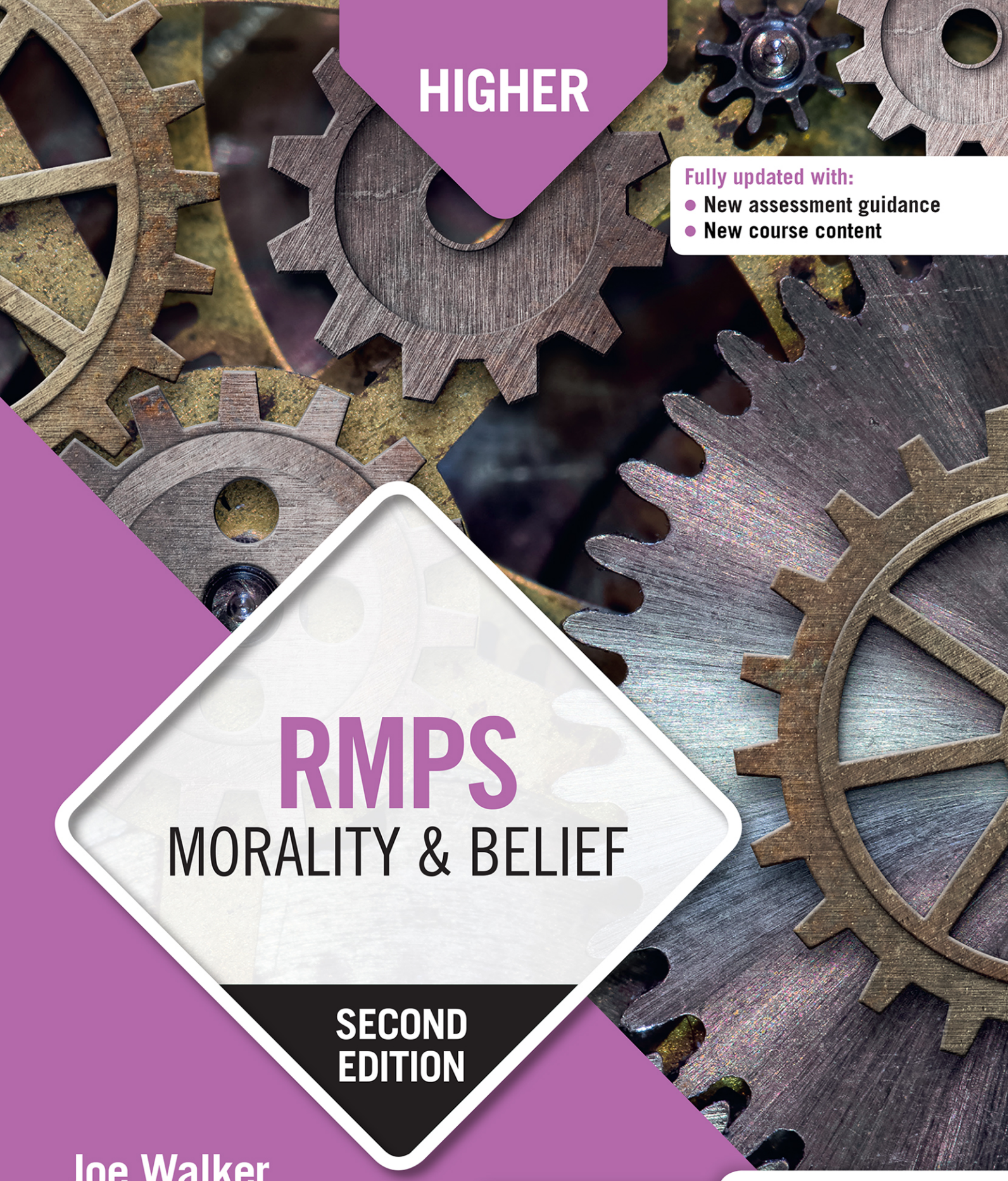

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RMPS

MORALITY & BELIEF

SECOND EDITION

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Contents

1 Morality and belief

It is the year 3016 and three young people have reached the magical age of 16 years old. In 3016, it is recognised that the world is a better place when everyone does what is right, although it is also recognised that forcing anyone to do what is right is wrong. So, invented by the genius John Burbleblott, a chemical potion has been created which tastes a bit like lentil soup. However, this potion is a one-off drink for life. At 16 you are offered a choice – you can drink a mug of this potion … or not. No one will force you to drink it and no one will judge you for choosing not to drink it. Once you have drunk this potion, its chemicals will go to work on your brain immediately and irreversibly. The potion will affect an area of your brain identified by John Burbleblott and named by him as the 'Burbleblott spot'. This bit of the brain is where all your decisions about right and wrong are made. The potion will work on this area of your brain and after drinking it you will never be able to think or do anything wrong again – for the rest of your life.

The three young people who must now make the choice about drinking the potion or not are typical young people in 3016. They love their holographic interface, their atmospheric sensory suits and, of course, their neurological media implants – well, what young person wouldn't? Interestingly, like all young people in 3016, beliefs are central to their life and of the three, one is a Christian, one a Buddhist and one a Humanist. Although much has changed in the world (and in the other planetary systems where people now regularly holiday), Christianity, Buddhism and Humanism remain much as they have done in the past, and so each young person makes decisions about life based on their understanding of Christianity, Buddhism or Humanism. Each has just received a priority neurological communication confirming the date when they must choose to drink the potion … or not.

Talk Point

What should the young people do?

What is morality?

