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DAVID BEST ON RHYTHM IN MOVEMENT

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SUMMARY

This essay seeks to recover, extend and critique the work of David Best on the concept of Rhythm in Movement, the title of a chapter in his influential book *Philosophy and Human Movement*. Best shows how movement theorists have been confused by the concept of rhythm, and so we investigate some of the theses advanced.

We argue for the following conclusions:

1. The “Rhythm in all Movement” thesis is false, as applied to Movement Rhythm.
2. Cosmic Rhythms and Bodily Rhythms are irrelevant to our study of Movement Rhythm.
3. One useful concept of rhythm is that of the Recurrent Pattern (especially as we have revised and extended it).
4. Another useful concept of rhythm, yet to be fully explored, is that of Unity and Harmony.

Key words: rhythm, David Best, movement

INTRODUCTION

This essay seeks to recover, extend and critique the work of David Best on the concept of Rhythm in Movement, the title of a chapter in his influential book *Philosophy and Human Movement*.

Most people think they know what rhythm in music is, and how rhythm is used in the structure of poetry. Similarly, of course, people often talk about rhythm in movement activities, such as dancing, gymnastics, skating, aerobics and other sport disciplines where movement is performed to music, and the rhythmic elements are evident. But we also speak of rhythm in other sports, such as tennis, skiing, team games and many others, in which the movement of the athlete or team performance is independent of music. We all seem to understand that there is rhythm in there somewhere, even though it is sometimes difficult to say where, and just what, it is.

One of David Best's claims, in relation to what has been written on rhythm in dance, is that "... there reigns such confusion in the use of the term 'rhythm' that all too frequently it is by no means clear what quality or attribute is supposed to be predicated by it" (Best, 1978, p. 39). So, our question is: what is rhythm in movement? Best begins by criticising a range of authors, mainly from the field of dance, who have presented various uses and definitions of the term "rhythm", in order to explain what rhythm is and how it is involved in human movement. Best's tactic is to expose the uselessness or incoherence of a number of popular theses, in order to pave the way for his primary positive suggestion, the Recurrent Pattern thesis.

The "Rhythm in all Movement" thesis

Best's central aim in this chapter is to refute the "Rhythm in all Movement" thesis, and he cites a number of authors who clearly advocate it. For example, he quotes H'Doubler, who says: "Any movement ... has rhythm" (Best, 1978, p. 39), and Mettler, who says: "All movement has rhythm ..." (p. 40). "Rhythm is ... universal. ... No simple movement can be lacking in rhythm ..." (p. 45). And from Meerloo we see the clearest possible example of this thesis: "Everything is rhythm" (p. 46).

However, these statements cannot be tested unless we know how the authors are using the term "rhythm", and they are unclear as to their own usage. They do not say what they think rhythm is. So Best suggests, for the sake of argument, that the central feature of rhythm is a recurring pattern of some sort, and he thinks that this is a minimalist and uncontroversial starting-point. If we accept this simple suggestion for a moment, it becomes clear immediately that none of the above statements can be true, since some movements have a recurrent pattern, and some do not. Walking, for example, often falls into some rhythmical pattern, but many movements do not.

If *all* movement were rhythmical, we would not be able to pick out *some* movements that we wanted to recognise as rhythmical – there would be no need for the term. The explanation of why this is so is given by one reading of the Spinozist dictum *omnis determination est negatio* – a concept is determinate only in virtue of its contrast with other concepts. If all the world were blue, we would not need the word "blue", since there would be no not-blue things to recognise in contrast. Indeed, there would be no need for colour-words at all, because we would have nothing to refer to. If the word "rhythm" is to mean *anything at all*, there must be some movements that are non-rhythmical. Furthermore, if the word "rhythm" is to mean something *important* for students of human movement, we need to be able to distinguish rhythmical movements from those that are not.

If we were to insist that *everything* is rhythm (or is rhythmical), we would lose a distinction that is very important for appraisals of sport and dance, in which we often want to single out some performances from others for praise, as being rhythmical. ("Now he's got into his rhythm!" we say, when someone starts playing really well.) But if nothing could ever be non-rhythmical, it could not be an important feature of movement that it is rhythmical. And if rhythm is something important, then not everything could have it.

We must conclude that the "Rhythm in all Movement" thesis is false and, since not all movements are rhythmical, we stand in need of an account of the concept of rhythm that will enable us to identify rhythm in movement.

