Chapter 3
Critical Thinking in Students' Ethical Reasoning: A Reflection on Some Examples from the Swedish National Tests in Religious Education

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Abstract To reason about ethical issues in a thoughtful manner is often seen as a desirable human ability if one is to live a responsible life, both as an individual and as a member of society. Taking its point of departure in Professor of Ethics Daniel Lee's non-confessional approach to ethics education and Professor of Education Robert Ennis's definition of critical thinking, this chapter reflects on manifestations of critical thinking in ninth graders' responses to two tasks concerning ethical issues in the Swedish national tests in religious education. The reflection tries to describe and discuss some critical-thinking skills that are manifested and how these vary among the analysed student responses. The reflection also considers how task design may affect opportunities for students to manifest critical thinking. Further, the reflection discusses whether critical thinking could be a feasible focus point when testing, measuring and assessing students' ethical reasoning, in order to avoid mixing personal and societal ethical values into the processes of testing, measuring and assessing this kind of reasoning.

3.1 Introduction

It could be argued that the development of the ability to reason about ethical questions is at the heart of being able to live a responsible life, both as an individual and as a member of society. Without such an ability, how can a person, and indeed humankind, find responsible ways to deal with issues such as sustainable development, human rights and other decisive issues of today (Paul and Elder 2009: 36, 2010: 37)?

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In Swedish religious education – which is non-confessional – one key component is ethics education (Franck 2014: 188–190, 192–194; Skolverket 2011: 186–187, 189–194). This is basically to be seen, using the terms of Professor of Ethics Daniel Lee (2006: 199, 208), not as an education in ethical indoctrination but as an education in ethical engagement (Löfsted 2011: 115–124; Skolverket 2011: 186–187, 189–194; Osbeck et al. Forthcoming: 3). The latter is roughly defined as an approach 'which emphasizes listening to others in an open-minded manner and coming to carefully considered conclusions only after thoughtful reflections about differing views concerning matters of controversy' (Lee 2006: 199). Many writers (Carlton and Ting 2013: 64; Meisel and Fearon 2006: 149, 151–156), among them Lee (2006: 199, 201–202) and one of the leading authorities on critical thinking (Menssen 1993: 85; Facione 1990: 18), Richard Paul (1988: 11–13), have argued that at the centre of such an approach lies the art of critical thinking, an ability that is at the core of modern Western education (Siegel 2010: 141; Moore 2013: 506; Behar-Horenstein and Niu 2011: 25; Tsui 1998: 1[4]; Larsson 2013: 423).

The purpose of the following chapter is to reflect upon manifestations of critical thinking when students reason about ethical issues in the Swedish national tests in religious education and then to draw upon this to formulate some topics for further discussion.

3.2 Setting the Scene for the Reflection

In this section, I discuss some methodological issues related to my reflection.

3.2.1 Tasks

Two Swedish national tests in religious education were conducted in 2013, one for sixth graders and one for ninth graders. The test for sixth graders included four tasks concerning the ethical dimension of religious education (Skolverket 2013a: 43). The test for ninth graders included three tasks of that kind (Skolverket 2013b: 40). Here I will base my reflection upon students' responses regarding two of the three tasks in the ninth grade test.

I have chosen the responses from these two tasks because they concern the reasoning aspect of the ethical dimension. Furthermore, these tasks were chosen because they were designed as essay tasks, which, compared to a multiple-choice design, give quite a good opportunity to see how the students actually *reason* about the ethical issue at hand (Tsui 1998: 21[18]; Norris 1985: 42, 44; Larsson 2013: 135). That in turn also makes it possible for me to reflect upon manifestations of critical thinking in their ethical reasoning.

As with most ethical issues, the two tasks addressed are of the kind that is usually described as ill-structured problems (Kuhn 1991: 10; King and Kitchener 1994:

10–13), that is, in short, problems or issues where there is no certain answer, and it falls to the individual to make judgements based on reasoning (Kuhn 1991: 10; King and Kitchener 1994: 10–13).

