

## A Behavioural Approach to Kazuo Ishiguro's Novels

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### Abstract

Behavioural research indicates that humans can seldom be rational decision-makers that maximise their profits while minimising their costs at all times. The current paper proposes an interdisciplinary perspective on Kazuo Ishiguro's novels with regard to his characters' choices, decisions and actions. By presenting identity crises as a result of faulty choices and decisions, Ishiguro stresses the importance of heuristics, biases and conditioning in the decision-making process. Like real people, Ishigurian characters are emotional, irrational and prone to error, behaving contrary to the maximisation of their lives. This behavioural pattern comes as everyday normality in both real and fictional environments plagued by uncertainty and unable to provide all the available information on every topic – not even in an unnamed modern city (*The Unconsoled*) or a dystopian England in the late 1990s (*Never Let Me Go*), let alone in a post-Arthurian England dominated by magic (*The Buried Giant*) or during and after the Second World War (*A Pale View of Hills*; *An Artist of the Floating World*; *The Remains of the Day*; *When We Were Orphans*). As a case study from literature, Ishiguro's characters prove that the decision-making process cannot be viewed unilaterally, hence the interdisciplinary nature of the current study.

**Keywords:** behavioural concepts, Kazuo Ishiguro, choices and decisions, psychotherapeutic literature, behaviour.

### Introduction

According to the principle of unbounded rationality, humans should unemotionally form their beliefs at all times after having studied all the available information to maximise their expected utility for every life aspect. However, the ever-growing amount of information and the limited capacity to compute it all invariably drives humans towards bounded rationality, which is

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based on rules of thumb and adaptive tools called heuristics (Simon 18). Thus, when making decisions, humans will prefer representative cues and short, time-saving calculations to any other methods of maximising their utility in all existential circumstances. The human mind is heavily influenced by all types of environment, so the concept of ecological rationality indicates that humans usually have to make their decisions with incomplete information, based on motivation and self-regulation (Gigerenzer 21; LaCaille et al. 532-534). In other words, socio-economic and cultural conditions will mainly dictate which strategies humans will have to adapt to turn their preferences into practical choices regularly. Daily faced with choice overload, humans will invariably experience decision fatigue, which means that they will start making inadequate decisions after enduring over choice and repeated decision making. Heuristics can thus simplify their decision-making process in environments based on uncertainty and scarce information.

According to the two behavioural schools known to date, heuristics can be regarded as either biased or unbiased (Tversky and Kahneman 1127; Gigerenzer and Brighton 109). Thus, one school treats heuristics as errors of judgement leading to biased choices and decisions while the other views them as fast, frugal and therefore ecologically rational. Either way, humans follow, either intuitively or rationally, the information search, the stopping and the decision rules in every decision they make, big or small (Gigerenzer and Brighton 108). Following the division of the mind into intuition and reason, dual-process theories (DPT) of reasoning refer to “judgments mediated by both fast, automatic processes and more deliberate, analytic ones” (Thomson et al. 107). The dual process is therefore divided between heuristic and analytic processes. In the first stage, the relevant information is chosen and then used to assess the circumstances connected to it, in the analytical stage (Evans 451). Daniel Kahneman names the dual-process System 1 and System 2 of thinking, corresponding to the automatic and reflective

brains (23). While both intuition and reason underlie human choices and decisions, System 1 dominates the decision-making process because of its rapid and instinctive nature. However, when System 1 makes mistakes, System 2 eliminates the contradictory options, clarifying the thinking pathways in a consciously logical fashion (33).

Many behavioural-change theories aim to explain the diverse factorial dimensions of the decision-making process (Osman et al. 969-980). Based on self-interest and interdependence, social exchange theory relates the minimising of costs to the maximising of benefits in every human transaction (Cropanzano and Michell 874-900). Directly related to the imminence of a perceived threat, the health belief model presents, in a similar fashion, both the net benefits and the factors leading to inspired decisions despite the obstacles encountered along the way (Glanz 83-93; Becker 12).

