

## **Comments on Millican, "Hume's Idea of Necessary Connexion:**

### **Of What is it the Idea?"**

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In the context of the New Hume Debate, Millican's suggestion is irenic. He takes account of the evidence Strawson has adduced for "causal realism", the view that Hume takes causal power to be real but merely hidden. Yet he also notes that Hume's semantic theory makes it impossible for any term we use to have *any* meaning unless it can be traced to an impression. Millican proposes to reconcile these apparently contradictory thoughts by postulating that there *is* a "general notion" of "consequentiality" which is "the common simple component in which Hume is interested" (7). Consequentiality is not the objective necessity of causation; nor is it confined to expectations conditioned by constant conjunction. "Consequentiality" is what causal power in the external world and inference in the mind have *in common*. The point of Millican's paper is to display, as a virtue of this proposal, its capacity to solve four puzzles.

As Millican points out, causal realism requires us to ignore Hume's core semantic doctrine. That is a price some are prepared to pay. Strawson, for example, finds it "obvious that there is more to causation than regularity" and that Hume can't be denying this because it would be "absurd" to do so: "there is a fundamental respect in which one has already said enough when one has granted that matter has a certain nature." (Strawson 2001, p.49 fn. 12). Perhaps that is a way of putting the intuition Descartes expressed when he declared: "The same power and action are needed to preserve anything at each individual moment ... as would be required to create that thing...." (1986, Meditation III, p.49). If we equate ordinary observable properties with causal-dispositional properties, we can find a deflationary, standard-view Humean interpretation of Descartes' intuition: *the mystery of induction is just the same for ordinary properties continuing*

*unchanged as it is for causal succession.* A competing philosophical intuition, however, is induced by the notion of inertia. Newton put an end to the ancient dispute about what keeps an arrow in flight by saying, in effect, that no explanation is required: instead, we need to explain why it stops. We need no special power to explain why things change in expected ways, any more than to explain why things stay the same. Neither requires the kind of “something more” that Strawson thinks it “absurd” to deny.<sup>1</sup>

On these matters of background perspective, I think I have no disagreement with Millican. Let me now focus more critically on his puzzles and his proposed solution.

**Synonymy:** The first puzzle arises from Hume's remark that “*efficacy, agency, power, force, energy, necessity, connexion, and productive quality*, are all nearly synonymous”. This is indeed strange. On Hume's official view of how terms get meaning, it's hard to see what it could mean. Are these various ideas derived from “nearly identical” impressions? Are they linked by a primitive relation of resemblance? What sort of relation is that? (Does the resemblance between pink and red make ‘pink’ and ‘red’ “almost synonymous”?) Millican's solution to this puzzle (and his three others) rests on the suggestion that there is, after all, an idea involved, but it's not exactly the idea we thought we were looking for. Instead, it is “the general notion of *consequentiality* – of which necessity is but one species.” (9). Consequentiality straddles what is imputed to the world (causal power) and what occurs in the mind (inference).

This idea is intriguing and provides one possible key to the puzzles. But I have trouble understanding it. ‘Consequentiality’ would seem to fit in Hume's list of near-synonyms, except that it's supposed to be what is shared by all the others and also by “*inferential connexion*,” which is itself not obviously synonymous with any of the others.

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<sup>1</sup> What Nelson Goodman (1983), called the “New riddle of induction” illustrates the fact that what counts as remaining the same or changing depends in part on convention. Whether a term is “projectable”—whether we trust the expectations embedded in talk of ‘green/blue’ rather than ‘grue/bleen’—depends on what is “entrenched”, that is, on which terms are habitually projected. This seems to me entirely in the spirit of Hume, standardly interpreted.

An alternative interpretation of the relation between causal power and inference is suggested by Hume's summing up of his argument, quoted on p. 2: "either we have no idea at all ... or we can mean nothing but that determination...." This—and many other similar passages—amounts to the claim that there really is nothing to be found in the world over and above constant conjunction. The illusion that there *should* be something there is *explained* by the "determination" that occurs in the mind. (2). Far from *conflating* the ideas of inference and causation, as Millican claims,<sup>2</sup> Hume is claiming that one of those ideas is meaningful and correct, while the second is meaningless. There is *nothing*—or more accurately, in order not to betray the agnosticism to which the skeptic is committed, *we find nothing*—in the world except the fact of succession, corresponding to the expectation we find in the mind. Millican is quite right to say that "If... an appropriate impression is identified, its nature and circumstances of occurrence will determine the very essence of necessity." (3) And he is correct that this essence turns out to be different from what we thought we were looking for. But that's not because its true nature is "consequentiality"; rather it is because it isn't "out there" where we were looking for it, but instead is lodged entirely in habits of the mind. Millican has not shown that "conflating" inference and causal power is anything other than equivocation.

