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*Judicious Judgment: A Case for Very Unusual Minds*

**ABSTRACT**

This paper addresses a mode of thinking that, it is argued, is manifested in Max Deutscher’s oeuvre. It explores the intricacies inherent in the 'singular thoughtfulness' of Deutscher, intricacies that emerge through his use of imagery in its connection with the subject matter with which he deals. The paper challenges the idiom of obvious associations and moves towards an appreciation of Deutscher in his judicious balance of his experience and thinking as well as a correlative balance of certainty and uncertainty, all contrasted on a ground of confidence and its intensified over-confidence. The paper employs an imagery of its own in order to highlight Deutscher's peculiar use of everyday images in his work. Thus figures as diverse as Whitehead, Proust and Sand are woven into the fabric both in order to support and to distinguish Deutscher's thought. The paper was first presented as a fifteen minute presentation: the object here is to retain a quality of brevity, swiftness and economy: all features of Max Deutscher in his extensive writings.

**BIOGRAPHY**

Daniel Nicholls was a doctoral student of Max Deutscher in the 1990s. His PhD thesis, *Obstacles and Le Dœuff's imaginary or Consciousness vis à vis Philosophy's Obstacles*, explored the philosophical imaginary of Michèle Le Dœuff on a background of Deleuze, Leibniz, Lacan and Shakespeare, among others. His interest in the philosophical imaginary is absorbed into his work on consciousness, language and human relationships. He is currently a Senior Lecturer in mental health nursing at the University of Western Sydney.
JUDICIOUS JUDGMENT: A CASE FOR VERY UNUSUAL MINDS

Alfred Whitehead noted: “Familiar things happen, and mankind does not bother about them. It requires a very unusual mind to undertake the analysis of the obvious.” Of course, Whitehead was (at least) referring to the origins of Western science wherein there was a wrenching from a previous naïve acceptance of life’s ‘recurrences’. Be that as it may, in a similar spirit to Whitehead I will attempt to say something in this paper about what I see to be the ‘very unusual mind’ of Max Deutscher. That means I will need to say something about what Deutscher might consider as ‘the obvious’ these days, as well as to say something about what might constitute a ‘usual’ mind. Since his latest published book is on judgment I’ll start there and consider what he may challenge as a general naïve acceptance of the ‘recurrences’ – as repetitions – that pertain to mind and judgment. This challenge requires judgment to be deployed in a very particular way – judiciously I will argue – a judiciousness that has nothing to do with prudence and everything to do with a singular thoughtfulness. A singular thoughtfulness is what enables us to negotiate the environs in which we necessarily find ourselves: a particular engagement with those environs as the key to proper judgment.

One of Deutscher’s environs in 2007 was St Petersburg, where he attended the ballet, Swan Lake. Having come to expect something ‘saccharine’, with music ‘whose themes had become a satirisable cliché’, he was pleasantly surprised to find that ‘even the music […] was played with such confidence and drama that I felt stopped short in all my prejudices.’ His pre-judice in this case was that the ballet would be mundane in the worst, stuffifying sense: banal, or dull; to do with its recurrent quality. What he found instead was that the ballet, though so often performed, was here different. The difference in this case consisted in the ‘confidence and drama’ of ‘even the music’, the ‘even’ suggesting that the dancing was also performed with similar confidence and drama. This then is an example of the everyday being brought into high relief, as each day – the day he attended, to be precise. And now it is a three way relief: the double manoeuvre of Deutscher in being quite matter of fact about his experience and his prejudice, matched with his pleasure at the boldness of a performance that might otherwise have been delivered in a clichéd manner. In terms then of that which might constitute the everyday or obvious or mundane there are at least two obvious aspects: the recurrent, familiar event on the one hand and the shifting perception, or judgment, of that event on the other.

In his work on judgment Deutscher resorts to similar possible clichés. For example:

Imagine. I’m on a picnic in the park, senses flooded […] Then the images fade, replaced by the economy of words and symbols […] In a few words I tell all that happened. ‘Yes, he was there and yes, she …and the dog…and the children of course. They went for a walk in the bird sanctuary […] Thought, ‘de-sensed’, exceeds the rate of perceptions, images and the spoken word.

Nothing could be more ordinary or clichéd than a picnic one might think. Deutscher has swiftly transformed his image of a picnic into high art: a swiftness which sits alongside either a slow monotony or a hazy laziness. We see two swiftnesses: one, the sudden flooding of the senses overtaken by ‘economy’; the other his recapturing of the sensory moment; and yet another: his jettison of ‘even’ the sensory moment as thought exceeds everything else.