The “Cosmic Rhythm” thesis

Some authors are willing to accept the recurring pattern feature as definitional of rhythm, but refer to the “rhythm of the cosmos”, as a way of claiming that there is rhythm in all movement. They claim that all movement must (or should) be rhythmical because the whole universe is based on rhythm. Best (1978) quotes Haskell: “Why should movements be rhythmical? The answer can be found in the universe ...” (p. 45) and North “... all created things are in constant motion ... in ordered, patterned, rhythmical motion ...” (p. 41). Finally, he quotes Meerloo: “Tiny particles inside the atom dance their various orbits in an ultra-microscopic cosmos ... People, too, however quiet and immobile they may appear, are in constant rhythmic movement” (p. 41).

It is this last sentence that most clearly exposes the confusion of the cosmic rhythm thesis. If it is true (which it surely is) that the sub-atomic particles of which our bodies are made are constantly whizzing around, then this will be true of someone who is asleep or awake; active or passive; moving rhythmically or moving non-rhythmically; alive or dead. (Even when we are dead, the “tiny particles inside the atom” continue to dance!) That is to say: cosmic rhythm exists at a different level of reality than the rhythm of human movement. They are two quite different things, and two quite different concepts of rhythm, which we should take care not to confuse. We conclude that the “Cosmic Rhythm” thesis is irrelevant to our concern with the rhythm of movement.

The “Bodily Rhythm” thesis

We might extend this kind of critique as applying also to the “Bodily Rhythm” thesis, which appeals to basic facts of human biology: the heart beats and the lungs breathe rhythmically, and our whole body responds to circadian rhythms (often called our body-clock – a daily cycle of biochemical, physiological, or behavioural processes). This suggests that we are all in a constant state of rhythmic movement – indeed, it is often said that life *is* movement, and the absence of such bodily rhythms is an indication of death.

However, again, if this is true (which it surely is), then this will be true of someone who is asleep or awake; active or passive; moving rhythmically or moving non-rhythmically. That is to say: bodily rhythm exists at a different level of reality than the rhythm of human movement. They are two quite different things, and two quite different concepts of rhythm, which we should take care not to confuse. We conclude that the “Bodily Rhythm” thesis is irrelevant to our concern with the rhythm of movement.

“Movement Rhythm”

Now suppose that a coach wants an athlete to produce a rhythmic performance. Presumably the coach understands that there are some performances that are *not* rhythmic (otherwise there would be nothing for the coach to want). What the coach wants is for the athlete to achieve Movement Rhythm. However, since *any* kind of movement by the athlete (and also, indeed, no movement at all!) would exhibit cosmic and bodily rhythms, movement rhythm must be something quite different from them.

This is Best's point: if it is true that cosmic rhythm and bodily rhythm are present in *all* human movements, then they *cannot* be what the coach is interested in – because the coach is trying to get the athlete to see that only *some* of his movements in performance count as rhythmical ones. The coach is trying to get the athlete to *achieve* a rhythmic quality in his movement, and then to *improve* the rhythmic quality, and then to make his performances *consistently* rhythmical.

The “Recurring Pattern” thesis

As we have said, Best's central, and negative, aim is to refute the “Rhythm in all Movement” thesis, and we think that the above arguments demonstrate that in this aim he is entirely successful. So now, having disposed of unhelpful theses referring to cosmic and bodily rhythms, let us ask the same question again: what is rhythm (in the context of movement)? We now turn to Best's positive account of Movement Rhythm.

Best first develops an account of rhythm which is based on the idea of a “recurring pattern of some sort” as a logically necessary condition (Best, 1978, p. 40). Examples of rhythmic movement would then include such ordinary sequences as walking or running, in which simple stepping movements recur in a regular pattern. One unitary step alone, though, could not be rhythmical, since it does not recur.

We wish to introduce the term “arhythmical” here, by analogy with the term “amoral”. Amoral acts are those that lie outside the sphere in which moral judgments apply, whereas, within the moral sphere, we may judge acts to be either moral or immoral. Arhythmical movements are those that lie outside the sphere in which judgments about rhythm apply, whereas, within that sphere, we may judge movements to be either rhythmical or non-rhythmical.

Taking a movement example: a single (unitary) tap of my forefinger is arhythmical, but four taps of my forefinger might produce either a non-rhythmical series of random taps, or a metrical series of taps (for example, with three equal time-spaces between the four taps). Here we can see that rhythm is not just a matter of the simple recurrence of the unitary tap, but rather of its *metrical* recurrence.