At its simplest, morality is about right and wrong. Being a 'moral person' would mean living a good life and being an 'immoral person' would be the opposite. The difficulty is in deciding what is and is not 'moral', and then deciding how to live – and even if it is actually important to live – a moral life. In different times, places and in different cultures today, some people might think of something as perfectly moral and others might think the opposite about the same thing! Some people think that there are things which are 'morally neutral', while others might think that these very things are very 'morally charged'. Some think your morality is determined by the situation and others think it is determined by laws, rules or guidance from divine beings. Some think we are born with a 'program' in our brains about what is right and wrong and others think we are born like blank canvases, having to learn what we think is right and wrong by trial and error and by being guided by others in a variety of ways. Morals are sometimes summed up in laws and rules which we follow – and these vary according to where and when we live. Morals may also be summed up in codes and sets of guidance which are based on the beliefs of the communities we are a part of and any belief system we follow.

What is belief?

Our beliefs are the things we think about life, the universe and everything. Again, some people think we are born with beliefs and others think these are things we pick up and develop throughout our lives. Our beliefs are often very closely linked to our upbringing, and to the culture and time we live in. Some people probably constantly think about and challenge and reassess their beliefs – while others maybe just 'go with the flow' a little more. Some beliefs are very strongly held by some people – and for others beliefs are just there in the background. How much belief affects action is a matter of debate. Beliefs may come through experience, through being taught or through membership of communities and groups such as religious and other belief groups.

Talk Point

How do you make moral decisions? What influences you?

The link between morality and belief

In some ways the two words 'morality' and 'belief' can be interchangeable – what you think is right is also what you believe to be right and so morality can equal belief. However, the relationship between them isn't always simple because sometimes belief comes before morality: I believe X so this makes me choose Y. Sometimes belief comes after morality: I do X therefore I believe (or must believe) Y. This course is based on the idea that morality and belief are closely linked: the topics you will study in this course are going to make you think very carefully about your morality and your beliefs – and about how the two are related. All of the topics in this course can produce very fierce debate and strong emotions. Each topic can also lead to a very different range of views which depend on a very wide range of issues, facts and opinions. There won't be anything you're likely to study that will be simple and all the topics will almost certainly come with a dazzling variety of beliefs and moral viewpoints based on … well, that is for the rest of this book.

Making decisions about moral issues

We each probably make decisions about right and wrong many times every day. For example, you're reading this when you could be doing something else (daydreaming perhaps) – so you have made a choice about studying in RMPS or letting your mind wander away to other things. Many of our moral decisions are pretty straightforward ones and others are very complex. Some of the moral issues in this book are things you might never face – while others might be extremely relevant to you. What you will be learning throughout the course is the very important life skill of being able to make reasonable, thoughtful decisions. This is a skill which will be important throughout your life. You will learn about gathering evidence, weighing up arguments, considering different viewpoints and then putting that all together to make sense of your own response to the topic or issue. This will help you make decisions for learning, life and work. In this course you might cover science, technology, economics and social issues, for example, and you will draw on a range of beliefs and viewpoints to help you make sense of these very complex issues and topics – this won't be easy, but it will be rewarding.

Moral responses

For each of the topics you will examine in this course, you are expected to be able to consider them in relation to the following:

- religious responses
- non-religious responses.

You will be required to understand, explain and evaluate a range of religious and non-religious responses about the topic you choose to explore. Now, this doesn't mean that you can consider the topics in relation to 'my granny who follows voodoo' or 'my auntie Margaret who doesn't believe in any religion'. We will be considering *authoritative* responses from both these positions. These authoritative responses might be from a religion's sacred scriptures or a

non-religious belief group's agreed position about something. Authoritative responses might also include the teachings of key religious figures, past and present, and statements made by the 'ruling bodies' of such religions. For non-religious belief groups, authoritative responses might include the viewpoints of key figures, past and present, and statements from groups and organisations which are nationally or internationally representative of this belief group. Now, there are many varieties of religious belief around the world and there are many different non-religious philosophies, organisations and 'stances for living', so to keep this book as manageable as possible, we will be drawing on teachings, beliefs and views, as far as possible, from the following:

Religion: Christianity

Christian moral responses are reached by individual Christians and Christian groups in a variety of ways:

- **Reading sacred scriptures** In this case, the Bible. Christians are likely to read this and then try to work out what it teaches about right and wrong.
- **Key religious figures** In Christianity, the teachings of Jesus are central – and his teachings contain a great deal about moral behaviour and choices. There are other key figures in Christianity whose teachings and views Christians might draw on when considering moral issues: the first disciples, the apostles, saints, and theologians past and present. While scriptures and key figures are important, linking this to modern moral topics is not always straightforward – because many of the moral issues facing us today were not written about in the Bible, or dealt with specifically by any key religious figure.
- **Prayer** Individual Christians may also seek direct guidance from God on moral choices. They will pray and wait for answers and guidance. How they recognise and interpret this will be their choice.

For many Christians, learning from other Christians in denominations and churches is another way to make sense of difficult moral decisions – and in this course we will use two specific Christian denominations when exploring moral issues (although in your course you are free to use any religious response to moral issues).