In one of the tasks (for tasks, see Appendix 1), the students were asked to reason about the ethical concept of forgiveness (Skolverket 2013c: 8, see also Chap. 4 in this volume). In the other, the students were asked to reason about the death penalty, taking their point of departure in different ethical ideas, such as deontological ethics (Skolverket 2013d: 16). In both tasks, the students were to draw only on their own previous knowledge and experience. There were no texts[1] that the students were supposed to base their answers upon or to consider in their responses to the tasks (Skolverket 2013c: 8, 2013d: 16).

3.2.2 Students, Answers and Selection

The teachers who conducted the test were, inter alia, asked to send in readable copies of the responses of every student born on the sixth of each month to the University of Gothenburg, who, on behalf of the National Agency for Education, had constructed the test (Skolverket 2013e: 6). From among these responses, I randomly selected 40, only discriminating to ensure an appropriate division between answers from male and female students and to include some answers from students of foreign origin. For each of these 40 responses, I then read thoroughly the responses to the two tasks mentioned above and finally chose some illustrative responses from among these 40 for the above-mentioned purpose of this chapter. In the light of this, the final selection can be described as strategic. The responses I present are thus not representative of Swedish ninth graders in general.

3.2.3 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is an elusive phenomenon, and it has been conceptualised and defined in a variety of ways (Tsui 1998: 5[2]; Petress 2004: 461–466; Phillips and Bond 2004: 278–280; Moore 2013: 507–508; Johnson and Hamby 2015: 417–430). Though some (McPeck 1990: 58) stress the differences in definitions, others (Halpern, (2001)[1993]: 272; Tsui 2006: 201, 2002: 743, 1998: 5[2]; Quellmalz 1987: 87–90) have argued that there is a great deal of consistency in the various ways of defining the phenomenon, not least when they are operationalised in empirical investigations.

[1] The task about the death penalty contains a short text (Appendix 1). But the task is not about the actual text, and the text cannot in any concrete way be used as support for the reasoning the task calls for, i.e. the students cannot base their thoughts about the death penalty and the different ethical perspectives on the text in any reasonable way.

In this reflection, I take my point of departure from a widely recognised definition formulated by the professor of education and long-standing authority in critical thinking (McMillan 1987: 11; Facione 1990: 18, Menssen 1993: 85), Robert Ennis, who writes that critical thinking is 'reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do' (Ennis 1987: 10, 12, (1993): 180). This is indeed a very dense definition, and Ennis's (1987: 12–15) elaboration consists of more than 150 different specifications. Without giving the full elaboration of the meaning in this context, we can use an abridgement made by Ennis where he states that this involves a person doing most of the following:

1. Judging the credibility of a source
2. Identifying conclusions, reasons and assumptions
3. Judging the quality of an argument, including the acceptability of its reasons, assumptions and evidence
4. Developing and defending a position on an issue
5. Asking appropriate clarifying questions
6. Planning experiments and judging experimental designs
7. Defining terms in a way appropriate for the context
8. Being open-minded
9. Trying to be well informed
10. Drawing conclusions when warranted, but with caution (Ennis 1993: 180)

In light of this definition, some immediate clarifications are warranted in relation to my reflection. Firstly, even though I take this definition as a point of departure, it should be stated that I use it predominantly as an overarching concept to frame and to anchor my thoughts on the students' responses, not as a fine-grained measuring instrument of any sort. Secondly, it should also be stated that merely because of the nature of the tasks, some of the ten abilities in Ennis's list above couldn't reasonably be expected to appear in the students' responses. Among these are 'judging the credibility of a source', 'planning experiments and judging experimental designs' and 'trying to be well informed', although the last of these could perhaps be linked to being in possession of the appropriate factual knowledge for the task.

3.2.4 Analysing Students' Responses

My reflection is based on my analysis of the selected student responses to the two tasks. This analysis set out to trace manifestations of critical thinking in the responses using the specified definition of critical thinking as an overall framework. At a global level, the two key questions in the analysis were 'Can elements of critical thinking be seen in the students' responses to the task?' and if so 'Which elements of critical thinking can be seen?'

