

Book Review of Kazuo Ishiguro's *The Remains of Day*

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The point of Kazuo Ishiguro's novel, going by the title, is the balance between work and the leisure which makes life sentimental, comfortable, and sociable. At the remains of the day, at Weymouth, Mr Stevens concludes:

As I watch them now, they are laughing together merrily. It is curious how people can build such warmth among themselves so swiftly. It is possible these particular persons are simply united by the anticipation of the evening ahead. But, then, I rather fancy it has more to do with this skill of bantering. Listening to them now, I can hear them exchanging one bantering remark after another. It is, I would suppose, the way many people like to proceed. In fact, it is possible my bench companion of a while ago expected me to banter with him — in which case, I suppose I was something of a sorry disappointment. Perhaps it is indeed time I began to look at this whole matter of bantering more enthusiastically. After all, when one thinks about it, it is not such a foolish thing to indulge in — particularly if it is the case that in bantering lies the key to human warmth. [page 257]

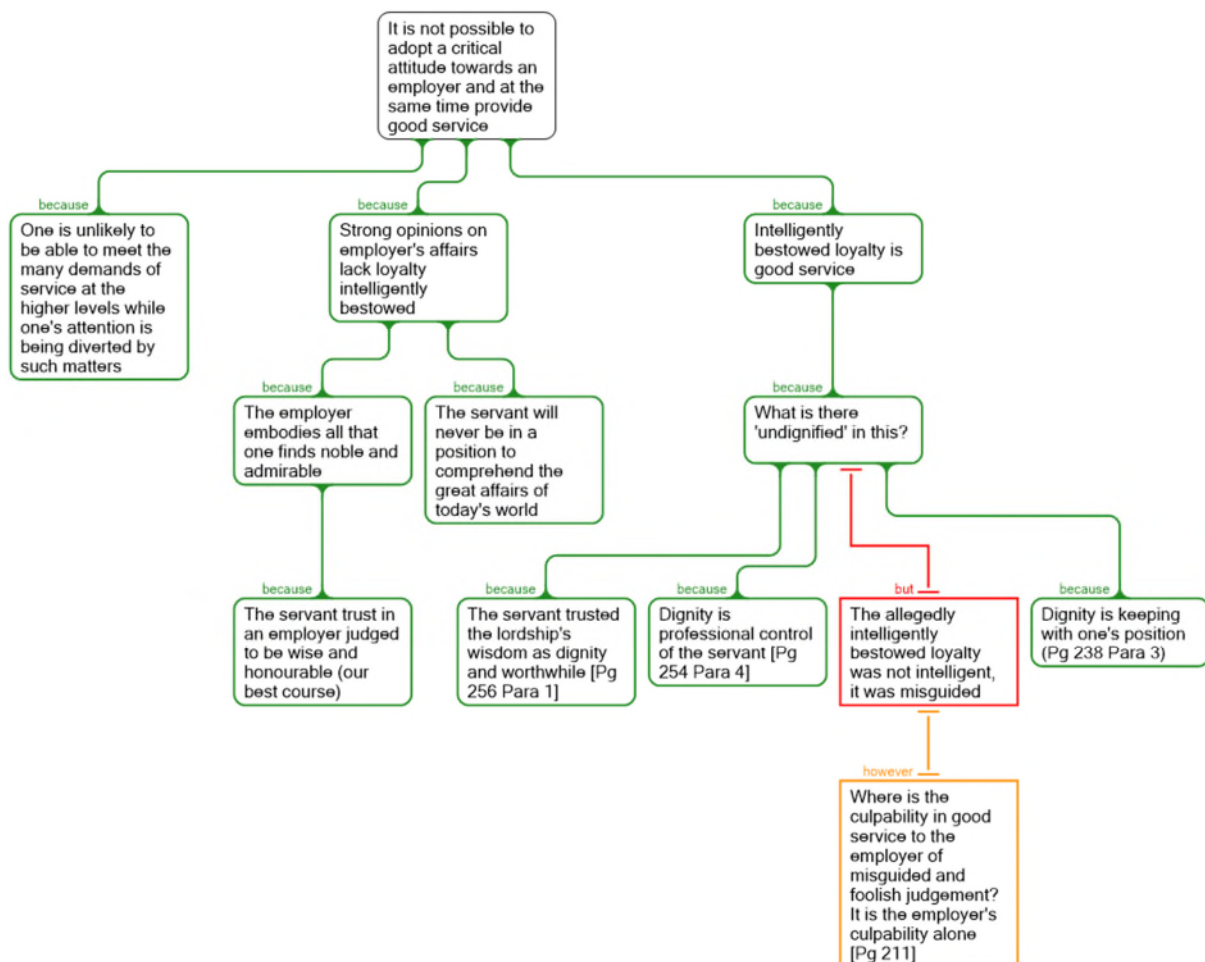
Bantering is taking a too casual attitude for Mr Stevens until he sees it as a necessary skill for his new working relationship. Indeed, he must practice the leisure with diligence.