Religious response: The Church of Scotland

A member of the Church of Scotland might draw on the views of the Church when making moral choices. They may take part in Bible study, listen to sermons and other teachings in their own church and learn from other members of the Church. As an organisation, the Church has a number of 'councils, committees and departments' which regularly prepare very detailed documents exploring particular moral issues. These documents are prepared by experts in the field they relate to and by theologians. They link Christian teaching to moral issues and may make recommendations to the Church's highest body, the General Assembly. The General Assembly meets once a year and is made up of commissioners – members of the Church who hold positions in local churches – such as elders, deacons and ministers. The Assembly debates and discusses the papers presented and may vote to accept them or not. Once passed by the Assembly a paper would be considered to be 'The Church's view on …'. However, individual members of the Church of Scotland can still choose to accept this view or not and the Church leaves a great deal of room for individual conscience. This book tries very hard to represent Church of Scotland teachings and views, but it is not in any way officially approved by the Church of Scotland and the issues it deals with change all the time. So, if you are a member of the Church of Scotland, check out the Church's position with your minister or by contacting 121 George Street, Edinburgh, the Church's headquarters.

Religious response: The Roman Catholic Church

A member of the Roman Catholic Church may take part in Bible study, listen to the views of individual priests and teachers, and pray and reflect, just like a member of the Church of Scotland. However, in Catholicism there are a number of other ways in which individuals arrive at moral decisions. The Catholic Church has, throughout its history, drawn on the views of a range of theologians – sometimes referred to as 'Doctors of the Church' – who have interpreted biblical and Church teaching on various matters. It has also had councils of the highest levels of the Catholic priesthood (cardinals, archbishops and bishops), for example, the Councils of Trent and the first and second Vatican Council:

at these councils, many doctrinal issues have been agreed and therefore have become Church teaching. One major source of Catholic teaching we will refer to in this course is the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC). This is a comprehensive document, finally published in 1992, which contains key Catholic teachings on a wide range of issues.

Unlike the Church of Scotland, where the leader is the Moderator, chosen only for a year, the head of the Catholic Church is the Pope – from the moment of selection this is a lifelong role (although, in 2013, unusually, Pope Benedict retired from the role to become 'Pope emeritus'). The Pope is also the Bishop of Rome and head of the Vatican State. The Pope is viewed as a final authority in matters of Catholic belief and he issues teachings in a variety of ways – for example, Papal Bulls and Encyclicals, which are documents issued by the Vatican that outline Church teaching on specific matters. Of course, things that the Pope says are often reported in the media – but his views are only Church teaching if they are issued in official Papal declarations (*ex cathedra*) and therefore represent the *magisterium* of the Church. Of course, Catholics are invited to accept and follow the teachings of the Church, but like other Christians, the role of individual conscience is still important. Catholics believe that the teachings of the Church are not to be thought of just as a set of dry rules or instructions but as something more. A good way to think of it is that Catholics believe that the Church is a mother and a teacher. A mother cares for you, looks out for you and wants to protect you from harm; in that way she also becomes your teacher. So Church teachings are not some list of 'dos and don'ts' but loving guidance about how best to live your life. It is important to point out that this book does not have any official seal of approval from the Catholic Church – so if you are a Catholic it would make sense to make sure your RMPS teacher and/or your parish priest supports your understanding of Catholic teaching on these complex issues.

Religion: Buddhism

Buddhists also meditate, reflect and study sacred scriptures in order to make moral choices. They consider the teachings of Buddha and of key figures within Buddhism, past and present. There are Buddhist scriptures too and writings from Buddhism, past and present, which Buddhists may draw on when considering their responses to moral issues. Like the other religions, though, many of the moral issues covered in this course were not around when these scriptures were written – so Buddhists have to try to link the general principles in their scriptures with modern moral issues – which will be easier at some times than others. Like other religions, Buddhism also has a number of denominations and other groups within the religion – Theravada and Mahayana, for example, but also Zen and Pure Land. In this book, Buddhism will be covered as a single religion rather than going into detail about its different versions. This, again, is just to keep things manageable in a book that you won't need to transport into school in a wheelbarrow. You are more than welcome to explore all the different varieties of Buddhist thought and teaching on each issue and build your own understanding further – and if you are a Buddhist you will probably want to do this anyway.

Talk Point

Within your class, what role is played by religion when your classmates are making moral decisions? How well or badly does this reflect the place of religion in society as a whole?

Non-religious response: Humanism

Humanist Society Scotland has referred to itself as a belief group. Humanists make moral choices in a variety of ways. There are no agreed central sources of teaching for Humanists – certainly no 'scriptures' of any sort – and there is not any particular agreement on who the key figures in Humanism might be. Humanist organisations like Humanist Society Scotland and Humanists UK (formally the British Humanist Association) do publish materials expressing 'Humanist views on …', but individual Humanists are free to accept or reject these views as they see fit. For Humanists, the most likely way to make moral choices is to gather as much evidence as possible and then approach this evidence using reason to reach a conclusion. According to Humanist Society Scotland, Humanists *'are people who trust science and rational inquiry to help explain the universe around us, and who do not resort to supernatural explanations'*. Humanism is therefore a philosophy,

an approach and a way of life – but each Humanist can reach their own conclusions about moral issues. Humanists may make use of the views of key figures in Humanism such as Bertrand Russell, Carl Sagan, Richard Dawkins and others – but people do not have the same place in Humanism as key figures generally do in religion.

Non-religious response: Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is a philosophical perspective. Generally speaking it is based on the principle that any moral choice should result in 'the greatest good or happiness for the greatest number'. This can also be expressed as 'the best consequences for the greatest number'. This means that Utilitarians always have to weigh up the benefits and costs linked to each moral choice in relation to who they affect and how they affect them. Utilitarian thinking appears in the writings of two of its founding fathers, Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–73). Utilitarianism can also be broken down into two types of Utilitarianism: *act* Utilitarianism, which uses the consequences (real or predicted) of actions to decide what is right or wrong; and *rule* Utilitarianism, which is a set of rules (or a rule) that are applied to decide what to do in certain situations to maximise happiness for the greatest number.