Since many of us would probably think that we are singularly thoughtful, the unusualness of Deutscher’s mind, I will hope to show, is in the way he utilizes ‘the obvious’ whilst at the same time saying something about it: getting a little distance – being both present and absent at the same time, both an actor and an observer. That is to say, Deutscher’s mind is not unusual in being above or outside the everyday. Rather it is unusual in that he is everyday – now as relaxed, matter-of-fact – in his philosophical deliberations, which largely rely on recurrent events as the images that give his thinking the empirical substance they require. But to say he is relaxed and matter-of-fact is not to say that he is slow. On the contrary his dual relation to the everyday requires lightning reflexes of thought: a two way manoeuvre. His then is a double manoeuvre which brings the everyday into high relief; while the usual mind might be said to keep the everyday in low relief: unimportant, destined to be hidden away from view – now something is relegated (as hidden) where it was previously manifested. Paradoxically it would be the usual mind that seeks to uncover the (now) hidden: a one-way manoeuvre. Unusual then matches with the obvious and its varied complexities; usual matches with the obscured from view, whether sensorial or intellectual.

The unusual mind requires a dual rapidity so as not to become mired in obscurity. There is a constant flight that looks like a tangential escaping. The escaping however is more to do with being sceptical about surety, usually sought in that which is obscured from view. Such surety would be the ultimate trap for Deutscher. For just as the world escapes us we need to escape from the surety by means of which the world presents itself to us. It is here
that Deutscher aligns himself with Sartre, at least for a moment or two. In discussing Sartre’s ‘Qualities’ in *Genre and Void*, Deutscher renders Sartre’s ‘escaping being’ as:

> How things are for us opens up what the world is. If there were no ways the world was for us, we should know nothing of it. Yet as fast as the world shows itself we become suspicious of what we have been permitted to see, fearing that we have come to know the *world-as-it-is-for-us* rather than the *world-as-it-is-in-itself*.

As early as *Subjecting and Objecting*, he is even talking about judgment in these terms:

> For all this insistence on the necessity of judgement, of deciding that certain matters are so and others not, as a condition of reason and not a mere dogmatism, the subjective mode has its place in all our attempts to deal with what we see and think. To deny this is to deny the place of wondering, pondering, mulling things over, softening one’s line and attitude to be receptive to what one does not yet understand, to what seems perhaps, to flout outrageously what one knows clearly and full well.

This passage appears under the heading: The importance of being not too confident. And yet there is a strong sense of confidence in Deutscher’s work, and a respect for confidence, as we saw with his comments on the *Swan Lake* ballet. He is confident in admiring those philosophers who are confidently undecided in the face of certainty. Those like Le Deuff, Irigaray and Beauvoir. Of course there is nothing undecided in Sartre it would seem – well, on the face of it: any indecision would be tantamount to bad faith, or explained away in the matrix of ‘being-for-others’ and the “Other’s being-there.” Deutscher however is tolerant of Sartre also and concludes:

> Certainly, we can observe that all of them – Sartre, Beauvoir, Le Deuff and Irigaray – in their different ways – tend towards an ontology that would not divide person from body. Such ontology of an observable bodily consciousness must then take care to respect the interiority of a person’s life as something always only partly known and understood – whether by themselves or by another.

Yet whilst we may only partly know and understand we get on with things. It is the *degree to which* we get on with things that is important to Deutscher: confident but not too confident, judging but not judgmental, critical but not criticising. And all these attitudes are the same yet different. Confidence is about trust. The French has a nice opposition here: *confiance* and *méfiance* – trust and mistrust. This opposition finds its parallel in *connaissance* and *méconnaissance* – knowing and not knowing. Lacan however will show that *méconnaissance* is a “false not knowing,” similar to Sartre’s *Bad Faith*. I think though that these oppositions would also be too easy for Deutscher: perhaps for him the oppositions themselves serve to cover over the question rather than allow it to remain manifest. It is not doubt – real, conscious, or otherwise – that he will see as opposed to confidence but rather a *too confident* attitude. That means that his confidence is a softer, more malleable thing. In *Subjecting and Objecting* he talks about

> a reasonable confidence [that] allows one to include within one’s observation and judgements what still is, in tone, an openly concessionary and further-observation-and-discussion-permitting “It seems…” “I feel that…” In dogmatism, one thinks that the facts, the principles, the theory, speak for themselves.

