



## Protection of Conscience Project

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# Rounding the Horn with the Principle of Double Effect

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*April, 1805: Napoleon is master of Europe. Only the British fleet stands before him. Oceans are battlefields.*

Thus opens the movie *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*.<sup>1</sup> The audience finds British Captain Jack (Lucky Jack) Aubrey and the crew of his man o'war on the north coast of Brazil, hunting the French privateer *Acheron*. The film follows the hunt down the east coast of South America, around Cape Horn and into the Pacific.

“Rounding the Horn” in the days of sail was often a treacherous business, and the film makes the most of the tradition with a roaring gale, mountains of roiling water, blinding spray and the sepulchral moan of the wind in the rigging.<sup>2</sup> Aubrey, his quarry in sight, is pushing his ship to its limits when the ship's carpenter shouts a warning: “I'll not vouch for this mast, sir! Not around the Horn!”

But Aubrey presses on, and the result is tragedy in the full sense of the word.

For the carpenter is right about the mast. Unable to withstand the fury of the wind, the top of it snaps off and blows into the sea, carrying with it a sail and boom and a hapless sailor. When the broken mast and sail crash into the waves, the rigging connecting them to the ship instantly pulls taut, turning the wreckage into a deadly sea anchor. The ship, crippled, begins to heel over, while the desperate sailor thrashes through the water to reach the rigging, his only hope of getting back to the ship.

Aubrey and the men above instinctively urge him on, but the camera reveals seasick men below deck, suddenly terrified when they feel the lurch of the ship as it begins to go over. A shout from a ship's officer brings the danger home to Aubrey and the choice before him. He must cut loose the rigging to save the ship and crew, leaving the man in the water to drown, or wait for the man to reach the rigging and pull himself to the ship, risking the loss of the ship and all hands.

Three hatchets are produced, and the Captain, an officer and crewman hack at the lines even as the floundering sailor nears the rigging and his comrades aloft call hope to him. With a final look at the doomed man, Aubrey cuts the last rope. The ship, suddenly freed, rights herself and lifts once more in the surge, leaving the gasping victim to his fate. The men below break into cheers; Aubrey, the officer and the crewman sink in grief. Afterward, the ship's surgeon, trying to console Aubrey, suggests that he had to choose the lesser of two evils. In fact, the incident was a fine cinematic rendering

of the principle of double effect.

Aubrey's act - cutting loose the wrecked mast and rigging - had two inseparable effects, one intended (saving the ship and crew) and one unintended (the death of the man overboard). The intended effect was unquestionably good, and the unintended effect unquestionably evil.

But the act - cutting the lines - was not, in itself, wrong. And the good effect was accomplished by this act, not by the death of the sailor, which was an unintended and unavoidable consequence. Finally, the evil effect (the death of one sailor) was not disproportionate to the good effect (saving the ship and crew).

These are the essential elements of the principle of double effect. The man overboard scene in the film, only a few minutes in length, dramatically illustrates the nature of the choice: the good and evil effects, their inseparability and proportionality, that the good is intended, the evil, unintended. Especially praiseworthy from an ethical perspective is the portrayal of the death of the sailor as not just 'unintended' in a technical sense, but something clearly unwanted, a source of profound sorrow.

It is remarkable to find a principle that is sometimes mocked as ethical sleight-of-hand so vividly illustrated by acting, music and script in a popular film.

**Notes:**

1. 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox, Universal Pictures and Miramax Films, 2004. The DVD version of the film, with its scene-selection option, is particularly convenient for classroom use.
2. Scene 14 in the DVD version.