Behavioural patterning can also be explained through the interrelation between classical and operant conditioning in daily life. In line with Pavlovian conditioning, humans can make associations between naturally occurring stimuli, which trigger naturally occurring responses, and neutral stimuli which will trigger the same involuntary responses after several encounters or repetitions (Rehman et al. 1). Skinner's operant conditioning, on the other hand, connects behaviour to its rewarding or punishing consequences to reconfigure or preserve certain habitual practices (Dunsmoor and Murphy 73; Staddon and Cerutti 115).

Given that the theories of human behaviour could explain and interpret human life in all its transactional manifestations, the current study aims to prove that the enduring reality of scarcity will always jar with the unrealistic concept of unbounded rationality (Beinhocker 87). Humans can neither tap into unlimited resources nor investigate all the possibilities before making their decisions, hence the satisficing, not maximising, nature of the human mind (Simon

4). For all the fragility of the human condition, the resilience of life energy will always prompt humans to find innovative – and sometimes unthinkable – ways to preserve their identities, however, troubled their surroundings are. The pursuit of happiness, therefore, means to transcend the barriers of the "human project", with its non-chronological display of the past, present, and future (Sartre 207). Yet, to attain such freedom, one should look within, since the outside will always depend on others' choices and decisions, hence the transitory nature of the greater good.

As a case study from literature, Ishiguro's novels can be interpreted with the help of many behavioural concepts, thus helping readers to make better decisions based on heuristics, biases and conditioning.

### **Ishigurian Behaviour**

Born in Nagasaki and raised in Great Britain since early childhood, Nobel-Prize winner Kazuo Ishiguro has written about the human condition and the emotional abyss in novels that take place in Japan, Shanghai and England (Nobel Prize 2017; Ishiguro 2017).

Critics have explored the settings and their corresponding historical contexts for their symbolic or metaphorical significance and to discern their author's philosophical perspectives. Ishiguro himself has preferred to see his works as offering an international or universal view of human experiences, a goal he identifies when explaining his vision or purpose as a writer (Wong 309).

Given that, from transgenerational perspectives, many inspired choices, decisions and deeds could become exactly the opposite in time, Ishigurian characters embody the real-life struggle to align the moral and ethical standards of human behaviour with a rational approach to decision making. In other words, by conveying human irrationality in the decision-making process, Ishiguro's novels exemplify exactly the opposite – that is to say, the second approach to

heuristics, as effective problem solvers regardless of the environmental type. Ishiguro's protagonists thus prove that their decisions, mostly taken under the fast and frugal heuristics, are perfectly rational from an ecological point of view, although many times biased (Gigerenzer and Brighton 121-135). Like real-life people, Ishiguro's protagonists invariably have limited time, information and attention span before making decisions that mainly involve deliberate computation.

The decision to drop two nuclear bombs to end World War II (WWII hereafter) is the most unfortunate example of fighting fire with fire. The devastating effects of such momentous events continue to create ripples within the minds and souls of Japanese survivors, and far beyond. According to statistics, 210,000 people lost their lives in the atomic bombing, out of which 70,000 lived in Nagasaki (Ishikawa 22). In *A Pale View of Hills*, young Etsuko aims to escape the post-bomb Nagasaki, even at the price of her elder daughter's happiness, because, like most of her peers, she sees no other solution for a better life. As a fast and frugal heuristic, following a default rule is the best option, unless there is a reason for doing otherwise. Loss aversion, however, becomes a case of classical conditioning for the war survivor, who resorts to extreme solutions to avoid further loss at all costs. Sadly enough, when preparing to leave the country, Etsuko's alter ego, Sachiko, decides to drown her daughter's kittens to get rid of any liability that could hinder their travelling abroad. However troubled at the time, Etsuko/Sachiko should have known that killing her daughter's pets would traumatise a little girl for life, ultimately leading to her suicide in her adult years: "Sachiko was gazing down into the vegetable box through the wire gauze. She slid open a panel, brought out a kitten and shut the box again. She held the kitten in both hands, looked at it for a few seconds, then glanced up at me. 'It's just an animal, Etsuko,' she said. 'That's all it is.' [...] 'It's still alive,' she said tiredly ... 'How these things struggle'" (Ishiguro

167).