Further, let us say that this metrical recurrence forms a pattern or a motif (a series of four taps followed by a pause), such as I might also produce when I “drum” my four fingers in regular succession – tap tap tap tap. Now, if I repeat this motif a number of times, I produce a rhythm that might be called a “recurring pattern”.

So here we have described two ways of identifying rhythm in movement. We can try to bring out what is at issue here by noticing the ambiguity of the phrase “recurrent pattern”. It could mean either a pattern of recurrences (PoR) or the recurrence of a pattern (RoP). Examples of a PoR are the four-tap motif, or rhythmic walking (remembering that finger-taps and walking steps can also recur non-rhythmically – they are only rhythmical if the recurrences form a pattern, or a motif). Examples of RoP are repeated finger-drumming, dancing the waltz-step or a series of tennis serves. Each of these (on its own) is a pattern, not a rhythm – on Best's account, the pattern needs to recur in order to form a rhythmic pattern.

So we have identified two kinds of recurrence. In the case of walking, it is a single step that recurs. But in the case of a dive, or a golf swing, or a tennis serve, Best says that what

recurs is the whole sequence of movement – the whole dive, or swing, or serve (i. e. the pattern, the motif). The rhythmicity is to be sought in the repetition of the sequence.

However, this does not seem to explain the possible rhythmicity of the sequence of movement itself – of the “internal” rhythmicity of a single tennis serve. This is partly illustrated by the fact that a player rarely plays an identical serve twice in a row (since that would be too predictable). We might want to say that a player’s rhythmic serve is one in which the “internal” rhythm(s) remain of high quality, even when the individual serves themselves are of different kinds. In maintaining rhythm in her serve, the player is trying to produce successive movements in rhythmic fashion, not necessarily trying to reproduce one pattern of serve.

Internal and External Rhythm

Here it will be useful to refer to Best’s own distinction between internal and external rhythms (1978, p. 47). For Best, internal rhythm is exemplified by the metre of a poem, which is intrinsic to the poem, and which carries its own rhythm; whereas external rhythm is exemplified by the recurrence of a pattern (such as a tennis service, or the beats of a waltz-step), which he says does not carry its own internal rhythm, but requires repetition.

Firstly, let us consider the example of poetry and its rhythms. In poetry a syllable is arhythmical, whereas a combination of syllables (a “foot”) may have external rhythm. A foot (for example an iamb – “ti-túm”) might be seen as a “motif” that can recur so as to form a rhythm. The rhythm (say, iambic pentameters – ti-túm ti-túm ti-túm ti-túm ti-túm) might form lines of a poem structured in a certain way (for example, as a sonnet, which has 14 lines, with a certain rhyming configuration). So as well as the metrical rhythm (the repeated pattern of the iamb), the poem also exhibits the internal rhythm of the sonnet form.

Now, let us consider movement examples: rhythmic walking is an example of “external” rhythm, since one single step has no rhythm of its own, and is externally related to the next, and to other subsequent steps. The rhythmic element is not in the step itself, but in the *external relation* of one step to the others. “Internal” rhythm might be exemplified by dance, since what makes the whole dance performance (or part of the performance) a rhythmic one is the internal relation of the component parts to the structured choreography of the dance as a whole (or of part of it). This makes it clear that we do not need to invoke the recurrence of the whole dance (or part of it) in order to account for its rhythmicity, but only the structured recurrence of certain elements within it.

However, this leaves open a third possibility: that a sequence of movement itself might have internal rhythm. On our account, it is only the *elements* of movement that are arhythmical (one beat of the waltz-step, or one element of the tennis serve); once those elements are seen in combination with others, the question of rhythmicity arises. Our question is whether a sequence or a pattern might itself be considered rhythmic, *whether or not that pattern recurs* (RoP).

Best says that a rhythmic tennis serve is one which recurs many times in a game. But we think he is forced into saying this by his adherence to the Recurring Pattern thesis. We would not call a very bad, but frequently recurring, serve a rhythmic one. This is partly

because, although it is possible to perform many different kinds of bad serves (to make many different kinds of errors) it is really quite unusual to do one bad thing repeatedly, since we are always striving towards some standard of performance. That is to say: a rhythmic serve is also a good serve, and a good serve is what we are trying to do repeatedly.

