**Aspects of judgement**

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Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck,

And yet methinks I have astronomy […]

Shakespeare; *Sonnet 14* (1595)

**Introduction**

I will not be describing what I think judgement *is*, but will suggest that it matters very much where we get it *from*. Bion, contemplating the need for openness, asked a question[[1]](#footnote-1): “When a mother loves her infant what does she do it *with*?”

I begin by asking a similar question in relation to judgement: When a person, or a group, judges another person or a group, what do they do it *with*? Let me ask you, when you make a judgement, what do *you* do it with? And from where do you get it?

In many situations in which judgement is required, such as a psychotherapeutic encounter, Britton reminds us that “uncertainty is a daily companion, anxiety is high, and needs are pressing”. If we can stay with uncertainties, mysteries and doubts – holding back, as Keats says, from ‘irritably reaching for fact and reason’, and I would add, authority established from above – our best compass is the authority of experience. Until we have gained some confidence, or can find some faith, in judgement based on experience, we are, suggests Britton, quite likely to rely on teachers, manuals or ancestor-worship – which is likely to lead us to overvalued ideas.

Judgement based on experience and its stored images is, in the psychoanalytic sphere, a major function of the ego, in contrast to judgement based on superior authority – which I will be considering later *not* as a function of what is normally considered the super-ego, but of a different kind of internal object altogether. Ronald Britton prefers his judgement to come from experience, however fallible it may turn out to be.

Shakespeare[[2]](#footnote-2) begins his Sonnet 14, with the line: “Not from the stars do I my judgment pluck”, and this in spite of possessing knowledge of astronomy. If not in that direction, to where and what *does* he look for his sense of judgement? Not from above. Not primarily from a relationship to the vertical, the hierarchical; not so much from authority, but from another source, to which I return later.

From where does Shakespeare gather *his* judgement? After six lines concerning oracular judgement founded on prognostication from divine communication, he tells us:

But from thine eyes my knowledge I derive,  
And, constant stars, in them I read such art  
As truth and beauty shall together thrive

His meaning resounds with the (better-known) Sonnet 116 (‘Let me not to the marriage of true minds/ Admit impediments…), where we hear of love as the principal guide to judgement, as though it were the mind’s North Star – “It is the star to every wand’ring bark/ Whose worth’s unknown, although his height/ be taken”. This latter phrase is yet another reference to judgement, in this case the distinction between the quantitative (height) and the qualitative (worth).. It corresponds precisely to the principle of learning expressed in passages of *Love’s Labour’s Lost[[3]](#footnote-3)* and may well have been written around the same time.

Judgement on this basis is not to be sought *above* the human being, but between fellow human beings, eye-to-eye, signifying ’I’ to ‘I’ – in the “I-Thou” relationship as Martin Buber was to put it.

Shakespeare extends this same (lateral) principle to what he calls all the ‘powers and offices’ of the mind, all deriving ultimately from the formative relationship to the eyes and encouraging mind of the mother, which internalise and are in turn internalised by the child.

From women’s eyes this doctrine I derive:  
They sparkle still the right Promethean fire;  
They are the books, the arts, the academes,  
That show, contain, and   
nourish all the world,  
Else none at all in aught   
proves excellent.

But love, first learned in a lady’s eyes,  
Lives not alone immured in the brain,  
But with the motion of all elements,

Courses as swift as thought in every power,  
And gives to every power a double power,  
Above their functions and their offices.

In the verses I mentioned earlier, from Sonnet 14, Shakespeare makes use of the form most suited to making this argument about the source of his judgement, in that he departs from the English sonnet form and uses one that is closer to Petrarch’s Italian structure; it positions the first eight lines in contradiction to the thrust of the final six, a structure well suited to posing an argument – which in this case is: do we find ourselves judging from above, predominantly in the vertical dimension (stars, fate, destiny, divine law, power, be it regal, judicial, or by raw strength) or lateral judging? (*die Einfühlung*, compassionate understanding, relating as the fellow-human being, referred to by Freud in 1895 as the *Nebenmensch*).

The crucial lines have links both to Ovid’s love poems and, as we see, to the ‘this doctrine I derive’ passages in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, at the centre of which there is the same argument, concerning from where is it that we should derive judgement if our aim is insight informed by veracity – the quality that Shakespeare called “the ground of study’s excellence”, and which Bion (following Keats) called the ‘Language of Achievement’.