Moral complexity

Moral issues are often very complex and require a good understanding of the background and linked issues. As an example, let's consider the environment. To make a moral decision about the environment you would probably need to consider:

- a range of scientific claims about the environment and the effect of human activities on the environment
- a range of views about the impact of human psychology, behaviour, social structures, politics and economics (to name but a few) on the environment
- how far all of these views, opinions and facts and figures agree or disagree about the causes and consequences of human activity for the environment
- the key teachings and viewpoints of your religion or belief group and perhaps the key teachings and viewpoints of key figures and representatives of this religion or belief group and how far the group is agreed on its approach to human interaction with the environment
- your own understanding of all of this! (Then you can decide whether to recycle your jotters from last year or chuck them in the bin …)

Perhaps the next time anyone suggests that RMPS is easy you might like to mention these five bullet points.

Nevertheless, although moral choices are not easy to make, it is vital that we make them – and that we make them as carefully as possible. All of the issues in this course are complex, sometimes very sensitive and usually very difficult. The consequences of our actions (or inaction) might also be very serious, so it is everyone's responsibility to make carefully judged moral decisions. This course is not just about passing Higher RMPS (though that's important) – it's about helping you to take your place as a member of society who is informed about the big issues and who can have a positive impact on the world. It's important to understand the world in which we live – but it's also important to work towards making it a better place for all: your part in that is just as vital as anyone else's.

Personal Reflection

- *How do you make moral choices?*
- *What role does religion or belief play in your life?*
- *Would you take John Burbleblott's potion?*

Active learning

Check Your Understanding

1 What might be the characteristics of a 'moral person'?
2 Why doesn't everyone agree about what is and isn't moral?
3 Describe two sources or methods a Christian might use to help make moral decisions.
4 For one of these sources or methods, explain one benefit and one drawback of using this to help make moral decisions.
5 What differences are there between how a member of the Church of Scotland and a Roman Catholic might make moral decisions?
6 Why might the scriptures of religions not be easily applied to moral issues in the twenty-first century?
7 In what different ways might people who are not religious make moral decisions?
8 What is the difference between act and rule Utilitarianism?
9 Why might making moral choices be difficult?
10 Explain how you decide what is right and wrong.

Investigate

1 Carry out a survey in your class or school to find out how people make decisions about right and wrong. Make sure the answers are treated as confidential. You could ask people about how far their choices in life are guided by religious or other kinds of belief. You could collate and display your findings.
2 By this stage in your learning you will have learned a lot about Christianity. You may have learned about Buddhism and Humanism. Carry out your own research into Buddhism and/or Humanism and create a report on one/both of these. You should find out about their history, their key beliefs and views, and how Buddhists and Humanists make decisions about right and wrong.
3 Although you will have learned about Christianity throughout RME, you may be less familiar with the Church of Scotland and/or the Roman Catholic Church. Carry out your own research into one of these and create a PowerPoint or other visual presentation about the denomination you have chosen.
4 To help you develop your understanding of the religious and belief landscape of Scotland, you should carry out research to produce a poster about religion and beliefs in Scotland. What is the spread of religion and beliefs like in the twenty-first century? How has it changed in recent times? How central is belief in the life of modern Scots?

Analyse and Evaluate

1 What are the key similarities and differences between how the religious and non-religious perspectives in this section reach moral decisions?
2 Followers of religions draw on a range of sources when deciding what is right and wrong – often including direct revelation from their divine figure. What should a religious person do if they think their divine figure is telling them to do something which all the teachings of the religion point to as being wrong?
3 Discuss each of the following statements in pairs and then in your class consider the responses people give:
   - The sacred scriptures of religion come from so long ago that they aren't really very helpful to people trying to make moral choices in the twenty-first century.
   - Most moral issues are far too complex for anyone to understand and make decisions about – we should leave it to the experts.
   - No one has the right to suggest what anyone else should believe.
   - Everyone is responsible for their own moral choices – we can't blame anyone else.
   - Even if a key figure or famous person says we should do something, we still need to work it out for ourselves.
   - Following a religion or a belief system is just an easy way to avoid making decisions for yourself.

Apply

Having now considered the religious and non-religious perspectives you will explore in this course, in groups, come up with a range of simple moral dilemmas (don't use anything you might cover in this book), for example, 'You have accidentally dropped your wee brother's favourite toy and it has smashed into a thousand pieces'. For each of these moral dilemmas explain what a Christian, Buddhist, Humanist and Utilitarian might advise and what sources they might draw on in giving their advice. You can go into as much detail as you like.

