

**Film Title:** *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*

**Director:** Peter Weir

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**Author:** Robert W. Kolb, University of Colorado at Boulder,  
Robert.Kolb@colorado.edu

**Principal Players:** Captain Jack Aubrey–Russell Crowe; William (Will) Warley, Captain of the *Mizzentop*, the midshipman who goes overboard–Joseph Morgan; Mr. Allen, the Master, the older florid man with a stove-pipe hat–Robert Pugh.

**Genre:** action, drama, adventure, war

**Exact Segment:** Track 15 entire; “Man Overboard”

**Exact Segment Length:** 4:51

**Exact Segment Start:** Beginning of Track 15, “Man Overboard”

**Exact Segment End:** At the end, a small box with the name of Warley on it dominates the screen. The scene ends with a cut away from the box.

**Synopsis:** A man swept overboard a warship must be sacrificed in order to save the ship and crew. The clip highlights the conflict between rights and social outcomes.

**Keywords:** utilitarianism, rights, emotion, leadership, consequentialism, duty

**Setting the Stage:** The action takes place aboard a British man-of-war, *H.M.S. Surprise*, during the Napoleonic Wars. The ship has been damaged by a sneak attack from a mysterious French ship and now fights its way down the east coast of South America as it struggles to make for and round Cape Horn and break into the Pacific Ocean. A storm rises with waves reminiscent of footage from *Victory at Sea*, and it is clear that the ship and its men are in for a difficult time.

**Description of Events in Segment:** As the storm rages, the sailors of the *Surprise* make a desperate effort to reduce sail. Men are aloft in the rigging, trying to strike and secure sails, when the storm sweeps broken spars, sail, line, and a man (Will Warley) into the ocean. Will is a young midshipman and the favorite of the crew. The debris is still attached to the *Surprise* by lines, and the desperate Will swims toward the wreckage that trails the ship, while his shipmates yell encouragement.

The debris, toward which Will desperately swims and which he seems sure to reach, trails through the water acting as a sea anchor. This causes the *Surprise* to heel ever more dangerously and the action of the sea anchor threatens to take down the entire ship. Meanwhile, below decks, the rest of the crew panics, knowing that the ship is close to foundering.

The master and Aubrey exchange meaningful looks—they know that they must cut the lines and sacrifice Will to save the ship and crew. Under Aubrey's orders, they all hack at the lines to cut away the sea anchor, as lush and emotional music swells. Will can see Aubrey and the others at the stern hacking desperately at something, but he does not fully understand the significance of the action. Eventually, the men sever the lines and free the ship. As the ship immediately rights itself, Will disappears from view astern among mountainous waves and the crewmen below decks cheer knowing that they are saved, but not knowing that Warley is doomed.

In the aftermath, the crew of the *Surprise* feels the loss of Will fully. At the same time, it seems clear that the men will never look at Aubrey the same way again. The scene closes with Will's friend looking at Will's silhouette and packing away his few former possessions, and the friend closes a wooden box with a name on it—W. Warley.

**Ethical Concepts and Issues Illustrated:** The scene brilliantly depicts one of the most frequent and difficult ethical decisions—achieving some worthy outcome requires the sacrifice or violation of someone's rights or legitimate expectations. Given student tendencies towards consequentialism, this clip forcefully demonstrates the poignancy of those situations in which rights conflict with desirable goals.

This is not a “trolley car” example in which one must choose to save some and let others die, although it may seem so at first. The clear premise of the segment is that the lines must be cut and Warley discarded if the ship is to be saved, but

the alternative is that the ship will founder and all, including Warley, will die. Nonetheless, it is by Aubrey's will that Warley must die.

The scene provides a great opportunity to initiate the discussion of rights and to dramatize the distinction between *prima facie* and absolute rights.

**Additional Comments:** Suggestion: The dialogue is difficult to hear; turning subtitles on helps understanding a great deal.

**Film Basis:** The film is inspired by the Patrick O'Brian series of seafaring novels that revolve around the person and career of Jack Aubrey. The books are known as the Aubrey-Maturin series—Maturin is the physician side-kick of Aubrey. The series consists of twenty complete novels, plus several chapters from the unfinished twenty-first. The novels follow Jack from youth to the heights of his military career. *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World* uses events drawn from at least two of the O'Brian novels. O'Brian died in 2000 at the age of 85.

**Definitions:** *sea anchor*—a restraint tied to a boat that floats or lies partially submerged behind a vessel to slow its advance and to keep its bow up, usually used in heavy weather; *mizzen*—the mast closest to the stern; *top*—a small platform part of the way up the mast; *mizzen top*—the top on the mizzen; *taffrail*—upper part of the ship's stern; *topgallant*—a small square sail at the top of a mast; *mizzen topgallant*—the topgallant at the peak of the mizzen. In the scene, it is apparently the mizzen that breaks and hurls the mizzen topgallant and Warley into the ocean.

### Questions for Discussion:

1. Did Aubrey do the "right thing" in deciding to cut Warley loose?
2. What might Kant say about Aubrey's decision? In particular, is there a sense in which Aubrey violates Warley's rights? Does Aubrey treat Warley as a means only?
3. Would Mill have a problem with Aubrey's choice?
4. What is the essential ethical problem in the situation?
5. Does Aubrey violate Warley's rights as a human being? If so, does that mean Aubrey acted unethically?
6. Assume that Aubrey acted morally and did the right thing? Why is he upset

afterwards? Why not simple celebration?

7. What role does emotion play in helping us to understand (or in keeping us from understanding?) rights and wrongs in situations like “Man Overboard?” Are our emotional experiences simply things that happen to us, or do they somehow give us information about the world in general—and about good and bad, right and wrong in particular?

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