Why have I chosen to quote these lines from Shakespeare? The two main reasons for beginning with this insight from the dramatist are to prepare the ground to discuss the difference between judgement *by* what we call ‘ego’, and *under* what is variously (and confusingly) discussed in the literatures as ‘Super-ego’, ‘superego’, and “Super” Ego. I will have more to say about this term ‘Super’ later. I argue that it has led to routine misunderstanding.

At the beginning I asked the question: when we use judgement – of a situation, a moment, an action, a motive, another whole human being – what do we do it *with*? I am sure you had your own responses. Perhaps some of you thought: ‘The superego’, or ‘the ego’, or both – depending perhaps on whether morality or moralism was involved in the act of judging. Or again, ‘intuition’, if you might have been considering the fine but unconscious (in the topographical sense) judgements made by the footballer or the gymnast, as each of them moves from reflection to action. For Freud, judgement was one of the five functions of the ego – not, we can note, of the super-ego.

**Judgement**

At its most basic, judgement applies to the question of whether something is *deemed real*. In this sense it comes from an ancient etymology[[4]](#footnote-4) (825 A.D.) related to ‘doom’, of which the term ‘deem’ is a derivative, both pertaining to aspects of the human condition, to that which cannot be prevented or altered much by human beings and is therefore of the ontological.

The psyche governed exclusively by pleasure and pain can live in limitless hallucination – much as Hamlet stated that he could be bounded in his nutshell (skull) and count himself “King of infinite space” (were it not for his dreams) – but, in contrast, reality and the need to make judgements on it constrains us. As Lucretius wrote, it requires “truth-seeking words that set the bounds to lust and terror”.

In psychoanalysis we use a set of inter-related functions, collectively termed ‘ego’, to make judging possible – alongside Freud’s list of ego-functions: predictive *attention*; apperceptive *memory*; requisite *action*; and reflective *thought* (with restraint of action). Freud regarded growth of the ego as an extension of *interest* invested[[5]](#footnote-5) *beyond* *pleasure and pain*, for which only the power to discriminate is essential; but this is not sufficient for judgement, a much more complex process that cannot be automated (unlike attention and memory).

Heidegger critiqued the generalising attitude towards being-in-the-world to which he gave the term ‘*das Man*’, by which he meant a mentality of ‘everydayness’ in which we might easily say, “In such and such a situation, one does this”. Nuanced judgement of a situation, much more than do the other ego-functions, depends on fresh perception and a regard for unique circumstances. The ‘one does this’ attitude supports simple rule-making but neglects evaluation of motive and character, and cannot usefully be applied to the judgement of complex moral dilemmas.

Realistic and truth-seeking judgement of circumstances subverts the dominance of the pleasure-pain principle and prevents the generalising tendency of ‘das Man’ as a defence, *increasing anxiety* as one of the major costs.

Brecht exemplifies this in his dialectical theatre, in which he presents a thesis and an antithesis, placing the audience in the difficult position of having to produce a synthesis out of having been invested in the conflicts of the characters on whose actions and motives they are forming judgement. He makes you think: ‘don’t rise above it, step into it, and look at what factors are causal’. The problem is that specificity in judgement tends to bring a greater degree of anguish and confusion, which is specifically what the defence of ‘the everyday’ protects us from.

At this point, and before moving onto the superego proper, it is worth making a point about the term *moral*. In terms of psychological judgement we tend to take the narrow usage of this term, limiting it to distinctions of right and wrong, good and bad – both closely related to the bounds of the pleasure-pain principle. In the writing of Aristotle in the *Poetics*, and in the dramaturgy of Shakespeare, it is a term with widened meaning relating to the motives of characters under various dramatic conditions. The mind’s object relations are, in one of their dimensions, dramaturgical, and so we should philosophically and psychoanalytically include this widened meaning when we address situations that we regard as ‘moral’ dilemmas. If we do this, the function/ structure named by Freud as *Über-Ich* is the ego’s extension into the realm of assessing consequences and motives in object relations, in the inner and outer worlds. I will have more to say in a moment about the importance of this term *Über*. It has led to misunderstanding.