In *An Artist of the Floating World*, the reason why Masuji Ono admits publicly to his past mistakes may be that he wants to save his younger daughter Noriko's *miai* with Taro Saito, a young man from an influential family: "I made many mistakes. I accept that what I did was ultimately harmful to our nation, that mine was part of an influence that resulted in untold suffering for our own people. [...] at the time I acted in good faith. I believed in all sincerity I was achieving good for my fellow countrymen" (Ishiguro 123-124). This is an obvious case of preferential attachment, a fast and frugal heuristic indicating the importance of establishing strong relationships, especially with people that have many social ties. Another heuristic example is imitation: Successful or influential people are usually imitated by their peers. Being deeply fascinated by cowboys, along with the American cartoons and the English language, Ono's grandson Ichiro regularly imitates their language and behaviour to the desperation of his traditional grandfather. Also, many former members of the totalitarian regime commit suicide, one after the other, to atone for their deeds during the WWII. A tit-for-tat strategy indicates that, in any type of transaction, humans usually start off by cooperating and then they will behave as their opponents, either cooperating or defecting. In accordance with this type of fast and frugal heuristic, when Masuji Ono goes to visit his former student Kuroda, whom he has unfairly reported to the police, he is driven away by Kuroda's protégé, Enchi.

At a transgenerational level, characters' destinies as adults stem from their parents' influence on their child selves, as Masuji Ono's example can demonstrate. At the age of fifteen, the protagonist of Ishiguro's second novel experiences his first identity crisis when his father burns his paintings, prohibiting him to follow an artistic career that can give him "every temptation to become weak-willed and depraved" to the detriment of the family business he

should take over instead (Ishiguro 8). Although he is initially trained in the art of the “floating world”, young Masuji gives up painting geishas and nightlife of debauchery for serving through his art the imperialistic Japan of the early 1930s. At Master Takeda, Ono is paid to depict imagery – that is “geishas, cherry trees, swimming carps [...] temples [...] that [...] look ‘Japanese’ to the foreigners to whom they were shipped out” while at Mori-san, he uses Europeanised ways of “portraying pleasure district women” (Ishiguro 69; 140). To transcend his credibility as an artist of transitory beauty, and encouraged by his patriot friend Matsuda, young Ono chooses to swap trivial and immoral art for painting the glory of imperialistic Japan (Ishiguro 174). As expected, his father's extreme conduct could only strengthen Ono's desire to prove his father wrong. His professional choices establish him as a reputed creator of propaganda paintings, with students of his own, who learn to disregard the transience of carnal pleasures in favour of the “more manly spirit” of Japanese imperialism (Ishiguro 74). His devotion to nationalistic ideals is pushed to the extreme when he reports his best pupil and protégé Kuroda to the national Committee of Unpatriotic Activities. His student's only crime is that he cannot renounce the object of his artwork, though his teacher deems it frivolous and grotesque, in a subconscious attempt to prove to his father that he was honest and brave instead of having "a weak streak that would give him a tendency toward slothfulness" (Ishiguro 45). Just like Ono's father once did to him, Kuroda's works are burnt while he is taken to jail and mutilated for life. Although young Ono wanted “to be something more than ordinary in the endeavour to rise above the mediocre” to spite his father, he “took some bold steps and often did things with much single-mindedness” to fulfil his ambitions (Ishiguro 134; 202; 204).

As the ramifications of Ono's choices and decisions suffer a historical reconfiguration, Ono's militaristic acts will not acquire the quality of good old wine. With time, the frivolity and

lack of substance of the floating world prove less detrimental than Ono's propagandistic paintings, which seemed so morally correct when they served the country's imperialistic creeds. Ono indirectly sends young men to war and survives most of them, his son Kenji included. His totalitarian choices and decisions thus make him responsible for his son's death, just as Ono's father was once responsible for his son's professional direction. Labelled as a militarist coward by the younger generations, Ono cannot be redeemed: "[...] those who sent the likes of Kenji out there to die these brave deaths, where are they today? They're carrying on with their lives, much the same as ever ... Brave young men die for stupid causes, and the real culprits are still with us, afraid to show themselves for what they are [...] that's the greatest cowardice of all (Ishiguro 58). Unlike other patriots, Ono refuses to take his own life as a way of clearing his name, thus unwittingly adhering to the Western ideology of committing suicide: "American condemnation of suicide makes self-destruction only a desperate submission to despair, but the Japanese respect for it allows it to be an honourable and purposeful act. In certain situations, it is the most honourable course to take in one's name" (Benedict 166). For years on end, Ono could no longer paint, because his subconscious associated the act of painting with the blame for his political affiliation. By choosing to start painting again, the transience of nature, Ono seems ready to give up his radical political views. Although Ishiguro cannot reinvent Japan's aggressive intentions to monopolise the whole world (Lewis 49-50), he explains how the Japanese mentality can be manipulated at its core, which renders Ono's final decision realistic and authentic:

The thing about Japanese psychology is they'll fight like a berserk against enemy as long as that person is identified as an enemy. That seems to be very much embedded in the Japanese psyche. But once it has been established that whoever it is no longer the enemy but in fact is your conqueror, your new teacher, then the Japanese don't seem to have any



kind of mental block about switching completely and becoming very subservient and loyal to this new power. (Sexton 32-33)

The butler, regarded as “the most English of stock characters”, is an obvious example not only of imagology but also of classical conditioning (Lewis 74). However, the subconscious transfer from a Japanese sense of ingrained duty to a British sense of upper-class servility may transpire from the first pages of *The Remains of the Day*. So devoted to his cause is Stevens “that he could be Japanese, in his finely calibrated sense of rank, his attention to minutiae, his perfectionism and his eagerness to please; his pride is his subservience, and his home is only in the past” (Iyer 586). According to behavioural research, there are four steps to take when deciding between two possibilities per the take-the-best heuristic: (1) looking for cues; (2) ceasing the search when finding the discriminating cue; (3) selecting the cue-based alternative; (4) choosing a possibility at random, if no relevant cues are to be found (Gigerenzer and Brighton 121-135). After the war, Stevens leaves Darlington Hall for the first time in years to meet Miss Kenton, who worked there as a housekeeper twenty years ago. The discriminating cue is Miss Kenton’s letter, which seems to tell Stevens between the lines that, in light of her pending divorce, she will like to return to Darlington Hall as a housekeeper. This is an offer the perfect butler cannot refuse due to the drastic shortage of staff at present – and the love he is still reluctant to admit that he has been feeling for Miss Kenton all this time. In line with the biased approach to heuristics, Stevens frequently uses the representativeness heuristic, validating as true only what is more representative – for instance, his belief that genuine butlers are to be found only in England while the rest of the world only has manservants (Ishiguro 43). Although Stevens could be perceived as a true maximiser, whose unwavering self-control enables him to avoid emotional decision-making, his choice to serve a Nazi sympathiser turns him into a satisficer

whose life principles prove wrong at the end of the day. In the post-war period, Stevens' degrading demeanour transpires from his hilarious comments on running out of fuel on his journey to the West of England. The reader will experience an ambiguous state, deeming Stevens' propensity for disorganisation as incredibly untrue while seeing that Stevens cannot be far from the truth when his professional dignity labels his slips as unpardonable errors: "The fact that [...] I came to be [...] at the mercy of Mr and Mrs Taylor's generosity on this night is attributable to one foolish, infuriatingly simple oversight: namely, I allowed the Ford to run out of petrol. What with this and the trouble yesterday concerning the lack of water in the radiator, it would not be unreasonable for an observer to believe such general disorganisation endemic to my nature (Ishiguro 81).

The health belief model could shed more light on the internal and external factors that influence the characters' decisions throughout *The Unconsoled*. Acknowledging an upcoming crisis (perceived threat) could prompt characters to inspired actions if they were aware that their benefits were far greater than the physical, mental and emotional obstacles to be encountered (net benefits). Decisional failure is particularly obvious in the pianist Ryder's behaviour as he associates almost all the elements of his shifty environment with his inability to bring his commitments to closure. Nevertheless, the leaders of the unnamed city also prove irrational decision-makers as they ask the piano player to help them solve their crisis when they should have gratefully accepted their status quo to revitalise the cultural community, hence the fiasco at the end: "The evening. It's a shambles. Why pretend it's anything else? [...] The evening is a shambles" (Ishiguro 506). In terms of costs and benefits, the social exchange theory can also account for the psychological and sociocultural perspectives on the characters' inconsistent behavioural patterns. Ryder's erratic choices and decisions within a tiringly irrational narrative

can only prove how important his family members are in determining both his everyday behaviour and his professional demeanour.