While this theme of work-leisure is important, it is not the key point of the novel. The central theme, the key point, is Mr Stephen's professional understanding of his work in 'service'. It is summed up in this self-reflection towards the end of the novel:

I personally knew professionals, both of some ability, who went from one employer to the next, forever dissatisfied, never settling anywhere, until they drifted from view altogether. That this should happen is not in the least surprising. For it is, in practice, simply not possible to adopt such a critical attitude towards an employer and at the same time provide good service. It is not simply that one is unlikely to be able to meet the many demands of service at the higher levels while one's attention is being diverted by such matters; more fundamentally, a butler who is forever attempting to formulate his own 'strong opinions' on his employer's affairs is bound to lack one quality essential in all good professionals: namely, loyalty. Please do not misunderstand me here; I do not refer to the mindless sort of 'loyalty'

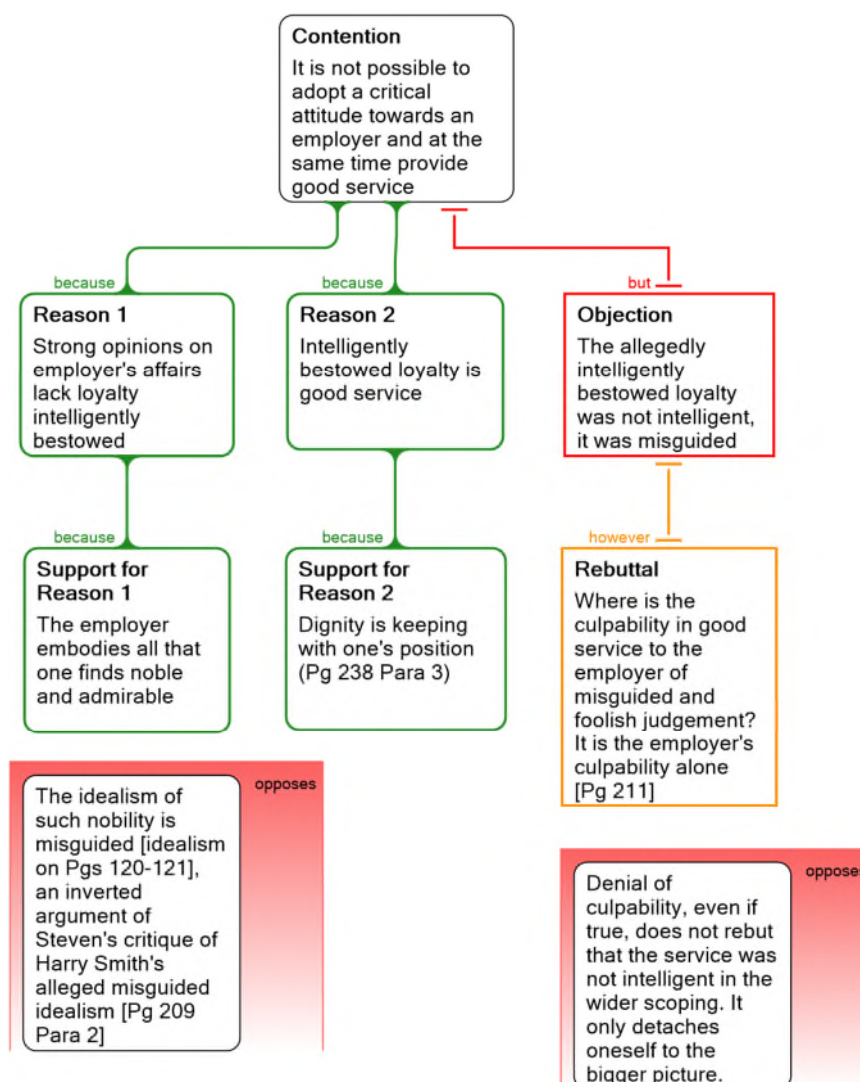
that mediocre employers bemoan the lack of when they find themselves unable to retain the services of high-calibre professionals. Indeed, I would be among the last to advocate bestowing one's loyalty carelessly on any lady or gentleman who happens to employ one for a time. However, if a butler is to be of any worth to anything or anybody in life, there must surely come a time when he ceases his searching; a time when he must say to himself: 'This employer embodies all that I find noble and admirable. I will hereafter devote myself to serving him.' This is loyalty intelligently bestowed. What is there 'undignified' in this? One is simply accepting an inescapable truth: that the likes of you and I will never be in a position to comprehend the great affairs of today's world, and our best course will always be to put our trust in an employer we judge to be wise and honourable, and to devote our energies to the task of serving him to the best of our ability. [page 210]