Ronald Britton notes that in carrying out its function of judgement, the ego has the mental counterpart to a *voice*, with which, under the right conditions, it may speak truth to power – and in doing so, “speak with the authority of the individual’s own experience”. In a book currently being written by DCS and myself, we are interested in discovering to what extent we can further the capacity of the individual to become free to develop and to make use of this, their own-voice, rather than being spoken-over, or even replaced, by an archaic, pre-existent voice, one that, as Britton says, “*claims* authority by virtue of its *position* and its *origins*”.

**Ego, Super-ego, or “Super”- Ego?**

This brings us to a central point that I want to make about judgement and the superego. In psychoanalytic literatures and discussion, something of a ‘standard model’ has stemmed from the combined effect of two elements of the translation into English of what Freud initially introduced as ‘a special function’, an extension of the ego’s functioning based on its ability (when pictured as a ‘structure’) to undergo division (*spaltung*), in which one part of itself was separated off to become placed alongside, or else setting itself above, what remained and also able to treat a part of itself as though it were an ‘object’ and not part of self.

When it appeared to do so in melancholia he called the new formation an ‘*Instanz’*, and in the influential 1917 paper this was translated by Strachey as ‘Critical Agency’ (1917), though its etymology is far richer. Because Freud’s severely melancholic patients attacked themselves and their characters remorselessly, it became inevitable because of this dominant feature of the melancholic that ‘critical’ agency became paired rather narrowly with censorious criticism, rather than the concept that Freud was pursuing with a fainter sketch, a specialised function on behalf of the ego of judging the qualities and meanings of experience.

Etymologically speaking, the word ‘critical’ was first used predominantly for “Given to judging, especially adverse or unfavourable criticism; fault-finding, being censorious”. Later (around 1650[[6]](#footnote-6)) the term was extended to also signify the exercise of careful judgement or observation; nice, exact, accurate, precise, to the point. Actually, ‘to the point’, is one of the several meanings of Freud’s carefully chosen word, *Instanz*, which aside from its judicial meanings can also refer not only to point (*punkt*), but also a significant point in the sky, a ‘star’.

**“*Über*”: Above or beyond?**

Strachey chose the English word “Super” for Freud’s term *Über*. Hence, what we all say nowadays, “Super-Ego” for “*Über-Ich*”. Was this term coded for the intended reading of ‘superior’ in its positional, ‘anatomical’ sense, analogous to the ‘superior vena cava’ and the ‘inferior vena cava’[[7]](#footnote-7), which is saying no more than a relation such as that of ‘anterior’ and ‘posterior’? Or is dominance intended? Just as something important was lost in translation when Freud’s ‘Instanz’ became simply ‘Critical Agency’, the term “Super” chosen by Strachey for Über has real disadvantages.

At the time in which Freud was writing his ideas, the term *Übermensch* was part of the philosophical scene, having been introduced in 1883 by Nietzsche in *Also Sprach Zarathustra*. It is interesting when in a particular historical epoch, a term, like *Über*, begins gathering use across several different disciplines. *Über* was intended by Nietzsche, when used with ‘*mensch’* ( human; person), to signify the requirement for the human being to extend themselves *beyond* their everyday Being by accepting the ‘death of God’.

Nietzsche responded to the void created by the ‘death of God’ concept by calling upon individuals to commit themselves to a Spartan kind of self-invention, to supersede the angst of everyman to recreate themselves with a will to power as what he called the *Übermensch*. A brave new world. Unfortunately the ambiguity of the term “*Über*” with its liability to be taken as the far from ambiguous “Super”, with its connotations of ‘better’ or ‘greater’, led to its appalling misuse.

In translating *Zarathustra*, Thomas Common (1909) had made *Über* into ‘Super’, just as Strachey had with Freud’s term fourteen years later, with Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* becoming ‘Superman’, as in George Bernard Shaw’s 1903 production of *Man and Superman*. But Alexander Tille, the first translator of the work, had rendered *Über* as *beyond* (1896), and it is this usage that in psychoanalysis gives a much more nuanced meaning to the *Über-Ich* of Freud. Taking this perspective gives a functional definition of superego as ego extended beyond its normal capabilities to take account of complex moral situations – in other words, motives.