**Complexity.** On Millican's view, Hume should have considered more seriously (and not merely mentioned) the possibility that causal necessity or power is a *complex* idea. It is complex, he argues, on Hume's own showing, since it involves both succession and necessity (5). This is

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<sup>2</sup> Millican writes on p. 6: "Necessary connexion' is better in this respect, preserving the causal/inferential conflation while introducing a desirable asymmetry: *A*'s being necessarily connected to *B* does not imply a necessary connexion in the opposite direction." I am not convinced that asymmetry is actually a requisite. Recall Hume's three definitions of cause in *Enquiry* §vii: "we may define a cause to be an object, followed by another, and where all the objects similar to the first are followed by objects similar to the second. Or in other words where, if the first object had not been, the second never had existed.... [or thirdly,] an object followed by another, and whose appearance always conveys the thought to that other." What's notable here is that the first and third definition present the cause as *sufficient* for the (expectation of) effect, but the second definition presents the cause as *necessary*. That establishes a symmetry between cause and effect, in respect of time.

Millican's second puzzle. His solution is that unlike causal necessity, consequentiality “can plausibly be regarded as a simple idea” (7). I find this claim puzzling, however, since on the same page we are presented with a table in which three separate features are attributed to consequentiality, at least one of which—its applicability to “both causal and inferential links”—appears complex.<sup>3</sup> In any case I don't think Millican is successful in deflecting the objection that ‘consequentiality’ is “disjunctive”. He writes: “it is crucial to [Hume's] argument that he is able to conflate causal and inferential consequentiality.” (7) But it isn't crucial to Hume's argument at all. It is only crucial to Millican's argument. What is crucial to Hume's argument is that one of the two terms Millican wants to “conflate”, namely inferential connexion, *replaces* and *explains* the illusion of the other, viz. causal power. That is reason enough for holding that the term ‘consequentiality’ really is “disjunctive”.

The **Vulgar puzzle**, and the **Probability puzzle** are closely related. Causality is supposed to involve *necessity*, yet the “vulgar” allow causal connexions to be merely probable. But “if the idea of ‘necessary connexion’ is a simple idea which has inexorability as part of its very nature, then how can it be possible for an idea of mere probability to be in any way derived from it?” (9). To my mind, the key to both puzzles lies not in the idea of consequentiality but in Hume's doctrine that there is no such thing as chance, and that our ignorance of the full range of relevant causes in any particular cases accounts for the fact that some expectations are disappointed.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> I daresay I don't have an adequate idea of what it is for an idea to be simple. I find in my own experience no impression of “simple” or of “complex”. (Would the impression of *simple* be simple or complex?)

<sup>4</sup> This is explicit in Enquiry, §VI, where Hume also allows that expectations may be calibrated to frequency.: “THOUGH there be no such thing as Chance in the world; our ignorance of the real cause of any event has the same influence on the understanding, and begets a like species of belief or opinion.....It is true, when any cause fails of producing its usual effect, philosophers ascribe not this to any irregularity in nature; but suppose, that some secret causes, in the particular structure of parts, have prevented the operation. Our reasonings, however, and conclusions concerning the event are the same as if this principle had no place. Being determined by custom to transfer the past to the future, in all our inferences; where the past has been entirely regular and uniform, we expect the event with the greatest assurance, and leave no room for any contrary supposition. But where different effects have been found to follow from causes, which are to appearance exactly similar, all these various effects must occur to the mind in transferring

I have suggested, as an alternative to Millican's solution in terms of consequentiality, that Hume *explains* our illusion of necessity by reference to habit. But that raises another puzzle, for habit is itself a causal property. Hume writes “Tis this impression, or determination, which affords me the idea of necessity.” (2, quoting T152). ‘Determination’ is yet another candidate for membership on the list of “near-synonyms.” We seek causality in the world in virtue of the expectations set up in our minds. But this set-up in the mind is itself a causal property. This might seem to support Millican's talk of a conflation of inference and causation. But it doesn't really help him. For if it now turns out that *both* what happens in the mind *and* what we were looking for in external events is just causation, then, *pace* Millican, there are not *two* ideas to be “conflated”, and so no need for ‘consequentiality’.

Whether this creates a problem for Hume is less clear. It might be held against him that the “determination” of the mind can't explain the illusion we form about the world, since it's actually just an instance of it. On the other hand, Hume seems happy to acknowledge “ a kind of pre-established harmony between the course of nature and the succession of our ideas” (*Enquiry*, §V pt II) as one which, like inertia, neither affords nor requires explanation.

## References

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the past to the future, and enter into our consideration, when we determine the probability of the event.”

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