There was no intention that the analysis should cover every possible element of critical thinking that can be found in ninth graders' reasoning about the two tasks. The analysis was carried out solely to make an initial reflection on manifestations of critical thinking in students' ethical reasoning and from this to introduce some potentially interesting questions for further discussion. In connection with this, it

may also be of importance to emphasise that the different abilities that are included in critical thinking often intersect and overlap with each other, and there can be legitimate grounds for interpreting the answers differently with regard to which abilities actually manifest themselves (Larsson 2013: 41–42; Gustafsson et al. 2014: 22, 25–27, 30–43, 54–55,64–67, 99–104). It therefore follows that my interpretation of which abilities appear in the responses is neither the only nor the final one. In accordance with the objective of my reflection, and in order to make the presentation clearer, my standpoint here is that I have an obligation to show how the interpretation I make has its foundation in the definition and in the empirical data, rather than reasoning about every other possible interpretation.

3.3 The Reflection, Act I

In this section, I reflect on some of the student responses to the two tasks. I first address the task concerning the death penalty and then the task about forgiveness.

3.3.1 The Death Penalty, Deontological Ethics and Traces of Critical Thinking

It is first necessary to say that the task in question was not only about the death penalty and deontological ethics; it was wider in scope, also including consequentialist and intentionalist ethics in relation to the question. The fact is, however, that the students' responses in general give an impression of unfamiliarity with the different ethical theories. I have therefore limited my reflection to the ethical theory where the students seemed to be able to reason in any depth: deontological ethics. It is also essential to know that in the responses that I have chosen, there is an overall interpretation of the task as being *to reason about how a person with a deontological ethical view would look at the death penalty*. In this context, it should also be stressed that it is only extracts of each student's response that I present below. These students' responses are more extensive and in some cases also concern other ethical viewpoints. Though this is the case, the empirical extracts show *everything* each individual student expresses about deontological ethics and the death penalty.

With this as a background, I will now turn to the students and their actual reasoning. I will start by saying that I find what can be called *traces* of critical thinking in some of the students' reasoning. I use the term traces because what I see in the students' responses, at a global level, are more *indications* of critical-thinking abilities, which can mature and develop, than actual fully fledged critical-thinking abilities. Some of those traces are, however, more evident and developed, while others are quite vague and undeveloped. There are also students for whom reasoning can be described as lacking any direct trace of critical thinking.

In the following section, I will present three empirical examples of what I mean and try to explain how I see them. I will begin with an example of the most distinct and developed trace of critical thinking that I found among the selected responses:

> A deontological ethicist would say that the death penalty is wrong because you can use a rule that 'it is always wrong to kill', which says that the act is wrong regardless of consequences or intention. A deontological ethicist could also say that the death penalty is right and lean on rules like 'an eye for an eye', when he says that if someone committed a murder he should also be killed as punishment. The principle, however, would only justify the death penalty if the perpetrator committed a murder himself. (S1)[2]

In this response, I can see primarily two abilities that could be linked to critical thinking: 'identifying assumptions' and 'being open-minded'. The presence of the first of these is indicated by the fact that the student shows the skill to see that one crucial foundation in a deontological view is the rule or norm itself, and depending on the preferred rule, different stands could be taken on the same issue. The second ability, being open-minded, is revealed when the student shifts from one perspective to another (Ennis 1987: 12). To elaborate, the student explicitly shifts from one rule and one standpoint on the issue (sentence one) to another rule and another standpoint on the issue (sentence two), making it clear that there is not one fixed way to look at the issue from a deontological ethical viewpoint; it all comes down to the preferred rule. Perhaps even the ability 'drawing conclusions when warranted, but with caution', could be seen in this student's response, manifested in the last sentence. Building on the conclusion from the sentence before, in the last sentence, the student shows the ability to make a clarification aimed at determining under which circumstances the proposed conclusion is valid.

If the example discussed here is seen as a sort of norm, the next selected answer (S2) could be said to contain essentially the same two abilities, but in a much more vague and undeveloped way.