Hanna Segal was thinking along similar lines when, in a discussion of some work reported by Ronald Britton, she said that ‘superego’, to deserve the name, has really to be a kind of reality-sense in the moral sphere and, crucially, that “*it should not be part of any power structure[[8]](#footnote-8)*”. Of course, if the object carrying such a function is infused with too much hatred for the self, or others, it is ill-suited to a task of judgement. Tellingly, Segal said “It should not tell you what to do – only what is”. The overvalued idea that the superego is what tells us what to do has become a routine stance in clinical practice and psychoanalytic theory and requires revising.

For the question of what to do about a judgement, it is the ego-function of requisite action that is required, informed perhaps by its superego function. On this model, the superego makes a poor master but potentially a good servant. It follows from this line of thinking that the component that best satisfies the requirement for the term *Über* in its lateral (‘beyond’- ego) dimension is *evidence*.

We are not familiar at all with considering the requirement for evidence as an aspect of the superego, but that is because of the many descriptions in psychoanalysis of harsh, cruel, sadistic and oppressive ‘superegos’, because we have become used to thinking of superego as above the self, and not as an extension of it. I will now conclude the paper by indicating what it is in the psyche that both claims and enforces superiority and dominance over the self and all of its objects and capabilities, weakening the own-voice and confidence in it, and all the connections built up in the course of development. I will maintain, in agreement with Segal, that whatever it *is* – we should not confuse it with a superego, even an immature punitive one.

Clinically, it is essential for triangulation to work towards locating the patient’s own voice, the analyst’s voice, and where there is one, that of the ego-destructive object, because it is in such individuals that we need to understand exactly how judgement is usurped, and the manoeuvres and tricks by which the ego is weakened and replaced.

Next I describe this type of colonising object, for which, as Bion said, the name “Super” ego really is appropriate, and which we, in our new book (in preparation) refer to as a godlike object.

**The ego-destructive, god-like object**

Extending the range of the ego into judgement in the realm of moral discrimination and choice can only be achieved in a sane way if it is not ‘hyper-moralism’, executed by a superior being, which is what Segal meant when she said that the superego proper should not be part of any power structure.

The normal infantile superego is a remnant of the primordial indignant wrath against stirrings and tensions from within the psyche like a loud ‘no’ to experience, as though with a voice saying, “Whatever it is, I don’t care, it should not *be*!” This is not pathological, it is a normal part of the development of the superego.

In terms of theory, Hanna Segal has identified something like this “fundamental No!” as stemming originally from the first perception of the death instinct within, that is to say, in response to the origin of anxiety in Klein’s system, which is ontological anxiety, the anxiety of being and non-being.

However, as Bion demonstrated with clinical examples, the radical failure of the container-contained relationship produces a new and highly damaging internal object, actively detrimental to the ego. Bionfirst introduced what he termed the ‘ego-destructive superego’ as an object representing a personification of the ‘minus version’ of the ♀♂ function, forged from the infant’s disastrous discovery that it cannot avail itself of normal projective identification to make contact with the mother, and to have her help in setting bounds to its anxiety,

Experientially it is as though the original container is experienced as though it had said to the infant, “Who do you think I am that you attempt to put yourself into me! I am having nothing to do with *that*, or you!” – a bleak and wordless experience translating into the sense of a wholesale rejection of being, an annihilation of ego.

When it becomes disclosed through analytic work, the ‘will to power’ and deviousness of a god-like object is sobering and frightening, as Bion described in *Learning from Experience*. Here are some of its defining characteristics, all of which are highlighted clearly in the analytic treatment of echoistic individuals.

Firstly, Bion drew attention to a peculiar quality of the ego-destructive object as it manifests in near-psychotic conditions where there has been defective container-contained. Like a deity it seems to have a mysterious quality that he called its “without-ness”. By this he meant that it seemed to the patient limitless, having no external boundary. Like a god, its apparent indefiniteness, refusing to be manifest in a recognisably human form, but making pronouncements with an intimidating voice, contributes to its power.

It has hardly any of the characteristics of the super-ego as understood in psychoanalysis, but having seen this clearly Bion nevertheless persisted for some reason (I have speculated why earlier) in calling it an ‘ego-destructive *superego’*, even though in the same sentence he said it was “super” ego.

