**Beyond the Textbooks**

*by*[*Gary Jason*](http://www.libertyunbound.com/node/382)  |  Posted November 30, 2010

One of the curious things about business ethics texts is that they tend to focus on puzzling moral issues, such as whether monitoring emails on the job is wrong, or when is it morally permissible to blow the whistle on an employer. They usually spend little time on the notion of character and the problem of giving in to temptation.

This is curious to me. Most cases of unethical behavior in business — or in family life, religious life, government, or any other institution built with the crooked timber of humanity — are not cases in which the evil-doer acted wrongly because he couldn’t figure out what was right. Much more often, they are cases in which someone put the morally right aside because the wrong just feels so good.

Does anyone seriously believe that Bernie Ebbers defrauded investors in WorldCom because he didn’t understand that fraud is morally and legally unacceptable? Or that when Ken Lay and the smart guys at Enron defrauded their investors, they were somehow unaware that hiding debt in offshore, off-the-books entities was actually fraud? No, these perps did what they did because it gave them what they wanted (wealth, power and prestige), and they thought they could get away with it.

This phenomenon of succumbing to temptation despite your moral understanding is at the heart of an excellent movie now available on DVD.

*Good*is based on a 1981 stage play of the same name by C.P. Taylor. It tells the story of John Halder, a modest, mild-mannered literature professor in a German university in the 1930s, when the Nazis were consolidating their power. Halder writes a novel that portrays euthanasia in a romantic, favorable way. The subtheme of euthanasia plays out in a personal way for Halder as he struggles to care for his mother, who suffers from dementia. The novel is seized upon by the Nazis, for whom “compassionate euthanasia” of such people is a step toward finding a “final solution of the Jewish problem.” Propaganda minister Josef Goebbels first flatters and then bribes Halder into letting the Nazis make a film from his book. They enable Halder to move ahead in his career.

As this proceeds, we see how Halder is corrupted step by step. He leaves his wife and children for a beautiful young student. He joins the Party and is even given a token position in the SS (which liked to have a few academics on its roster for the sake of appearances). He is rewarded with the chairmanship of his department.

Halder’s systematic seduction and corruption are pointed out to him by his Jewish friend Maurice Gluckstein, who explains to him what the Nazis are doing to their country and to his own character. But Halder is able to maintain his self-image as a Good Man, even as his corruption evolves. He watches while Gluckstein is harassed and menaced more and more by the Nazi regime.

When Halder finally tries to help Gluckstein leave Germany, Halder’s new wife betrays his friend.  Halder discovers this, and by using his SS rank and his wiles, discovers and manages to get into the concentration camp to which Gluckstein has been condemned, hoping to free his friend. Here he is finally forced to recognize both the moral reality of the regime of which he has been a willingly blind supporter, and the degraded nature of his own character.

The acting in this insightful movie is uniformly good. Especially notable in support are Adrian Schiller as the cynical Josef Goebbels, and Jason Isaacs as the morally clear-eyed Maurice Gluckstein. The exchanges between Halder and Isaacs’ Gluckstein are among the best scenes in the movie. Viggo Mortensen is simply superb as the morally blind John Halder. The handsome Mortensen could have made a career playing nothing but roles such as Aragorn in *The Lord of the Rings*, yet he has gone out of his way to take on edgier roles, such as the gangster Nikolai in *Eastern Promises* and the unnamed father in *The Road.* Mortensen plays Halder perfectly.

Vicente Amorim’s direction is outstanding as well, getting just the right balance of passion and restraint from the cast. And the cinematography is beautifully done.

This is a thought-provoking film, one well worth renting or purchasing as a holiday gift for your most thoughtful friends.

**Editor's Note:***Review of "Good," directed by Vicente Amorim. Miromar Entertainment, 2008, 96 minutes.*

**About this Author**

Gary Jason is an academic philosopher and a senior editor of *Liberty*. His recent books, *Disturbing Thoughts: Unorthodox Writings on Timely Issues*and *Philosophic Thoughts: Essays on Logic and Philosophy*are both available through Amazon.