> From a deontological perspective the death penalty is wrong. Just because the criminal committed a great moral injustice, we do not need to do it – two wrongs don't make a right. But to let one who is prone to murder again live can be morally wrong, people are endangered. But letting someone die in prison due to life imprisonment is also morally wrong. (S2)

In this answer the student does not, in a clear manner, display an understanding of the deontological assumption regarding the rule and the importance of the preferred rule and the standpoint to be taken on the issue. Rather this is something that could be read into the response. The student could even be said to state initially that there is only one absolute rule and one possible stand from a deontological viewpoint. But in sentence three, the student signals that this is not necessarily the case by introducing – although vaguely – another somewhat opposing rule about 'protecting the people', leading to another possible standpoint concerning the death penalty. If the student's response is interpreted in that way, the student can be seen,

[2] This student response, and those presented below, has been translated from Swedish to English by the author. An effort has been made to stay as close to the original written response as possible.

though not distinctly and obviously, as exhibiting a hint of the critical-thinking ability 'identifying assumptions'.

The second ability, open-mindedness, could be seen in the student's ability to shift from the initial statement that a deontological approach implies a negative attitude to the death penalty because of the rule 'it's morally wrong to kill another person' to a perspective where the rule 'protecting the people' introduces the possibility of another deontological standpoint on the issue. Even the last sentence could be interpreted in this way. Here the student – indirectly – points to the possibility that even a life sentence could be immoral from a deontological view, because the person is then predestined to die inside the walls of jail. Is this another rule being introduced, that of a person's 'right to freedom', or just a sharpening of the rule 'it's morally wrong to kill another person'? The fact that this question arises underlines the ambiguity and the unclear manner in which the ability to be open-minded is displayed in this student's response.

Compared to the previous empirical extract (S1), there is no specific passage in this response where the shift in perspective is obvious, making it much harder to become aware of any shifts in perspective and the intentions behind them. Still, I would say that such shifts are present, implying that the student displays the critical-thinking ability of being open-minded.

Still using the first example as a norm, I now turn to the third empirical example:

> A deontological ethicist would probably say that the death penalty is wrong because you are not allowed to kill someone. That is a rule and the action must follow that rule. (S3)

In my interpretation, this student's answer demonstrates no skill connected to the two abilities 'identifying assumptions' and 'being open-minded'. Instead of identifying the underlying assumption in the deontological view discussed earlier, this student assumes that, from a deontological point of view, there can only be one absolute rule, leading to one absolute standpoint. The shortcomings in identifying the assumption in question also become visible in connection with the ability to be open-minded. The student shows no skill in shifting perspective and clings to one absolute rule with one absolute standpoint. In addition, there is no obvious display of other critical-thinking abilities in the student's response. I therefore claim that this student's response could be described as lacking any trace of actual critical thinking.

3.3.2 Conclusion

I've now given some empirical examples that suggest that there are various depths and degrees of traces of critical thinking when students reason about how a person with a deontological point of view would look at the issue of the death penalty. There can also be a total lack of any trace of critical thinking in a student's reasoning.

Momentarily returning to Ennis's (1993: 180, 1987: 10, 12) definition of critical thinking as reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do, a student with more profound traces of critical thinking ought to be able to make better and more accurate decisions on what to believe or do with regard to the issue at hand, and a student showing less profound traces should make correspondingly less accurate decisions. While even the most profound traces (S1) are not particularly profound, the *more* profound traces, compared to vague or absent traces, should then create a better opportunity for the student to make a decision about what to believe in relation to a deontological ethical viewpoint on the issue of the death penalty. Indeed, it might even create better opportunities for making decisions on the death penalty more generally, based on the assumption that the traces of the capabilities 'identifying assumptions' and 'being open-minded' could possibly be transferred into dealing with other aspects of the issue.

3.3.3 Forgiveness and Traces of Critical Thinking

The second task revolved around the issue of forgiveness, primarily asking the students to reason from the point of view of both the one asking for forgiveness and the one giving it. When I analysed the selected answers on the task, I found, as with the death penalty task, what I referred to above as *traces* of critical thinking. And as with the death penalty task, those traces could be more or less distinct and developed or even be lacking.