The passage with other references throughout the novel is a curious argument. Mapping it out, at a first go, it looks like this:



The contention is that it is not possible to adopt a critical attitude towards an employer and at the same time provide good service. First, one is unlikely to be able to meet the many demands of service at the higher levels while one's attention is being diverted by such matters. That is a reasonable claim, but it is not the primary concern for Mr Stevens. The argument goes much deeper to the view that strong opinions on employer's affairs lack the loyalty which is intelligently bestowed. There is a questionable premise that an employer embodies all that one finds noble and admirable. The reasoning seems only that the servant or employee trusts in an employer's judgement to be wise and honourable ("our best course"). This is Mr Steven's 'dignity' which is another important theme discussed throughout the book. The subservience is in that the servant will never be able to comprehend the great affairs of today's world. Intelligently bestowed loyalty then is good service. Such subservience is not seen as 'undignified' because the servant trusted the lordship's wisdom as dignity and worthwhile [page 256 Para 1]. There is also another way to avoid the stigma of subservience and that is to see dignity as the professional control of the servant [page 254 Para 4]; as in Nietzsche's Master-Slave dynamic.

Let us simplify the argument and then we can see the objections to Mr Steven's view of his professional work:



The prime criticism of the contention (that it is not possible to adopt a critical attitude towards an employer and at the same time provide good service) is that the allegedly intelligent bestowed loyalty was not intelligent, it was misguided. However, Mr Steven rebuttals, "Where is the culpability in good service to the employer of misguided and foolish judgement?" It is the employer's culpability alone [Pg 211]. The rebuttal has some standing, as it is aligning with a fair point that dignity is keeping with one's position [Pg 238 Para 3]. The important thing to be said, however, about the denial of culpability, is that it is not relevant to the point. What Mr Steven's view of his professional work misses is the bigger picture. If his work and dignity, so defined, is the only important matter then he does win his argument, but he lost many good and significant ideas along the way. He has put himself into a small world of practice, and where even leisure is instrumental.

The other important theme goes to the culpability of his former employer, Lord Darington. Here the film version has done mischief by conflating the three separate time periods of the novel, as historical markers: 1923, 1933, and 1938. The distinct and very different times of Anglo-French-German-Italian-American diplomacy cast a very different light on the role of Lord Darington. The Darington Hall conference, the fictional backdrop to the Lausanne Conference of 1922–1923, was really about the harsh Treaty of Sèvres imposed upon the government of the Ottoman Empire after World War I by the Allied Powers, included provisions that demanded the partition of Anatolia. The Allies were more favourable to the new government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Darington's concerns about the restrictive and unfair conditions from the Paris Peace conference upon Germany was simply not in the ballpark in 1923; however, concerns were diplomatically raised later and the fictional Darington was historically right in his attempt to shift the fictional M. Dupont, a high-ranking French politician, and also right in challenging fictional Senator Lewis and the concern for American profit from the war debt. Nevertheless, Senator Lewis's point about the gentleman's amateur game-playing also rings true in the history.

