award at the Royal Society of Arts in London), said Best's book was "the most outstanding and original academic book of the year, and indeed for several years". This is especially important, not only because of the prestigious nature of the award, but because it is the first time the award was given for a book on the arts.

The *Rationality of Feeling* is addressed (some might say, unfortunately) to art educators. Because it is, I hope it isn't less likely to be read by those who are not directly involved in teaching the arts. One would also hope that readers will see Best's book as *undiluted philosophy of the arts* -- according to the author, the application to education was incidental (personal communication, November 1995).

However, if the book *isn't* read by people outside the art-education field, it would be a great pity, because his critique of subjectivism (the main topic of the volume) and his exegesis of 'scientism' (pp. 11-14 and Chapter 3) would be of inestimable value to wider audiences.

I was immediately struck, for example, by the fact that art educators surely aren't alone in holding "[T]he common assumption that there is necessarily an opposition between, on the one hand, feeling, creativity and individuality, and on the other hand, cognition and reason" (p. 3). Nor are they unique in believing that "[T]he creation and appreciation of the arts is a matter of subjective feeling, in the sense of a 'direct' 'inner' subjective feeling, 'untainted' by cognition, understanding or rationality" (p.3).

> This is part of the subjectivist Myth of the human mind as consisting in two distinct realms -- the Cognitive/Rational realm, and the Affective/Creative realm. It is of the utmost importance to recognise the manifestations of this Myth, because it is one of the most plausible, yet most damaging, persistent and pervasive, of the various guises of the subjectivist/metaphysical doctrine. Moreover, not only is it disastrous for the educational credentials of the arts, but it expresses a complete distortion of the character of other disciplines, such as the sciences (p. 3).

I was also reminded that *JASHM* has recently enjoyed lively discussions from Best (see 'Body, Mind and Sport', cited above), Varela (*JASHM* 8(1): 43-64, 1994) and Pocock (*JASHM* 8(1): 11-42, 1994) on Dualism, Behaviorism, Objectivism and Positivism, but, we haven't had equal in-depth discussion about Objectivism's counterpart, Subjectivism. *The Rationality of Feeling* changes all that.

In the old positivist formulation, subjectivity was opposed to objectivity in what we now know was a fictional way, by people suffering, I think, from the assumption that if someone was *not* objective, he or she must *be* subjective (or *vice-versa*). Best elsewhere refers to the tendency to polarize ideas into two mutually exclusive spheres "the disease of the dichotomous mind" (see *Body,*

Mind and Sport, 1993: 203). When objectivity ceased commonly to be understood, 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism' arose,[1] deepening an already uncrossable gulf between science and art with regard to what 'knowing' and 'knowledge' amount to.

Where objectivism produces a caricature of the arts by classifying them as non-cognitive experiences suitable for people interested only in their feelings, subjectivism produces an equally ridiculous caricature of scientific knowledge, which, because of the greater political status and prestige of the sciences, is usually less emphasized -- but it is equally calamitous, as Best points out:

> Scientism...is currently one of the most popular shibboleths of our age. Briefly, it consists in the unquestioned assumption that *all* proof must be of an empirical or scientific kind, involving, for instance, experiments, testing, measurements, statistics, sociological surveys etc. Scientism is as much of an unquestionable foundation of thinking about knowledge, for many people, as is subjectivism about the arts for most arts educators. It amounts to the elevation of the methods and procedures of the empirical sciences [and experimental method] to the status of a religious belief. It is as unquestionable an article of faith for many people as his [or her] belief is to a fundamentalist religious believer (1992: 13).

To make matters worse, subjectivist and objectivist standpoints have been tied to a number of prestigious arguments with long histories that locate various aspects and attributes of human knowledge to the left and right hemispheres of the brain. For Best -- and for anyone who has followed the convoluted progress of objectivity's fate since 1942 -- the 'brain argument' is untenable and confused, no matter what form it takes (p. 14). Not only are brain-hemisphere arguments irrelevant, they should be rejected.

> Merely to show that a section of the brain is little-exercised or undeveloped does *not* imply that it should be *more* exercised. What if, for instance, it were shown that to exercise a certain part of the brain increased criminal tendencies? Surely that would be a good reason for not developing it. In short, it is not appeal to supposed functions of the brain, about which most of us know nothing anyway, but the *normal* justification for the *values* of the arts which is required -- that is, for instance, philosophical, artistic, education justification. At the very most, any argument for brain functions will be secondary to that, i.e. if we *already* regard an activity as valuable and it is found to be correlated with a brain function, then we might regard that brain function as worth developing. But it is the previous *philosophical* argument for the value of the activity which is fundamental (pp. 12-13).