With the above as a short preamble, I will now introduce four different empirical examples and describe my interpretation of them in terms of critical thinking. I begin with the response that I see as the one that displays the most profound traces of critical thinking among those selected:

> Forgiving someone can be both difficult but also a relief. When you have forgiven someone, you can of course be a little mad at the person but you should be able to be together, talk and socialise.
>
> I think it is easier to forgive than to ask for forgiveness. It requires more courage to swallow one's pride and ask for forgiveness and admit that one has done something wrong. To be asked to forgive can of course also be tough. It depends on what one is supposed to forgive. It is harder to forgive the murderer who killed your son than it is to forgive your brother when he slapped you. But to forgive is essential. /…/
>
> If everyone in the world forgave each other and thought of other things than violence and revenge, the world would be much better. There would be fewer wars and conflicts. So many people would benefit, if people began to forgive each other! (S4)

According to my interpretation, there are primarily two abilities connected to critical thinking displayed in this student's answer. These are the ability 'to be open-minded' and the ability 'to develop and defend a position on an issue'. I first turn to the ability to be open-minded, made explicit in the student's skill in shifting perspective (Ennis 1987: 12). This shift is primarily made in two ways. On the one hand, the student shifts from the perspective of the one asking for forgiveness to the

one giving it (mainly paragraph two); on the other hand, the student shifts from the perspective of two individuals (paragraph one/two) to the perspective of society (paragraph three).

The display of the other ability, 'developing and defending a position on an issue', is perhaps a bit more intricate and disputable. What speaks for its presence is that the student evinces a skill in making some more exact and developed claims when arguing from the different perspectives. For example, following sentence five, such claims are made in connection with discussing the role of the forgiver: 'It depends on what one is supposed forgive. It is harder to forgive the murderer who killed your son than it is to forgive your brother when he slapped you'. From my point of view, this kind of claim could be seen as displaying the ability to develop a position on the issue at hand, i.e. forgiveness, and also gives some clues about how the student might defend his or her view on this specific issue.

Using the example presented as a norm, I now direct attention to the second empirical example:

> If someone has done something that is considered wrong, or something that hurt someone else, it is good to ask for forgiveness from the person or persons affected. One then shows that one is truly repentant, and wants to do the right thing. Simply, one asks for another chance. It is important to get another chance, since everyone occasionally does something wrong, and you should not be judged for life due to one little wrongdoing.
>
> To forgive someone is therefore also important. One has to accept that people make mistakes sometimes, even those close to you. One must be able to give people another chance. However, you should probably not forgive someone too many times. If someone hurts you again and again, then maybe it's time to stop forgiving and move on. Or if someone has done something really horrible, e.g. murdered, you should probably not forgive so easily. (S5)

In this student's response, the two abilities 'being open-minded' and 'developing and defending a position on an issue' are also displayed. However, compared to the first example, in this response, the display of the ability to be open-minded is more restricted. This can be seen from the fact that the shift in perspective is made solely between the one asking for forgiveness and the one giving it, the societal perspective being absent.

The second ability is shown in the different claims made when arguing from the asker's and the giver's points of view. Compared to the first empirical example (S4), it can be pointed out that this ability is perhaps even a little bit more developed in the answer in question (S5). This is particularly true in the case of the forgiver, where the student makes some additional distinctions in his or her claims (paragraph two, sentences two to six) in comparison to the student in the first empirical extract (S4).

I now turn to the third example:

> If you have done something wrong and ask for forgiveness you show that you are mature and that you can admit your errors. If you ask for forgiveness and the person you ask accepts your request, this demonstrates that both have moved on. So it is important for both people involved to forgive or ask for forgiveness. (S6)

My interpretation is that this student's answer can be said to contain one of the abilities discussed in relation to the previous examples, namely, the ability 'being open-minded'. This is evinced in the same restricted way as in the previous empirical extract (S5) and is displayed in the ability to shift from the perspective of the one asking for forgiveness to the perspective of the one giving it (sentences one and two).

