

# *Hume and Kant on Liberty and Necessity*

Andrew Ward

*Kant agrees with Hume that an agent's voluntary actions must be seen as causally determined by its character and beliefs. Yet Kant also affirms, contra Hume, that it is possible to assert, even at the point at which an agent commits an immoral act, that the agent could have acted otherwise, i.e., could have acted for the sake of morality. An attempt is made to explain Kant's defence of his position and to assess its plausibility in the light of Hume's alternative theory and some claimed findings of neuroscience.*

Keywords: *Hume, Kant, Causality, Freedom, Phenomena/Noumena.*

## 1. *Introduction*

Hume and Kant agree that we can possess the liberty or freedom required for moral responsibility (moral freedom) despite – as they both hold – everything that happens, including all our decisions and actions, being the necessary causal consequence of prior states or events in the spatio/temporal world. But beyond this agreement, there is sharp divergence. Hume contends that our moral freedom cannot be compatible with the ability to act otherwise in situations of moral conflict. Kant disagrees. He contends not only that moral freedom requires this ability, but that it is possible we possess it. The main grounds offered by Hume and Kant, in support of their respective positions, are set out in sections 2-4 before, in section 5, some assessment is made of the plausibility of these grounds, principally in the light of contemporary neuroscientific claims.

## 2. *Hume*

Hume maintains that unless our actions are the necessary causal consequence of our character, together with our beliefs about the surrounding circumstances, we cannot justifiably think of ourselves as possessing moral freedom. Far from moral freedom being incompatible with our actions arising with causal necessity from our character, the very possibility of our being responsible for any action,