When the book gets to the era of Oswald Mosley and the 'blackshirts' (British Union of Fascists; BUF) we are in a far different diplomatic world [page 146], with Adolf Hitler as the German Chancellor in 1933. The prominent members and supporters of BUF came from across the British class system, including the rough working-class persons, but among the British establishment were:

- Patrick Boyle, 8th Earl of Glasgow was a member of the House of Lords;
- Lady Cynthia Curzon (known as 'Cimmie') was the second daughter of George Curzon, Lord Curzon of Kedleston, and the wife of Oswald Mosley until her death in 1933;
- Major General John Frederick Charles Fuller was a military historian and strategist;
- Group Captain Louis Greig was a British naval surgeon, courtier and intimate of King George VI;
- Harold Sidney Harmsworth, 1st Viscount Rothermere, was the owner of the Daily Mail and a member of the House of Lords;
- Josslyn Hay, 22nd Earl of Erroll, was a member of the House of Lords;
- David Freeman-Mitford, 2nd Baron Redesdale, was a member of the House of Lords. His wife, Lady Redesdale, and two of his daughters were also members;
- Diana Mitford (Lady Mosley, after her marriage to Sir Oswald Mosley in 1936;

- Edward Frederick Langley Russell, 2nd Baron Russell of Liverpool, was a member of the House of Lords. His wife Lady Russell was also a member;
- Edward Russell, 26th Baron de Clifford, was a member of the House of Lords;
- Hastings Russell, 12th Duke of Bedford, was a member of the House of Lords; and
- Frank Cyril Tiarks was a Director of the Bank of England.

Britain and Germany of 1933 were quite different to 1923, and the film did a great disservice by changing the context of the novel's 1923 conference to the conditions of 1933 and the legitimatisation of the Nazi Germany. Finally, the novel's and film version's conditions of 1938 are yet different to 1923 and 1933. The wider support for the blackshirts, as seen in 1933, had begun to collapse in 1937. The era of appeasement in 1938 was more contentious and it centres around the fictional secret meeting of Neville Chamberlain and Joachim von Ribbentrop at Darington Hall [pages 228-239]. Mr. Cardinal conversation with Mr Steven is enlightening in that it is a retrospective historical judgement of the events from 1938.

With this historical analysis we can understand the culpability of the employer, Lord Darington. In 1923 his intentions were noble, but he lack the right contacts to work with; those mentioned in the fictional conference of 1923 would never have been helpful. The old aristocratic diplomatic network had collapsed in the wake of World War I, and Lord Darington was an amateur in not understanding this fact. Lord Darington must take responsibility in 1933, as those across the class system, for buying into the Anti-Semitism of the blackshirts. Ignorance is a poor excuse and does not weigh against the responsibility to know.

This observation circles back to Mr Stevens and his view that his professional work does not entails knowing either. He also denies responsibility by scoping down to a limited worldview. The limited worldview of the British class system and the implications for politics then becomes a final important theme for the book. The era of appeasement, reaching its climax in 1938, was complex, but could have been untangled better, at the time, had thinking about human dignity not been so misguided by the class thinking. Indeed, this is the great contrast that Kazuo Ishiguro brings with the flashbacks in the present of 1956, casting back into its past. Memories and its valuation were fading away. Or so we thought....

Kazuo Ishiguro was born in Nagasaki, Japan, on 8 November 1954, the son of Shizuo Ishiguro, a physical oceanographer, and his wife, Shizuko. His family moved to the United Kingdom when he was five, and Ishiguro spent a large part of his life in Britain. He became a UK citizen in 1983 and was given the Order of the British Empire in 1995.