Since Deutscher has here related confidence and judgment, let’s see if the equation on confidence can be applied to judgment, and also to its correlative faculty *critique* (a critical enterprise), for I might suggest that these two are much the same. The words *critique* and *critical* hail from Greek stems that seem to my untutored eye to *obviously* imply the art of judgment. What would be the usual words to describe someone who does not judge or *critique*? *Uncritical* would fit, but not non-judgmental for that is something entirely different. So let’s suppose that, following the equation above, Deutscher’s judgment, as critical attitude, is soft and malleable. *Uncritical* would not be opposed to it; rather a *too critical attitude*. *Too critical* would be the opposite of good judgment and would indeed be an indicator of poor judgment. *Too confident* would be on a par with *too confident*. *Toov confident* as we have seen, is tantamount to dogmatism. Le Deuff of course would say that we need to employ good judgment in our critical enterprises – for her when it comes to critique it is not really a matter of *too* but rather one of *how*. That *how* is directly related to judgment when, in a discussion on Sartre and concerning her everyday or ordinary experience, she notes:

> I long remained blind to objective and politicizable data. But very early, one aspect of relations between men and women frightened me and this was the non-reciprocity of looks and judgements, which I again encountered in Sartre’s writings, but which I had already met elsewhere.
‘How am I thinking?’ might be the critical question for Le Dœuff. This is an important question for Hannah Arendt also. But here I see another point of difference with Deutscher.

For Deutscher, judgment is not a critical enterprise. There are many places in his last book that show judgment to be an emerging enterprise. And it is an emerging social enterprise. There are always others involved in my world. Those others may be ones who have come before us in time or who stand before us right now. One such person I am reminded of in this context is George Sand. Belinda Jack’s fascinating biography summed up neatly an attitude to judgment that could just as well fit with Deutscher’s enterprise:

> Sand has become increasingly interested, not in judgement, but in observation. She felt her anger at injustice to be less certain [and here she is talking about a particular kind of judgment – but judgment nonetheless]. It has been almost completely replaced by a desire for understanding. She felt privileged to be close to people, close to their inner lives, and was instantly fascinated by the range of human experience.

Deutscher also is fascinated by ‘the range of human experience.’ He looks backwards in order to look forwards and he takes a look around. He looks around himself to those and the thinking of those who are his closest associates and at those who might not be so. He stands before them to give them an adequate hearing. Standing before is not a static pose but requires constant movement backwards and forwards – around and about – by means of the rapid dual thought processes of a Max Deutscher.

This manner of proceeding is another take on Deutscher’s ‘conversal’ where he is in two minds as he absents himself in order to mind me. He is present in his absence, and a conversal has its connection with correction (com, con, co, cor, all connoting with or together) as it leads in the direction of judgment. Perhaps we should rather say we con-judge, judge together the coherence of our thinking. This is not a conjugation, which has the different connotation of joining or yolking. Rather, it is a judging together in our separateness or difference: not a joint judgment then, or a conjoint judgment, for they would both imply that we were joined. It is a judgment whereby we stand side by side or face to face or vis-à-vis. We judge in being absent from ourselves but present to each other. It is in our absence that we can indeed be present for we are not so closely tied to ourselves that we fail to take notice of those around us. In this sense we are engaged in a commonality, though not necessarily a common project. It is through the common that we become uncommon. And now I am meaning the common to be the familiar. The meaning of the word common easily extends itself beyond shared experiences to encompass the everyday or familiar. Antonio Negri utilizes this inherent mobility of the word when he states: “The construction of different worlds takes place through what is common – what is common to humanity.” But now, common moves beyond itself to uncommon difference. Those different worlds would be uncommon, unfamiliar.

A final comment: the titles of Deutscher’s two recent books are very telling. *Genre and Void: Looking Back at Sartre and Beauvoir* – looking back at those who stood before us: before in both senses of the word – as present and absent. *Judgment after Arendt* – judgment after: judgment which comes before is now done after. This is not to forget that the word after also means in the mode of. More double play in order to be not too confident. But sufficiently confident to be able to move from what is now evident as the complex system of the everyday: something which might be judged as obvious, familiar, and at times cliché. Max Deutscher’s art is to immerse himself in the imagery of the everyday in order for his thought to take bold flight. His *Swan Lake* experience was an apt metaphor for his philosophical attitude: a complex metaphor combining his experience of the ballet with the story of *Swan Lake*, which is all about uncertainty, swiftness and slowness, and a final, certain confidence. My double movement in the title, which is there to stress the repetitive quality of the familiar, and not to be taken as a mere tautology, signposts the way he moves from the familiar to the novel: from the obvious to the ...