In *When We Were Orphans*, the child Christopher Banks has to deal with two scenarios: his parents have either been killed or kidnapped. He selects the second one, so he becomes one of the greatest detectives of his time to solve the mysterious case of his parents' disappearance. This is a literary example of the fluency heuristic: If both possibilities are recognised, then the one recognised faster will be selected. However, the famous detective also chooses to present an emotional self-created world rather than hard facts from an objective reality: "Christopher envisions his work of solving heiress murders and jewel thefts as nothing less than 'combating evil,' and, on the eve of World War II, the circles he moves in are quite taken with the 'general picture of how certain forms of evil manifest themselves'" (Jaffe). Christopher Banks' stubbornness to match the identity of the Japanese soldier he accidentally meets with that of his childhood friend Akira represents an emotional case of confirmation bias. Christopher sees reality only as he believes it. Ishiguro makes it quite clear that the two Japanese are not one and the same person, yet the reader seems to share the bias with the protagonist in an endearing act of empathising with his childhood trauma: "Christopher is so determined for the childhood healing scenario to happen in real life that he's got to find Akira, and any Japanese person of a certain age will do. He refuses to contemplate that this man's not Akira. I thought it was clearly signalled because the Japanese keeps saying the wrong things, but I've obviously misjudged it because a significant number of readers haven't got it" (Blake). Christopher's behavioural delusions help the author render his version of the "universal story about childhood and how what happens then controls what we do later" (Blake). The detective finally chooses to find his happiness in London, in a reality that can be neither mended nor healed: "I enjoy my walks in the parks [...]"

This city [...] has come to be my home, and I should not mind if I had to live out the rest of my days here” (Ishiguro 368).

In *Never Let Me Go*, the advances of medical science make possible the creation of life in the lab, yet the state-sanctioned programme of organ harvesting robs a late twentieth-century England of its ethical principles – so much so that the artwork produced at Hailsham is not humanitarian enough to prove that clones also have a consciousness. When one of the students asks Miss Lucy about the purpose of their artwork, during the token issue, the guardian finds herself incapable of telling the clone children the cruel truth, although later on, she will rid herself of the burden: "You've been told and not told" (Ishiguro 79). However, the three protagonists choose not to focus on the social inequalities emerging from their unfair status, living instead as intensely as possible within the confines of their inner worlds: “Once I’m able to have a quieter life, in whichever centre they send me to, I’ll have Hailsham with me, safely in my head, and that’ll be something no one can take away” (Ishiguro 281). According to Siddhartha Deb, Ishiguro's focus on "intimate things", from "the small social groupings within a school" to "the nuances of personal relationships" makes a "larger world [...] a distant, blurred backdrop [...] brought into focus only at the end, when the "questions of human existence" have already filled the reader with chilling unease (New Statesman). On the other hand, if one of two possibilities is recognised, it will then be selected. The recognition heuristic appears when Kathy and Tommy start questioning their missions as donors only after they have discovered that they can prolong their lives on account of true love.

As a case of operant conditioning, Kathy feels extra motivated to do her caretaking job as professionally as possible because she wants to tend to her clone friends. Another conditioning example is Hailsham students' receipt of tokens in exchange for their art: The guardians utilise

operant conditioning to encourage students to show their creativity and submit their artwork to the quarterly art exhibitions called the Exchanges. The tokens are therefore very important to students, offering them the freedom to buy each other's art and create personal collections. Their importance is further emphasised by the "token controversy", a situation in which Kathy's class of ten-year-old students does not receive the usual financial incentives once the art transaction is complete. The otherwise obedient clones start protesting on grounds of their operant conditioning; not only can the tokens help them become little art collectors, but they can also offer students the possibility to participate in the monthly Sales, where they can buy child-appropriate objects, like toys, from the human world. Instinctively, Tommy breaks free from the collective conditioning by not providing any artwork for the Exchanges and therefore not receiving any tokens. On the surface, his tantrums constitute a form of rebellion against his teasing colleagues yet the reader can see that his nature is, in truth, rebelling against the cruelty of the whole system. His later artistic works, created by his free, uncomplying spirit, speak of clones' hybrid identity and tragic destiny: "[...] for all their busy, metallic features, there was something sweet, even vulnerable about each of them (Ishiguro 184-185).