The absence of the ability to 'develop and defend a position on an issue' is clear, in that this student's answer does not display any skill in making more developed and distinct claims when shifting between the asker's and the giver's points of view. What is presented in relation to the perspectives is merely very brief and quite imprecise utterances, as in the case of the forgiver: '[If the forgiver] accepts your request, this demonstrates that both have moved on'. This makes it impossible to draw any decisive conclusion on how this student would develop and defend a position on the issue of forgiveness.

Still using the first example as a norm, I finally direct attention to the fourth empirical example:

> It's important to forgive each other because everybody makes mistakes occasionally. (S7)

In this student's response, neither of the two previously discussed abilities can be seen. The shift from one perspective to another, which indicates open-mindedness, is absent. The answer is in a way so terse that it is very hard to even establish any one clear perspective from which the student approaches the issue. And although the student laconically states an opinion in saying 'It's important to forgive each other because everybody makes mistakes occasionally', this could not, in any way, be described as a display of the ability to *develop* and *defend* a position on the issue of forgiveness. In sum, it is my interpretation that this student's response lacks any trace of actual critical thinking.

3.3.4 Conclusion

As with the issue of the death penalty, I have given empirical examples that indicate that there are differences in the depth and degree of traces of critical thinking in the students' reasoning about forgiveness, with some students' reasoning even lacking any trace whatsoever.

As before, a similar conclusion could also be drawn in relation to Ennis's (1993: 180, 1987: 10, 12) definition of critical thinking. That is, more profound traces of critical thinking, as in the first example (S4), ought to give better grounds for accurate and reasonable decisions on what to *believe* in relation to the issue of forgiveness and, perhaps in this case, even what to *do* when faced with a situation concerning forgiveness. However, the latter is just a presumed conclusion based on the idea that a more thought-through and more complex conception of forgiveness, including weighing up multiple perspectives and making claims for one position, also generates a greater preparedness for a more moderate and balanced action.

3.4 The Reflection, Act II

Thus far I've shown that critical thinking is present when students reason about ethical questions in the Swedish national tests in religious education. Further, I've said that what is present seems to consist of traces of critical-thinking abilities, not the full-blown abilities. I also described which of the specific critical-thinking abilities I interpreted as being the most visible in relation to the tasks in question. Additionally, I suggested that there are differences in the depth and degree of the traces of those abilities among the students, some having more profound traces, some having vague traces and some even lacking such traces. According to the definition of critical thinking being used, I have also claimed that those differences result in uneven opportunities for students to make well-grounded decisions on what to believe (and do) in relation to the issues dealt with in the tasks.

With this as a base, I would now like to introduce three further topics with a bearing on students' critical thinking when reasoning about ethical issues. The first one connects more directly to the specific tasks discussed above and concerns the nature of the tasks. The second and the third are more general: the second deals with the possibility of making test, measurement and assessment of ethical reasoning less controversial by targeting the critical-thinking aspect of such reasoning; the third deals with some definition issues.

Starting with the first, it seems possible, as proposed above, to identify critical thinking in the students' reasoning about the ethical issues in the two tasks. However, even the more profound traces of critical thinking found in the responses must be described as quite limited. In relation to this, one can ask several questions. The question I am considering here is whether this could in some way be related to the character of the task. The two tasks are presented in a straightforward manner without any obvious support regarding information about the issues that are to be discussed, that is to say without any text[3] to base the reasoning on. This means that factual knowledge brought into the reasoning must be based solely on the students' previous knowledge. In my opinion, this could be somewhat of a problem if one wants to see how far the students can take their actual reasoning (here, their critical thinking). If students lack factual knowledge of the issue that is to be discussed, it is not possible for them to develop their thoughts in a substantial manner, and thus their ability to think critically about the issue does not show; this is not self-evidently due to poor critical-thinking abilities but due to a lack of factual knowledge of the issue.