Best's account of rhythm (involving recurrence) requires him say that a rhythmical tennis serve is one that recurs (or at least could recur). Our question is whether there could be a rhythmical tennis serve that happened only once (perhaps because, thereafter, you were injured) – that is to say, whether there is internal rhythm in the tennis serve, *even though there are no recurrent elements in it* (PoR), and *even though it was not repeated* (ROP).

Our answer to this will be that the tennis serve (as one example of a movement sequence) does indeed require internal rhythm for its successful performance. There are several elements making up the serve – throwing the ball up, bringing the racket head back, throwing the racket head at the ball, hitting the ball, following through, etc. – and none of these elements is internally recurrent. However, we do talk of a rhythmic serve, even if we have seen it only once, which suggests that recurrence alone will not explain the internal rhythm.

Our explanation for this will be postponed until we discuss in a following section a second concept of rhythm – Rhythm as Unity and Harmony – that is introduced by Best (p. 45), but inadequately considered.

Simple and Complex Movements

Best's own example of a simple "once-only" movement is that of your diving to your death from a high cliff (1978, p. 41), but, even though you obviously could not personally repeat such a dive, we do not think that this is a satisfactory example. In the case of a step repeated into a walk, a simple unitary element (the step) recurs so as to produce a rhythmic sequence (the walk). A dive, however, might well be seen not as a simple occurrence, but rather as a complex – as a sequence of movements, and not just a simple movement like a step. Consider the difference between a fall and an artistic dive. A fall off the cliff might be seen as a simple and, in any case, non-rhythmic movement; but an artistic dive might consist of a sequence of related elements, and this seems to open up the possibility that they might be rhythmically related, for example as a somersault or a twist repeated. If I wanted to dive to my death in some style, then, rather than just falling like a stone, it looks as though I would have to pay attention to a rhythmical performance.

Best anticipates such an objection, and provides another example of a simple, unrepeatable movement, such as just moving my arm a bit to the left, as an example of a non-rhythmic movement. However, this seems to us to be a clear case of a single, unitary movement and, as such, we would refer to it as arhythmical – i.e. lying outside the sphere to which judgments about rhythm apply, and therefore not an appropriate example.

Back to our case of the dive: does the rhythm here necessarily require "recurrence"? Consider a particular dive – say, a triple forward somersault with tuck, in which the diver tries for a rhythmic recurrence as part of the sequence. The somersault seems to be an internally recurrent element in the dive, which determines the rhythm of the dive.

Consider another example – the triple jump. Here, the coach wants to see and hear the rhythm of the jump – or, rather, the rhythmic sequence of the three jumps. Here, the rhythm of the jump seems to refer to the external relation of the three jumps – the timing and spacing of the three elements that are parts of the jumping phase of the performance (rather like my finger-drumming). Again, rhythm is identified by a recurrent pattern.

Sports Rhythms – Performance Rhythm and Contest Rhythm

We should notice that there are different kinds of recurrent patterns, and therefore different kinds of rhythm, at work in a game like tennis. Imagine a player behind the baseline, hitting a series of forehand ground strokes to the back of the opposing court, with her opponent doing likewise. Here, there are two rhythms in play – one is the personal performance rhythm of each individual player, as the differently “grooved” forehand of each player plays more or less the same shot 10 times in succession; and the other is the mutually produced rhythm of the contest, in which two players exchange 20 ground strokes. Since in each case there is a recurrent pattern, we see both as cases of rhythm, which we could call, respectively, the “performance rhythm” of a player, and the “contest rhythm” of the point.

Of course, we can think of many other ways in which players might exhibit performance rhythm; and many ways in which not only points, but also games, sets and matches might exhibit contest rhythm.

Some objections considered

Metricality

Metricality is raised as an issue because some authors want to assert that there is such a thing as non-metrical rhythm. Preston-Dunlop’s example is that of gesture in dance, which she says can be non-recurrent and yet still rhythmical – a sort of “free” or “non-metrical” rhythm. Best’s challenge is to ask those authors to say just what this “non-metrical rhythm” amounts to, and why we shouldn’t just call such gestures “non-rhythmical”. Best is clear in his mind that such attempts to retain the label of “rhythmic”, even for movements in which there is obviously no rhythm, stem from a commitment to the unjustifiable claim that all movement has rhythm. One major problem for such a claim is that it removes a distinction that is very useful to practitioners, who wish to distinguish rhythmic from non-rhythmic movements in order, for example, to show an athlete how to “groove” a golf shot. But if all movements are rhythmical, there would be no distinction to work with. There would be no point in his *trying to become* rhythmical, if we all already always *are* rhythmical (Best, 1978, p. 48).