Best criticizes "the wildly exaggerated but remarkably prevalent assumption that the only valid kinds of proof or knowledge are those delivered by the sciences" (p. 12). Furthermore,

> It cannot be too strongly emphasised that in rejecting the subjective as unintelligible, one is not committed to the view that the only meaningful questions are scientific. I entirely endorse the scientist's exclusive preoccupation with what can be objectively substantiated or refuted. What I am concerned to point out is that there are questions which, although they are not of the kind which can intelligibly be examined scientifically, are still fully objective. Moreover, it is important to draw attention to the fact that failure to recognise the point may lead to seriously distorted empirical conclusions (p. 14).

To paraphrase Varela (1994), Best is *for* objectivity but *against* objectivism. He is *against* subjectivism because this view confines those who hold it permanently to whatever inner feelings they may have. They cannot get outside their inner feelings and no different understanding or different reasoning can affect those feelings. Consequently, 'true subjectivists', like their counterparts, 'true objectivists' *both misunderstand* the nature of human feeling.

Not only that, in my opinion, the subjectivist/objectivist dichotomy has contributed, perhaps more than anything, to

> [T]he widespread assumption that the arts are forms of entertainment in that *they are mere diversions from the serious concerns of life, from which nothing of any significance can be learned.* It is remarkable that this trivializing conception of the arts should be furthered by many who are concerned with the arts in education (p. 196 - italics supplied).

Among a multitude of doubtful statements about dancing in this regard, this one from anthropological literature is a classic:

> Religion pipes to him [the primitive] and he dances.... So far, however, as he achieves form in giving vent to his feelings, thereby acquiring in like degree self-mastery and self-direction, he does it in order, not of thoughts and words, but of sounds and gestures. Rhythm serves him in lieu of reasoning. His moods respond to cadences rather than to judgments. To put it somewhat broadly and somehwat figuratively, in primitive ritual the tune counts for a great deal more than the words (Marett, 1932: 6-7, cited in Williams 1991: 52).

But, "it takes two to Tango", so to speak. These assumptions are rarely, if ever, roundly and thoroughly criticized *by* dancers and dance educators, who, sad to say, tend to accept these ideas, seeing their art as a rebellion against unfeeling, hostile worlds, or themselves as victims of social injustices which favor the verbal over so-called "non-verbal" forms of expression which they feel they can do nothing about. They rarely examine their own conceptions of meaning in art or in life, thus retreat into the *self-defeating* myth of Subjectivism.

The author answers the question, "How have the arts reached this position in Western societies?" by pointing out that many "wounds" to intellectual regard for the arts "are largely self-inflicted" (p. 1), although he doesn't minimize or excuse objectivist standpoints. In any case, the laying of blame isn't the point. His last paragraph is significant:

> A work of art, and through it a perceptive teacher or critic, can reveal the character of sincere feelings, and give the possibility of deeper and more finely discriminated emotional experience. As Leavis puts it (1952-3, p. 92): 'the superiority can be *demonstrated*'. That is, perceptive reasons can demonstrate the character and quality of the expression of feelings, and thus the character and quality of feelings themselves. In this way reasoning in the arts can give a richer possibility of feeling, not only in the arts, but in life (p. 203).

NOTES

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[1] At any rate, the term 'objectivism' and 'objectivist' arose in the discourse of American scholars who want to make a distinction between objectivity and its major distortion -- the positivist formulation that inevitably characterizes it as subjectivity's opposite -- which is what I mean when I use the word, 'objectivism'.

No one likes 'ist''and 'ism' labels, but there are times when we seem to be forced to use them, therefore, my usage of 'objectivism' in this review might be confusing.

Best uses the word, 'objectivism' simply as another form of objectivity, and 'objectivist' to define someone who advocates objectivity. When I use the word 'objectivist', I reserve it for someone who advocates 'objectivism', which is meant to be understood as *a distortion of objectivity*.

Let me repeat a point made in this review at the bottom of p. 189: as Varela puts it, there are those who are *"for* objectivity, but *against* objectivism" (1994), among them David Best and myself, however, Best doesn't use the words 'objectivism' and 'objectivist' in the specialized way I, Varela and some other scholars do, for example Lakoff and Johnson (1980).

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