This problem could, in my opinion, be highlighted in connection to both tasks discussed. The problem is most evident in relation to the task about the death penalty. As I said earlier, when discussing the circumstances surrounding this task, it was not possible to analyse the students' reasoning on the death penalty in relation to consequentialist and intentionalist ethics because the students demonstrate a lack of familiarity with these perspectives. Even the analysis of the deontological

[3] See footnote 1.

perspective shows, in my opinion, clear deficiencies concerning their knowledge about the perspective in itself, which is, in turn, revealed in the quite limited traces of critical thinking here. If one wants to enable the students to show their critical-thinking abilities in a more profound way, it could therefore be fruitful to devise possible ways to manage the problem of previous factual knowledge. The simplest device, which I have tested in empirical research with good results (Larsson 2011, 2013), is to give the students fairly short texts to base their thoughts on. These texts, however, must be well adapted to such considerations as the age of the students, if one is to avoid making reading ability the decisive factor, which would simply replace one problem with another.

Now before turning to the second topic, I first need to return to the initial suggestion, as advocated by Lee (2006: 199, 201–202) and Paul (1988: 11–13), among others (Carlton and Ting 2013: 64; Meisel and Fearon 2006: 149, 151–156), and taken as point of departure in this reflection, namely, critical thinking is the core of good ethical reasoning. If this is to be taken seriously, it follows that the quality of critical thinking ought to be directly linked to the standard of ethical reasoning. Thus more profound and developed traces of critical thinking are linked to more advanced ethical reasoning, while poor or absent traces of critical thinking are linked to varying degrees of deficiency in such reasoning. Without jumping to conclusions and exaggerating, there is also support for this in the empirical extracts discussed above, comparing, for example, S4 and S7 in the task about forgiveness.

If that suggestion is accepted, it follows, in relation to the second topic, that it should be possible to address matters concerning testing, measuring and assessing students' ethical reasoning, which is to say students' reasoning about ethical issues, from a critical-thinking point of view. One could of course ask why should this be done. My main point here is that ethical issues in themselves contain conflicting and controversial values and solutions, which in turn make them troublesome where testing, measuring and assessment are concerned. That is because it is hard for those who are involved in testing, measuring and assessing to act from a neutral ethical standpoint (which would be desirable from Lee's ethical engagement approach to ethical education) without concern for certain ethical values of a personal or societal character (Paul 1988: 11–19; Lee 2006: 203–207).

In line with the standpoint that critical thinking is at the heart of ethical reasoning, however, one possible way to try to overcome this problem could be to test measure and assess the critical-thinking aspects of the ethical reasoning. That is not to say that it is easy to do those things in relation to critical thinking[4] but that such an approach at least creates an opportunity to try to remove those features of the testing, measuring and assessing that are potentially tainted with personal and societal ethical points of view and direct attention solely to the students' reasoning capacity, as seen from a critical-thinking perspective. As Paul states it:

[4] For more on difficulties in assessing and measuring critical thinking, see, for instance, Ennis (2008).

> Critical thinking does not compel or coerce students to come to any particular substantive moral conclusion or to adopt any particular substantive moral point of view. Neither does it imply moral relativism, for it emphasizes the need for the same high intellectual standards in moral reasoning and judgment that are the foundation of any bona fide domain of knowledge. (Paul 1988: 14)

Finally, I want to address some ambiguities surrounding the definition of some of the concepts that have been central in my reflection. These ambiguities, I would argue, have their origins in the underlying assumption that critical thinking constitutes the core of the ethical engagement approach and therefore also of ethical reasoning, meaning that better critical thinking equals more advanced ethical reasoning and poorer or absent critical thinking equals less advanced ethical reasoning. If this is so, critical thinking could be claimed to define the standard of ethical reasoning, with the reasonable conclusion that critical thinking somehow then defines ethical reasoning, with ethical reasoning simply being critical thinking that is directed towards issues of an ethical nature. In line with this kind of argument, one can ask whether there is anything that should really be called ethical reasoning and reasoning about ethical issues or whether critical thinking is the only concept to be used.