Thirdly this type of internal object is, on the subject of morals, utterly hypocritical, which is reminiscent of the tyrannical gods of classical civilisation and the God of the Old Testament. It could easily be mistaken for a superego because it asserts its that it is superior – more powerful and better in every way than the patient’s self, and better than the analyst, ‘achieved’ to its own satisfaction simply by finding and pointing to faults in both, refusing to be scrutinised itself. It represents, said Bion, “an envious assertion of moral superiority without any morals”, and is the “resultant of an envious stripping or denudation of all good and is itself destined to continue the process of stripping”, until it becomes no more than “an empty superiority-inferiority”, a degenerative nihilism.

Fourthly, its most important characteristic, thought Bion, was its radical hatred of any new development in the personality “as if the new development were a rival to be destroyed”. This is important because if its resistance to the analyst’s attempts at encouraging and making use of triangular space. Its destruction of links in the ego, and space for thinking in the analytic relationship, attack all efforts to seek truth. Bion noted how the object sought to crush the ego’s attempts, however immature, to develop a scientific outlook, replacing it with ‘moral’ certainty and supremacy.

This is a necessarily condensed sketch, but the general outline will be clear. Clinical work in this area shows us that not everything that is ‘in’ us is ‘of us’, a principle that for me has come to have significance on a daily basis.

In the most extreme situations the object takes on the persona of an internal god-like object masquerading as both ego and superego, usurping all its functions and bringing the personality into ruin. Especially clear in echoistic patients who have undergone forced-introjection of narcissistic omnipotent parents or partners, a god-like object makes covert denuding attacks on meaning and learning whilst managing to occupy a pseudo-supportive executive role in the personality. Perhaps it is this ability to act the part of a superego that results in the patient becoming confused and therefore weakened, and it may go some way to accounting for the confusion in our field, evident in the muddled terminology.

It is often hard to tell if the deep undoings of the personality and its object relations is the ultimate aim of the ego-destructive object, or whether the subversion is what is necessary before it can rule tyrannically over the mind with vicious and narrow-minded religious moralism. There is much more to be discovered in this area. In our book, “*Encounters with god-like objects: The mind’s voices*”, we return to Bion’s keen-edged descriptions because they show in the clearest possible way the internalised object posing the gravest and most dangerous threat to sane human judgement, including the judgement of its own functioning.

To reduce any confusion between the different terms used for these phenomena, and to mark the distinctive operation of this specific kind of object in the realm of judgement, we note the underlying commonalities in descriptions such as Fairbairn’s ‘internal saboteur’ (1944), Leslie Sohn’s ‘Identificate’ (1985), Ron Britton’s mention of an ‘Ego-Alien object’, Michael Sinason’s concept of a mad voice inside’ as an ‘Internal Cohabitee’; Herbert Rosenfeld’s ‘Omnipotent Narcissistic parts of the self’, Bion’s ‘Ego-destructive superego’, also referred to as ‘“Super”- Ego’ – and we identify in them, as the most important clinical core, their god-like quality and self-assertion as such.

This conceptualisation enables it (a) not to be mistaken for superego; (b) it allows for triangulation between the usurping object, the psychoanalyst, and the patient, and the distinctive voices of all three; and (c), as Britton (2003, p. 116) advocates, helping the patient to understand and to become emancipated from the ego destructive object, much as in the book of Job, a mortal liberates himself from a tyrannical God by becoming free to judge his tormentor.

1. In *Learning from Experience* (1962, p.35) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Written in 1595 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Act 4, Scene 3, lines 278; 327. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (OE) Alle ða ðe doemað eorðan (‘All of them do the judging’) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Freud wrote to Ernest Jones of “interest (*Besetzung*)”; Strachey opted for the Greek term *cathexis* (κάθεξις), but many have preferred the translation into ‘investment’. The German term has signification in the areas of ‘casting’; ‘filling’, and ‘occupying’. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. 1650 Sir T. Browne Pseud. Ep. ii. v, *Exact and critical trial should be made‥whereby determination might be settled.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The veins that return deoxygenated blood from the systemic circulation, and the lower and middle body respectively, to the right atrium (chamber) of the heart. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. quoted in Steiner, J. (2008, p. 37). *Rosenfeld in Retrospect.* [↑](#footnote-ref-8)