MORALITY AND JUSTICE

2 Causes of crime

Imagine the following fictitious situation: James Carron has been found guilty of murder for which he may now face life imprisonment. Before sentencing, the judges hear final statements from the defence and prosecution …

Defence: My Lords, there is no doubt that the crime committed by James was a truly horrific one. James has acknowledged that and is deeply sorry for his actions. He understands and accepts that he must be punished for his actions. However, the defence argues that a life sentence is not in order here. It would be easy to think of James as simply a thoughtless monster who carried out a terrible action, but of course the truth is far more complex than that. From birth, James did not receive the opportunities in life that many in this courtroom have enjoyed. His abusive father was in and out of prison many times, before abandoning his wife and children. James's mother had a difficult life, battling addiction and an abusive relationship. The young James had to grow up quickly and his difficult life fostered in him a deep anger towards the world, an anger which would erupt uncontrollably for the slightest of reasons. This inevitably led to James missing a great deal of his education and therefore losing out on making himself desirable to any employer. This, in turn, led him to drug addiction and a series of petty crimes – crimes through which he hoped to support his younger brothers. As a society, we all share the blame for James's circumstances – his downward spiral was there for all to see, but he was no one's concern. Unsurprisingly, anger and resentment built up in James, and this anger, clouded by his drug dependency, ultimately led to the actions for which he is being sentenced today. It would be easy to think that James could have exerted some control over his circumstances to avoid his crime – but James was a victim of a series of dreadful circumstances which might have pushed any one of us to our limits. For this reason the defence calls for leniency in sentence – an expression of society's responsibility for the circumstances of life against which we did not do enough to protect James.

Prosecution: My Lords, the prosecution does not, for a moment, minimise the difficulties of Mr Carron's life. We recognise the failings on the part of many others, which led to his difficulties throughout life. We recognise that there were times when his judgement was less than it could be as a result of his drug dependency. We recognise that Mr Carron's circumstances were far from ideal. While all this is undeniable, however, it does not excuse Mr Carron from the enormity of his heinous actions. Many people experience great hardship in life, many are neglected by parents, fail in their educational aspirations, are excluded from working life and as a result seek escape through drug dependency. We do not wish to minimise this negative set of life experiences which Mr Carron has experienced. However, while many share the unfortunate nature of his life experiences, this does not automatically lead them to become killers. It is not inevitable that dreadful circumstances in life make one a murderer. No, we argue that Mr Carron, despite his tragic circumstances, ultimately had a choice. In choosing to carry out his vile crime he chose the wrong path. For this, he must be punished to the fullest extent of the law. All face difficulties in life – some certainly have more than their share of hardship – but to accept that this excuses the taking of life is not acceptable. Mr Carron made many poor choices, and it is for these choices that we call for a sentence of life imprisonment. Any other sentence would express contempt for Mr Carron's victims, and open the door for all to claim that equally atrocious events were somehow not their responsibility …

What is crime?

James Carron has committed murder – the taking of innocent life without justification – which is regarded as a crime everywhere. But what makes it a crime? Let's think of crime as anything which breaks the law. Laws are different around the world, of course, so what counts as a crime in one country might not in another. To keep things simple, we'll stick with Scots law – so crime is anything which breaks the law in Scotland. Crime can be committed on purpose (intentionally), such as *murder*, or it can be unintentional, such as causing death by dangerous driving, in which case the charge is more likely to be *culpable homicide* than murder. It is also a crime to attempt to do certain things (such as *attempted murder*) – and it is a crime to *aid and abet* someone who is committing a crime. There are many crimes, and some are considered by the courts to be more serious than others. Murder and assault are more serious than parking on a double yellow line or making a fraudulent insurance claim. While most people are likely to agree that some crimes are far more serious than others, there can still be different views about how criminal 'lesser' crimes are, such as taking certain classes of recreational drugs, for example. Throughout this section, we will assume that anything which breaks the current laws in Scotland is a crime.

Talk Point

Are some crimes worse than others? Who decides and based on what?

Causes of crime: simple or complex?

Imagine you were one of the judges. What sentence would you give James Carron? For some, the causes of crime are relatively straightforward and quite simple, for others they are far more complex and difficult to disentangle. When courts in Scotland make decisions about sentencing they do take into account a range of factors using 'background reports'. These can include any information, from the guilty person's mental state to other circumstances of their life. The aim of the court is to find out if there are any mitigating circumstances. Defence solicitors may also give a plea in mitigation, which basically amounts to trying to get as light a sentence as possible, putting before the judges a range of factors which affected the client's actions. During court cases, solicitors and advocates are likely to be very skilled in introducing doubt into judges' and juries' minds about the guilt of the accused. One way this can be done is by highlighting life circumstances which may have contributed to the actions of the accused. Judges and juries should be making their decisions about whether or not the accused is guilty based on the facts alone, but of course all involved are human, and introducing the idea that somehow the accused 'couldn't help themselves' may well appeal to human nature. Guilt should be linked only to *whether or not* the person committed the crime, but in reality perhaps it's a bit more complicated because it might be hard for judges and juries to ignore *why* the accused might have committed the crime. Throughout this section it is important to be aware that the causes of one kind of criminal activity may be very different from the causes of another – or they could be exactly the same. So, essentially, solicitors defending those accused of crimes may claim that the crime came about as a result of psychological factors or environmental influences (or, of course, a complex mixture of both).

Possible psychological causes of crime

It is not always easy to separate psychological causes from wider social circumstances and environmental influences because there will be interaction between both. However, some possible psychological causes of crime might be:

Individual psychological factors

Is there such a thing as a 'criminal personality' – are some people 'born criminals'? Is there a gene for being a criminal? Psychologists and neuroscientists are likely to disagree about this – partly because what makes your personality is itself very complex. But let's say that something about your personality makes you more likely to commit crime. Let's say that in your DNA, there is a code for being a criminal – does that then mean you are not responsible for your actions? Should we screen for this DNA before birth – and if we find it, what should we do? Would everyone who has this DNA automatically (and unavoidably) commit crime? Could there be DNA for theft, for murder, for parking on double yellow lines? It would be very difficult to isolate any such DNA and prove it contributes to one crime more than another, but perhaps in the future – who knows? Some argue that criminal activity is a part of human nature which some of us choose to exercise and others choose to reject, suggesting that humans are by nature 'bad' but usually keep this under control. Others disagree, arguing that humans are basically 'good' and any bad behaviours are the exception. Others may also claim that humans are morally neutral – neither 'good' nor 'bad' – just likely to do what they think needs to be done to achieve a particular outcome.