Another cause of this ambiguity is evident if attention is directed towards Lee's definition of the ethical engagement approach and Ennis's definition of critical thinking. Lee (2006: 199), on the one hand, states that the ethical engagement approach implies an educational standpoint where people should be allowed to, and even be taught to, deal with issues of an ethical nature 'in an open-minded manner and coming to carefully considered conclusions only after thoughtful reflections about differing views concerning matters of controversy'. Ennis (1987: 12), on the other hand, states that critical thinking is 'reasonable reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do', with one subcategory of this definition saying that this implies being open-minded, meaning, for instance, to 'consider seriously other points of view than one's own' and 'reason from premises with which one disagrees'. What exactly is the difference between those two definitions, other than that they are said by Lee and Ennis to define different things? Of course one can argue that there is a difference in the wording and, if studied as a whole, Ennis's (1987: 12–15) definition is presented in a more thoroughgoing way, *but* in essence they are almost interchangeably similar, I would claim, making it very hard, if not impossible, to make proper and valid distinctions between the two.

As no further conclusions on the question of ambiguity in definitions in this context have been reached, it is evident that the question is of future concern. If one wants to promote an education where ethical issues are approached with openness and without indoctrination, the question of the definitions employed in such an approach needs to be taken seriously – because fuzziness in definitions leads to the risk of introducing fuzziness throughout, opening the approach up to avoidable criticism.

3.5 Closing the Curtain

In the present chapter, a non-confessional approach to ethics education, where critical thinking is seen as a core competency, has served as a basis for a reflection on manifestations of critical thinking in student responses to two tasks concerning ethical issues, in the Swedish national tests in religious education. The reflection has centred on the character of these manifestations and demonstrated that there are what have been termed traces of critical thinking in the students' responses and that these traces differ in the degree of complexity between different students, ranging from no traces to more developed traces. In relation to the definition of critical thinking used, it has also been suggested there that these differences may lead to potential differences in students' abilities to decide what to believe or do in relation to these ethical issues. From a test and assessment perspective, the reflection has also touched upon ways in which design may affect the possible manifestations of critical thinking and how a focus on testing and assessing the critical-thinking aspect of students' ethical reasoning can be used as a basis for improving tests and assessments of students' ethical competence in a non-confessional context.

The reflection made in the current chapter should only be seen as an outline of ideas for further consideration and possible empirical studies. Although questions that point to a larger context have not been the focus of this reflection, such questions could indeed be asked. One of the most important of these, and one that deserves attention in the future, is that the analysed student responses indicate that the Swedish school system might have a limited and varied success in preparing individuals to reflect upon and, ultimately, to deal with ethical issues, an ability that was initially described as central to living a responsible life. This suggests that the national test, in this respect, can serve as more than an instrument to be used in trying to determine students' ethical 'knowledge'. It could possibly also be used as a basis for changes, to improve the education system at macro-, meso- and micro-levels in order to reduce differences between individuals and to strengthen the overall ability in individuals to succeed in living an ethically responsible life. In the long run, this is something that might enable (Swedish) society in general to, perhaps, better cope with questions of sustainable development, human rights and many others of tomorrow's more decisive issues.

Appendix 1

Task 12 (Forgiveness)

The word forgiveness is an important ethical concept. Perhaps you have forgiven someone or experienced being forgiven.

Discuss why forgiveness can be important both for the one asking for forgiveness and the one forgiving.

Task 25 (The death penalty)
Read the text below which deals with an ethical issue. Then solve the task below.

The Death Penalty: Right or Wrong?
The last execution in Sweden occurred in 1910. Johan Alfred Ander, who was convicted of a brutal murder, was executed early one morning in November at Långholmen in Stockholm. In Sweden, as in many other countries, the death penalty has now been abolished. However, it is still being used in several countries, for instance, China and the USA.

In newspapers and online, you can read about horrible crimes almost on a daily basis. For example, it could be about mass murder or serious sexual crimes. In these contexts, sometimes the issue of the death penalty comes up. Some say that the death penalty should be reintroduced in Sweden, while others say that it is the wrong way to go.

Discuss whether the death penalty is right or wrong. You should use the ethical models from the previous task in your discussion. Be aware that the same model can be used to argue both for and against the death penalty.

If you want, you can start your text with one of the following sentences:

- Whether the death penalty is right or wrong is something that can be discussed. A consequentialist ethicist would probably say ….
- A deontological ethicist would presumably say ….
- I think that an intentionalist ethicist probably ….

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