What then finally characterizes Deutscher’s thought? I started the essay with a singular thoughtfulness as being the crucial element of judicious judgment. As the essay progressed it became evident that the singularity encompassed a dual action. That dual action was itself multiple in that it connoted presence and absence, slowness and rapidity, and a confidence that coexists with uncertainty. The question of the modifier of intensity, the word too, also arose, leaving room for more thinking, or, as we encountered from Deutscher a long time ago: “wondering, pondering, mulling things over”.
Philosophy and Imaginary Practice

I suggest that we utilise the term the everyday as an expression of our familiar environs: an everyday notion is one that is familiar while at the same time verging on the clichéd. My ear of course will also hear an adverb in “I do it every day”, though my intellect will tell me to distinguish an adjective and a noun. I make this point merely to show that there may be nothing much everyday in the notion and its sounding – and similarly nothing much obvious in the obvious. Having said that, I will be utilising the terms the everyday and the obvious as synonyms of sorts, although they are also likely to be complimentary terms which both contain their own – not at all dissimilar – predicates: pertaining to themselves – as monads at least – in the tradition of Leibniz.

I am utilizing the word ‘proper’ with all its etymological leanings (including: clean, belonging to me, specific, precise, appropriate), leanings more nuanced in the French propre, but still extant in English. I am utilising the term ‘proper’ with all its etymological leanings (including: clean, belonging to me, specific, precise, appropriate), leanings more nuanced in the French propre, but still extant in English.

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xxvi Max Deutscher, Genre and Void: Looking Back at Sartre and Beauvoir (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2003), 99.

xxvii Max Deutscher, Subjecting and Objecting (St Lucia: Queensland University Press, 1983), 100.


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The etymology of obvious is ob+ the way. Ob: with verbs of motion, towards, to … with verbs of rest, before, in front of, over against. C. T. Lewis, Elementary Latin Dictionary (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992). I want to show that for the unusual mind the obvious is more than a noun or adjective – the way is an active moving forwards, a constant shifting, as well as a ‘resting’ awareness’.

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Deutscher, Genre and Void, 247.

This reference to the French is also an acknowledgement of Deutscher’s work environ French philosophers as well as his own play with word features, both English and French, throughout his oeuvre: ‘what ‘looks’, what ‘regards’, will leave his mind at peace and his heart happy” Deutscher, Subjecting and Objecting, 158.

‘Regards’ is indeed English, but it is more so French in this regard, and here he uses the word with the double sense of looking and being looked at, as he talks about the narcissist.


Deutscher, Subjecting and Objecting, 103.


Ibid., 160.

For Arendt, the question arises early in relation to Adolf Eichmann’s ‘thoughtlessness’. Hannah Arendt, The Life of the Mind (San Diego: Harcourt Inc.), 3-5.

One of Proust’s read authors as a child courtesy of his grandmother. “Beneath the everyday incidents, the ordinary objects and common words, I sensed a strange and individual tone of voice”. Proust, Remembrance of Things Past, 45.


Nicholls, “The Vision of Morality”, 158.

Deutscher’s ‘conversal’ is construed as ‘turning around together’ from its etymological roots. Deutscher, Judgment After Arendt, 77.

Interestingly, Arendt sees con-science as “to know with and by myself”. Arendt, The Life of the Mind, 5. This certainly accords with the dictionary and our everyday understanding of the term conscience but I am more than suggesting that for Deutscher ‘con’ points to an outward rather than an inward relationship.

As in a nineteenth century carriage of the same name.

Negri’s project here is Spinozan: “negative thought moving toward constitutive thought.” Antonio Negri, The Savage Anomaly: The Power of Spinoza’s Metaphysics and Politics, Michael Hardt (trans.) (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 212. Negri stresses this in the The Cell when he notes the construction of diverse words out of Leopardi’s pessimism. Negativity and pessimism are features of the mundane, as dull.

Bearing in mind that there is no word to describe a ‘super’ quality of obvious. Whatever is novel is destined to become obvious, so that the obvious always falls back on itself. If there were to be a word, it would belong to a prudent category rather than a judicious one.

Deutscher, Subjecting and Objecting, 100.