As well as possible direct DNA causes for 'a criminal personality', could DNA contribute to something else which then leads to criminal action? For example, aggression levels in individuals may be linked to hormonal factors (which in turn might be caused by genetic factors). It is suggested, for example, that there is a link between high testosterone levels and aggression. Dabbs *et al.* (1995) found that male offenders with high testosterone levels were more likely to be in prison for violent crime (in 1997, Dabbs and Hargrove found the same applied to female persons in custody). In both studies, however, it is difficult to say if the high testosterone levels caused violent crime or if violent crime caused high testosterone levels. So, might high levels of this hormone make you more likely to commit violent crime? If so, could you blame your testosterone levels, over which you have no control?

As well as hormonal factors, there could be a range of other individual factors which lead to criminal behaviour. For example, those labelled 'psychopaths' or 'sociopaths' may be more likely to commit serious, often violent, crime but the causes of psychopathological and sociopathological behaviours are not at all clear. So how far we can think of them as causes of crime – over which the criminal has little or no control – is not clear.

Of course, personality style may be a complex mixture of nature and nurture, and may be the result of the interaction between biological/psychological factors and social factors. Picking all this apart to decide what has caused criminal activity is not easy.

One other factor is important here: some crimes are planned carefully and the criminal has a clear understanding of what they are doing and why. They also have a clear knowledge of all the possible outcomes of their activity. Other crimes are committed very much in the 'heat of the moment' – they are unplanned, unforeseen and, perhaps, less within the control of the person doing them, maybe even unintentional. How much of a difference does this make? Are the causes of planned crimes the same as those which are done in the heat of the moment? Should courts take this into account? How important is the *intention* of your actions in relation to the *outcome* of your actions?

So, from a psychological point of view, there may be many possible causes of crime, from individual biology and the behavioural responses this produces, to personality types and other psychological factors which affect actions. The key

question perhaps is about how much these factors might be under a person's control or not and so how responsible they can be for the possible effects of these complex causes of behaviour.

Talk Point

Are some people just born bad?

Social psychological factors

As well as these very individual psychological factors, the role of social influences over behaviour might be very important. Every individual is a unique combination of a range of experiences, events and choices in life. Whatever our life experiences, our individual responses to these are many and varied and could lead to some responding by engaging in criminal activity and others not doing so. What goes into this complex mix itself will be varied across individuals and how each individual responds to this complex mix might determine how likely they are to be a criminal. How these individual responses are affected by social influences will also be important. For example, some psychologists argue that early childhood experiences have a large effect on adult behaviour. Certain experiences may be more likely to lead to criminal activity than others; for example, childhood abuse has been suggested as a possible cause of later antisocial and criminal behaviour. However, the link is not simple or clear: some people who experience childhood abuse engage in criminal behaviour while many do not – equally, many who have never experienced any kind of childhood abuse engage in criminal behaviour. It is perhaps too simplistic to make a straightforward causal link between early childhood experiences and criminal behaviour, but like all possible influences on criminal behaviour, it is something worth considering and researching.

Some psychologists argue that the role of *mediating factors* is an important one. Mediating factors are things which might reduce (or of course increase) the effect of something. So, for example, imagine a child neglected by his parents at an early age – a mediating factor would be whether or not he was taken into care as a result of this and the quality of his care. Perhaps having loving and caring foster parents would 'undo' any damage done to the child through his natural parents' neglect. So the effect of early childhood experiences on later life may be able to be 'put right' by a range of other factors and so reduce the harmful effect of early experiences. However, again, this raises the important question of how far anyone can 'blame' their early childhood – or any events in their life – for their actions.

Again too, such early childhood experiences (or indeed any experiences in life) might have a secondary effect in leading people to a range of 'coping mechanisms'. These coping mechanisms might be the result of a range of experiences in life and are a way of helping you to cope with what has happened. This could involve a range of addictions and other forms of unhealthy lifestyle. Perhaps, it is argued, in order to 'feed' such addictions, individuals are more likely to engage in crime. For example, feeding a drug addiction is costly – paying for regular fixes might require more than the average pay packet can stretch to. Also, as a drug addict you are probably less likely to be able to secure any normal form of employment, so getting the money you need might lead you to turn to crime as a quick and effective way to get hold of a lot of money fast. When you add to this the fact that the thinking processes of drug addicts are often negatively affected by their addiction, then this can lead to the possibility that crimes will be a lot less 'controlled' than they otherwise could be – which could lead to crimes becoming violent. Of course too, many may develop coping mechanisms which are not 'unhealthy' and which do not lead to dangerous, antisocial or criminal activity, so again the link here is far from clear.

Some argue that crime breeds crime (and so, in fact, prisons are simply schools for learning to be a better criminal!). Social learning theories say that we learn our behaviours through observing and copying others where we see them rewarded for their actions. If we see people 'getting away with it' we are more likely to try it for ourselves. So the causes of crime include imitation of others – a simple process where we do what seems to work for others. Of course, the punishment of crime has a role in putting us off such imitation of criminal behaviour (its deterrence value) and if we see criminals punished then this should make us less likely to commit crime. This does seem to work, but not for everyone – more of that in the next section.

