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# Calvin and Hobbes and John Paul

By James Q. Wilson

**M**ALIBU, Calif. Many people find philosophy boring and theology frightening. They would rather read the comics. And so would I: I can't imagine starting a day without studying "Calvin and Hobbes." But whether we notice it or not, that comic strip is often about the fundamental moral issue of our time. Here is a little boy (implausibly given the name of a stern Protestant theologian) asserting that what he wants — fame, luxury, diversion, staying out of school, hitting Susie with a snowball — is all that should matter. I am the center of the universe, he says; values are what I say they are.

And then there is the tiger (paradoxically given the name of an English philosopher who pretty much defended the little boy's view) who offers the sober judgment of mankind about this self-centeredness, all in the language of gentle irony. Periodically, just to prove that mankind is in charge, not little boys, Hobbes beats up on Calvin. And periodically, just to prove that the life of a solitary egoist is inadequate, Calvin blissfully nuzzles the tiger's fur.

This may seem an odd introduction to an essay on papal encyclical. But it is a matter of the highest importance to discover the grounds for our belief that Calvin is usually wrong and Hobbes is almost always right. At a time when some critics think literature is meaningless, some philosophers think morality is without foundation and some sociologists think the family is an arbitrary institution, we need to ask why so many of us think just the opposite.

That is one of the tasks that John Paul II set himself in his recent letter to Roman Catholic bishops. In it he offers a modern restatement of the

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church's argument against moral relativism. He takes on anthropologists who believe that morality has no meaning outside the culture that defines it, philosophers who argue that morality depends on a person's motives or the results he achieves and ordinary people who claim (with Calvin) that personal freedom is supreme and that its exercise should be uninhibited unless it harms others.

In opposition to these views, the Pope offers "Veritatis Splendor" — "The Splendor of Truth." That truth is not a list of specific moral rules. It is the universal law of nature that is discoverable by human reason; it exists in all people regardless of culture, and leads us inevitably to judge actions as right or wrong — whatever their intentions and whether or not they help or harm others.

In mathematics, we begin with assumptions and deduce conclusions; in ethics, as Aristotle pointed out, we begin with the conclusions — specific moral sentiments and rules — and infer general principles. Those principles, Aristotle felt, showed that all men sought some good, which he

## An encyclical for everyman.

called happiness. But not what we mean by happiness; certainly Aristotle did not mean that we seek mere sensory pleasure. True happiness means a life lived according to virtue.

Almost everyone agrees what such a life is like, at least in general terms. We value self-control over self-indulgence, fair play over foul, reasonable fellow-feeling over relentless selfishness. In the Catholic Catechism, these are stated as the virtues of temperance, justice and solidarity. These virtues are not wholly defined by our own culture: all people tend to speak of cultures that have or have not progressed, and they measure that progress by a standard that transcends their own culture. The stand-

ard is derived from mankind's possessing a common human nature — what the Founding Fathers meant when they said, "We hold these truths to be self-evident."

This may seem like common sense or irrelevant philosophical hair-splitting. It is neither. Americans are used to defining their relationships with each other in terms of freedom and rights, and our philosophers tend to base morality (to the extent they can think of any grounds for it at all) on a mutual respect for rights. But a morality based on rights is one that judges only harms and then judges them only in proportion to the degree of harm. A rights-only morality may criticize cheating or stealing, but it has little to say about pornography, drug use or consensual sex. These are private matters. The Pope, like other natural law philosophers, argues that though these may be private behaviors, that does not mean they are beyond the reach of moral judgment.

The encyclical does not devote much space to judging these specific acts, or any acts. It repeats the church's well-known opposition to abortion, homosexuality, suicide and euthanasia but does not make clearer the relationship between natural law (or human nature, properly understood) and these actions other than to say that they are "hostile to life itself." Moreover, the Pope restates the Bible's injunction that it is never right to do evil in order to prevent a greater evil.

This argument against what he calls "proportionalism" means, presumably, that abortion is immoral even to save the life of the mother or to prevent the birth of a horribly deformed infant, and suicide and euthanasia are immoral even if the painfully and terminally ill beg for release from their plight. Many people, including many Catholics, will question these implications as well as the Pope's implacable opposition to artificial birth control and abortion. Because they disagree with these papal views, they may not read the encyclical at all or, if they read it, be put off by the absence of any detailed defense of them.

This would be a pity. For though

the Pope clearly has not changed his mind, the encyclical is not about specific moral questions so much as it is a defense of the necessity — for non-believers as well as believers — of making moral judgments.

"The Splendor of Truth" restates natural law theory and seeks to make it a more secure and compelling basis for morality by linking human nature to divine design. If human nature was created by God, then natural law is God's statement of right conduct. Since man was created fallible but free, he may not always recognize or choose to act upon that law, and must seek God's grace. And since some people may recognize a universal moral law but still wonder why they should obey it, the prospect of eternal damnation must be held out as the ultimate sanction.

Most of mankind lives outside the church and thus lives without its assistance in knowing the law or receiving divine grace, without believing that the price of an unforgiven mortal sin is eternal damnation. What is in store for such people? Can they, will they, live moral lives?

Aristotle evidently thought so, since his version of natural law did not depend on divine wisdom, grace or justice. Were he responding to John Paul, he would point out that the fundamental moral sentiments tend to be the same everywhere, that though there are many religions all tend to teach essentially the same moral rules, and that most people obey these rules without fearing eternal damnation. He would probably admit that he did not know whether the natural law was a result of evolutionary accident or divine intent, but would add that the practical result would be very much the same in either case.

And I would add that the Pope and people "who are made nervous by references to God and revelation" (to quote the theologian Richard John Neuhaus) "still have a lot to talk about." Or as St. Paul put it, when heathens "who have not the law do by nature what the law requires, they are a law unto themselves. . . . They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts." □