OPINION

Upright citizens

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In a classic test of moral reasoning, Heinz, an impoverished man with a dying wife, is faced with a dilemma. A pharmacist in town is selling a treatment for an exorbitant price. Heinz tries to raise money to buy the drug but falls short. The pharmacist refuses to let him pay half the money up front and the rest later, so Heinz breaks into the pharmacy and steals the drug.

Is he right or wrong to do so, and why?

According to **Lawrence Kohlberg**, a protégé of child psychologist Jean Piaget, the thought process an individual uses to answer this question reveals where he or she stands on the ladder of moral development.

According to Kohlberg's theory, young children base moral reasoning on primitive 'obedience and punishment' orientation, and most teens and adults base their moral reasoning on the desire to conform or respect for authority. Some adults, however, make moral decisions based on abstract ethical principles.

So where does that leave people with autism? A new study, published online 30 September in the *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders,* suggests that adolescents with autism are **well able to distinguish** the difference between social transgressions and moral ones. But they tend not to couch their explanations of why certain things are right or wrong in abstract terms. Nor are they able to generalize about why certain acts are acceptable in certain situations, but not in others.

Does this mean that they are stuck midway up Kohlberg's ladder? Is there any point in trying to nudge them up the rungs into abstract reasoning? The researchers seem to think so.

In the study, they presented 36 teens and preteens with a set of ten pictures of familiar classroom and schoolyard scenarios. These include pictures of one student hitting or pushing another, throwing a glass bottle, not sharing food, or stealing.

These pictures of moral transgressions are balanced by other scenes of social blunders, such as eating a snack on the floor while peers eat at their desks, daydreaming while other students listen to their teacher, dropping a bag on a chair while peers hang theirs up neatly on hooks, and drawing on a wall while others draw on paper at their desks.

The 18 study participants with autism were just as adept as the 18 typically developing teens at describing the scenarios in the photos. The autism group tended to include a lot of irrelevant detail in their descriptions, but that's beside the point.

When asked why the illustrated behaviors were wrong, the participants with autism were more likely to say things like, 'That's bad, the teacher will get mad' rather than providing an abstract rationale for their judgment.

The difficulty these teens had in providing multiple examples of situations in which the social blunders would be acceptable shows an impairment in 'generalizing,' the researchers say. They suggest that it is important to teach individuals with autism the principles upon which rules are based, rather than just the rules themselves, and to emphasize the context of behavior governed by rules.

This seems a quixotic endeavor to me. Given the well-known difficulty individuals with autism have in inferring other people's **state of mind**, how would one teach them why some social contexts are acceptable and others are not?

Studies have shown that people with autism tend to judge **accidental harms** just as harshly as intentional ones, and that children with autism are even more distressed by **rule-breaking** than are typically developing children.

In short, most people with autism seem to know the difference between right and wrong. Why does it matter how they make their moral judgments, so long as they arrive at the right ones?