Possible environmental influences on crime

Talk Point

Is everyone in a society responsible for crime?

The individual possible causes you've thought about do not exist in a vacuum. All of our individual actions are linked to our interactions with others and with situations. Various *social processes* can be mediating factors which make crime more or less likely, and how individuals experience and respond to a range of social circumstances is going to have an effect on whether or not they commit crimes. The contribution of social factors to causing crime is also very complex and hard to pick apart. Crimes are generally carried out by individuals, but they may be the end result of a long and complex set of interacting factors which led to the crime and over which they had little control. Environmental influences can, of course, vary widely and separating them out from psychological factors is not always easy. However, an environmental influence can be thought of as anything outside of the person which influences them to behave in one way rather than another. Again, however, individual and social psychological factors are likely to play an important part in how a person responds to environmental influences – it's a complex set of interactions.

Economic issues

Some turn to crime because they want a better life – they want to be rich perhaps or just improve their lifestyle in some way. Others turn to crime because they see it as the only way to make ends meet. For example, if your family were starving and you thought the only way to feed them was to steal something, what would you do? For some, this is a major cause of crime in some situations and means that the responsibility for crime belongs with everyone who ignores the needs of the poor. Perhaps if societies were organised in such a way that no one was in need, then certain crimes might never happen. It is generally agreed that crime rates go up in times of economic recession, so perhaps this influence on crime could be dealt with by reducing economic inequality (and all the other forms of inequality which might lead to economic inequality). This might require laws, or it might just require people to care more about the needs of others. On the other hand, of course, it is far from true that anyone who is poor is going to engage in criminal activity, and it is also true that many people you would think of as being wealthy engage in criminal activity. Being underprivileged does not automatically mean that you will become a criminal because of the influence of many other factors – however, some argue, it remains a possible contributory factor in crime, so one way to reduce crime is to promote greater economic fairness in society.

Power imbalances and social approval

Some argue that one of the major causes of crime is the imbalance of power in society. The argument is that because some have power and others don't, this leads to resentment, anger, envy and a feeling of wanting to take what you don't have or put right what you think is wrong. Power imbalances come around in a number of ways – for example, some might argue that certain sectors of society 'look after their own' and that you are more likely to get on in life if you come from a particular class, race, social group, gender, city or country. Such differences within and between societies and social groups have the potential – it is argued – to lead to instability in society, which in turn is more likely to lead to crime. The solution therefore is to make sure that everyone in society has an equal opportunity to have a good life, so that society becomes more stable and crime less likely. Again, individual responses to this suggested cause of crime will play a great part in whether or not criminal activity follows and a whole range of mediating factors will be important here.

There might be other social influences too – for example, in some circumstances, the actions of others (or their approval) might 'legitimise' certain behaviours. Such circumstances can be anything from playground bullying where the apparent

approval of others might encourage it, to major criminal activity in a society which seems to say that doing certain things is okay. Again, the links are very complex here, but probably worth considering: How far might criminal and/or antisocial behaviour be made more likely by social circumstances which seem to approve of it or tolerate it or even encourage it? For example, does viewing violence on TV 'normalise' it and therefore make it unlikely? Or does it desensitise us to violence and so make it seem more acceptable? The relationship between influences such as the media and subsequent behaviour are very complicated indeed.

The role of freedom of choice

In all of the discussion about the possible causes of and influences on crime so far, one theme is common: how far does each individual have freedom over their choice to engage in criminal activity or not? Free will is a very complicated philosophical and psychological idea, but it is an important one in this case. Are we free to make choices about everything and what does such freedom mean? It is very hard to say how much freedom anyone has about any choices they make in life, because all of our choices have a wide range of possible causes, contributing factors and influences. Are all of our choices linked to our DNA, our personality, our social circumstances, our experiences, the chemicals running through our bodies, the structure and function of our brain? Can we think of any criminal act as something which someone has freely chosen to do? Are we ever 'in our right mind' when we carry out a crime? For some, this is the central issue, and it takes us right back to James Carron: how free were his choices and how much were they 'imposed' on him by factors and influences over which he had no or little control? Perhaps, of course, the causes of crime are not important – perhaps we should consider only the outcomes. Does it really matter why James Carron committed murder – should his punishment simply fit the crime and ignore the possible causes of the crime and all the influences which led up to it?

Talk Point

Is crime just the result of free choice?

Moral responses

Religion: Christianity

Within Christianity a range of viewpoints are likely about the causes of crime. Some will argue that all crimes are a result of the fallen nature of humanity – humans are sinners and crime of any kind is a sin. This sin came about through the rejection of God by Adam and has been the scourge of human nature ever since – an automatic part of being human. However, it is important for Christians themselves to resist any urge to engage in criminal activity and support others to do the same. This challenges our sinful nature and puts us on the 'right path' with God as role-modelled by Jesus.

However, while Christians would agree that criminal acts are a result of our sinful human nature, many Christians might argue that the causes of crime are far more complex than just the result of sin. They would point to injustice in society, poverty and inequality as contributory factors in crime – though they would be unlikely to allow people to use them as excuses for crime.