“Strict” metricality

Strict metricality is not necessary to establish rhythm. Most music and poetry does not slavishly follow some metrical pattern – rather, the particular rhythm of a particular poem, or line of a poem, is identified *in relation to* some metrical rhythm, in terms of the poem’s variations of it and departures from it.

Audibility and complexity

Audibility is raised as an issue because some see rhythm as essentially musical – but of course there may be inaudible rhythms (recurrent patterns) in other art forms, including dance. Best wants to be clear that his account is not limited to audible recurrence. Complexity is raised as an issue because sometimes there is a rhythm present whose complexity means that it escapes our notice. But just because I can't perceive a rhythm (maybe because I am an ignorant or insensitive perceiver) does not mean that it is absent. Others may be able to point it out to me, so that my levels of appreciation, and perhaps even my perceptual abilities, improve.

Metricality, patterns and structures

Whilst all metre is necessarily a kind of pattern, not all patterns are metrical. Metre applies primarily to auditory patterns or to human movements, as in poetry, music and dance. But art critics claim to see rhythm in paintings, architecture, etc, in which they do not purport to discern metre – so what could rhythm mean in this context? One answer for Best might still lie in the idea of “recurrent pattern” – imagine the recurrent pattern of a set of stairs and successive images of the body in Duchamps' painting “Nu descendant un escalier”. Here, the recurrent patterns in the painting suggest the kind of rhythmic movement of the person walking down the stairs. We might even say that the patterns in the painting are *suggestive* of a metre.

The “Unity and Harmony” thesis

However, there is another concept of rhythm that applies to many art forms, including painting and architecture, that is introduced by Best (1978, p. 45), but inadequately considered. This is the idea of rhythm as unity and harmony – as a “harmonious correlation of parts”. In this sense a rhythmic sporting performance might be one that is “well co-ordinated, smooth-flowing, well-timed, or efficiently and economically directed” (ibid.).

This sense of rhythm precisely describes a good serve, and explains why we feel able to ascribe rhythmicity to such complex sports actions without any requirement of recurrence. Of course, once such an internal rhythm has been achieved, the player will seek to reproduce that pattern (RoP) – and to achieve such an external rhythm is what is required for successful serving.

The reason why Best does not develop this concept of rhythm as applied to human movement is, we think, because his primary focus was on refuting the Rhythm in all Movement thesis. His comments are to the effect that not all movements are harmonious, well co-ordinated, smooth-flowing, well-timed, etc. – and so, if this is what is meant by “rhythmic”, not all movements are rhythmic. In this, of course, we concur – but we nevertheless consider it of the first importance to recognise the Unity and Harmony thesis as a partner to the Recurrent Pattern thesis. It is an idea that requires further investigation, since it promises to provide a strong and powerful tool for the further analysis of rhythm in movement.

CONCLUSION

With Best, we have taken the first steps in understanding the concept of rhythm in movement. We have argued for the following conclusions:

1. The “Rhythm in all Movement” thesis is false, as applied to Movement Rhythm.
2. Cosmic Rhythms and Bodily Rhythms are irrelevant to our study of Movement Rhythm.
3. One useful concept of rhythm is that of the Recurrent Pattern (especially as we have revised and extended it).
4. Another useful concept of rhythm, yet to be fully explored, is that of Unity and Harmony.

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DAVID BEST O RYTMU V POHYBU

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SOUHRN

Článek se snaží interpretovat, kriticky prozkoumat a navázat na práci Davida Besta ohledně pojmu rytmus v pohybu, jež je kapitolou v knize *Philosophy and Human Movement*. Best ukazuje problémy pojmání rytmu některými teoretiky a my zkoumáme jeho teze.

Diskutujeme a navrhuje následující závěry:

1. Teze o rytmu ve veškerém pohybu je neplatná, je-li aplikovaná na pohybový rytmus.
2. Kosmický rytmus a tělesný rytmus je nevhodný pro studium pohybového rytmu.
3. Jedním z užitečných pojmů rytmu je „opakující se vzor“ (zvláště po naší diskusi a prohloubení).
4. Dalším užitečným pojmem rytmu, který je však ještě třeba hlouběji prozkoumat, je jednota a harmonie.

Klíčová slova: rytmus, David Best, pohyb

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