After breaking the treaty with the Saxons, King Arthur has to find an artificial way to repair his mistake, so he asks for Merlin's help, in *The Buried Giant*. By converting Querig's breath into a magical mist with oblivion powers, Merlin creates a type of operant conditioning, with positive punishment, for the two warring nations. To cease fighting, the Saxons and the Britons are offered an aversive stimulus: Querig's breath. At an individual level, Axl and Beatrice's familial problems are solved in the same way. As expected, the side effects of the magical oblivion are too disturbing to ensure the success of King Arthur's plan.

Stimulus

Punishment

Positive

adding oblivion =>stop fighting (*Saxons and Britons*)*(Querig's magical breath)*=> start forgiving (*Axl and Beatrice*)

The health belief model could also explain the logic behind Arthur's decision to use Merlin and Querigin to create an artificial armistice between the Saxons and Britons after making the mistake of breaking the treaty with the Saxons. That it has been an inspired decision after all, despite its magical nature, is proved by the aftermath of Wistan's killing of the battered dragoness. At first, the warrior is unwilling to admit both the foolishness of his supposedly heroic act and his unconscious fondness for the Britons, after having lived among them for so long. In the end, he tries to protect the Briton couple he has travelled with, suggesting to them that they should start anew somewhere else. He thus gives up the remembered prejudice that all Britons must die, despite the magically induced peace between the two warring nations. The satisficing heuristic indicates that the best option is the one that helps achieve something with minimum effort. The decision of killing the dragoness Querig to regain power over memories can be viewed as a case of collective satisficing. In a similar vein, Axl and Beatrice are unable to see the costs of regaining their memories until it is too late to go back on their wish: "Yet are you so certain, good mistress, you wish to be free of this mist? Is it not better some things remain hidden from our minds? [...] the mist covers all memories, the bad as well as the good" (Ishiguro 52). Their future is therefore compromised as they can no longer have a present together. The end justifies the means. Arthur's magical method of creating a lasting peace between two enemy nations, and thus mending his initial error, might have proved very inspired if it had lasted.

Consequently, Ishigurian behaviour emphasises the intricate nature of the decision-

making process, both in fiction and in real life. Ishiguro's characters use bounded rationality to weigh up their costs and benefits and thus fail to see all the ramifications of their choices and decisions due to the dramatic change in the social environment in the long run. Another factor that impedes a correct assessment of costs and benefits is the characters' emotional system. By failing to combine cognition with behaviourism in their decisional process, Ishigurian protagonists can only prove the shifty quality of emotions under extreme circumstances like war, suicide, kidnapping, orphanhood, memory loss, old age or cloning.

## **Conclusion**

Human behaviour will always be based on bounded and ecological rationality due to choice overload, decision fatigue, incomplete information and uncertain environmental conditions. Heuristics thus prove handy mental shortcuts that can simplify the decision-making process through optimal cooperation between intuition and reason.

As a behavioural case from literature, Kazuo Ishiguro's novels prove that fictional humans can be irrational decision-makers that fail to maximise their profits while minimising their costs in most life circumstances. By taking faulty pivotal decisions in times of crisis, Ishigurian protagonists indirectly emphasise the importance of heuristics, biases and conditioning in the decision-making process. Like real-life humans, Etsuko, Ono, Stevens, Ryder, Banks, Kathy, Ruth, Tommy, Axl and Beatrice are all satisficers rather than maximisers as they resort to emotional and intuitive decision-making techniques and never to unbounded rationality. The British-Japanese writer also points out how big worlds swallow small worlds whole, changing the historical perspectives on the good and the bad. For centuries, humans have been mirroring each other in communities, large and small, from families to societies and nations. Even when impeccably made, individual choices and decisions will gradually alter their significance due to

the ever-changing nature of collective values. All in all, Ishiguro's novels can help the reader embrace the relativity of the decision-making process in real life, in a world built on networking and interconnection.

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