Religious response: The Roman Catholic Church

The Catechism of the Catholic Church draws on the Ten Commandments to state what counts as a crime. The Church would consider the cause of crime as the sin which lies behind the action. (CCC 865–69). It states that *'the fifth commandment forbids direct and intentional killing as gravely sinful.'* (2268) It supports the seventh commandment, which states quite clearly that '*You shall not steal.*' (Exodus 20:15) The Catechism states: *'The seventh commandment forbids unjustly taking or keeping the goods of one's neighbour and wronging him in any way with respect to his goods.'* (2401) So Church teaching on murder seems very clear, however it does go on to say that: *'the deliberate murder of an innocent person is gravely contrary to the dignity of the human being, to the golden rule and to the holiness of the Creator.'* (2261) This means that while the murder of an innocent person is considered criminal, it might allow that the killing of someone who is 'not innocent' may be possible in some circumstances (though whether this counts as murder or not is a matter for debate). The Church also qualifies its views on theft with the use of the word '*unjustly*', because some could take this to mean that there might be times when taking something which is not yours is justified. However, in Scotland, the Roman Catholic Church would support the law of Scotland in relation to crime. As to the possible causes of crime, the Roman Catholic Church is very aware of the pressures on those who are in poverty, but it would be unlikely to condone them engaging in criminal acts because they are poor. It suggests that crime is part of our sinful nature and it is every individual's responsibility to reject sin, although it is equally everyone's responsibility to understand and show compassion towards the sinner.

Religious response: The Church of Scotland

The Church of Scotland would have a broadly similar view to that of the Roman Catholic Church. It would be against any actions which broke any of the Ten Commandments and would support the law of Scotland in its handling of crime. The Church of Scotland would also accept, as does the Roman Catholic Church, that the causes of crime are many and complicated and might include individual and/or social contributory factors and influences. It would also accept that the Christian's role is to oppose crime, support justice for all, and to understand and help rehabilitate those who have committed crimes. The Church of Scotland could accept life circumstances as a contributory factor in criminal activity and is also aware of the fact that there is often a close relationship between individual, social and economic factors and influences, and criminal activity. The Church would argue that a fair, just and equal society would be likely to lead to reductions in crime, but that the fallen nature of humanity probably means that crime will be with us until we all put right our relationship with God.

Religion: Buddhism

Buddhists also accept the laws of the land in which they live, so would be likely to oppose anything which broke the law. Buddhists would also accept that there are complex causes of crime, which have both a social dimension and an individual one. Imbalanced, uncaring and unkind societies where people are lacking in equality, opportunity and perhaps hope are likely to be breeding grounds for crime. However, in Buddhism, individual causes of crime are also central. The key to the causes of crime is probably linked to the second of the four noble truths: *all suffering is caused by desire*. Perhaps, therefore, one common cause of crime is our desire – or greed – which is fuelled by our attachment to material things. This could be physical attachment – so that we are always wanting things and if we cannot satisfy those wants through the normal channels in life (such as working to be able to pay for things), then some will resort to crime to get what they want. It could also be psychological attachment – perhaps, for example, to wanting to be better than others – which might result in criminal activity to prove it. In Buddhism, the three root poisons *hatred, greed and delusion* are key causes of crime because they lead to unskilful actions and it is probably true to say that most crimes involve some mixture of the three root poisons.

Talk Point

Are we all essentially greedy, always wanting more?

Non-religious response: Humanism

Humanists UK states that: *'Actions can be morally wrong without being illegal, and illegal without being morally wrong, but many actions are clearly both.'* Although Humanists argue that people should work to challenge unjust laws, until they are changed they should follow them. Humanist values are summed up for many in the Amsterdam Declaration (2002) which sets out the values of Humanism worldwide. This contains seven fundamental values, one of which includes *'Humanists insist that personal liberty must be combined with social responsibility.'* So Humanists oppose crime, however they also understand that its causes can be very complex. They would argue that the causes of crime need to be researched carefully so that we are making judgements about the causes of crime based on the evidence. Although the causes of crime are complex, they are not unalterable as the Amsterdam Declaration states: *'By utilising free enquiry, the power of science and creative imagination for the furtherance of peace and in the service of compassion, we have confidence that we have the means to solve the problems that confront us all.'* Humanists would be likely to argue that the causes of crime are probably a complicated mixture of the interaction between individual and social factors. They do not believe that there is anything naturally 'good' or 'bad' about human nature, but that human survival depends on biological and social factors.

Non-religious response: Utilitarianism

Utilitarianism is based on the principle of maximising happiness for the greatest number, though this does not automatically mean ignoring the happiness of the minority – because, certainly in relation to crime, it is very possible that both are closely linked. The consequences of crime are definitely not causes of happiness for victims and, while they might cause some kind of happiness for 'successful' criminals, for those convicted of crime it's unlikely that they will be happy about it. Utilitarians generally argue that a society which balances the needs of the majority with the rights of the minority is most likely to be the happiest form of society. Certainly if a contributing factor in crime is individual or social circumstances for the minority (as criminals are) and this has damaging implications for others, then this needs to be put right. Most Utilitarians would accept that the causes of crime can be complex and that an unhappy society is probably likely to contain more crime. In this case, the task is to create as happy and contented a society as possible, which should therefore result in reduced crime as people feel less need to break the law to achieve their desired outcomes. Of course, Utilitarians would be aware that some crime might simply be related to individual characteristics and would occur no matter how happy the society (successful and wealthy people commit crimes too). Their hope would be that if you followed a Utilitarian philosophy then you would carefully judge the likely consequences of your actions – and this would probably lead to less crime.

Personal Reflection

- *What do you think are the most likely causes of crime and do you think these causes might be different for different crimes?*
- *Some say that given the right conditions anyone would commit a crime. What do you think?*
- *Is it ever possible for judges to take into account all the possible causes of crime when deciding on sentencing for crime?*