

THE OFFICE OF AN INTROSPECTIBLE SENSATION:
A REPLY TO FALKENSTEIN AND GRANDI

GIDEON YAFFE

University of Southern California

For Reid the perception of smell, taste, sound, temperature, texture, and color all proceed according to what has come to be known as ‘the Standard Schema’: the quality of the object impresses itself upon our bodies; this physical impression gives rise to a sensation; and this sensation, in turn, “suggests” the quality of the object, resulting thereby in a conception of the quality and a conviction in its existence. All interpreters of Reid agree in this. In fact, they also agree that the tactile perception of shape proceeds according to the Standard Schema. In “Reid on the Perception of Visible Figure”, I defend the unpopular view that for Reid the Standard Schema describes, also, the visual perception of perspectival shapes, what Reid calls “visible figures”. I claim that Reid takes visual sensations to suggest both color and figure, and so holds that visible figure is indeed suggested by a sensation, just like every other perceived quality. In their very interesting article (against my objections), Lorne Falkenstein and Giovanni Grandi defend the popular view according to which visible figures, for Reid, are suggested entirely by retinal impressions, without the aid of any sensation.¹ I am not convinced by the moral they draw from their discussion. In what follows, I explain why I am not.

Despite what Falkenstein and Grandi claim, Reid never simply says that the perception of visible figure marks an exception to the Standard Schema. Further, the burden of proof is squarely on the shoulders of those who contend that he nonetheless thinks it is. After all, Reid offers a general theory of perception in his description of the Standard Schema. He would have expected his audience to take him at his word, and thus to take him to hold that the perception of visible figure also proceeds that way. My article is mostly spent explaining what Reid is really saying in the passages that are so naturally taken to be claiming the perception of visible figure to be an exception. Here I want to add just one word about a passage that Falkenstein and Grandi quote no fewer than five times (pp. 120, 124, 125, 126, and 128), and which they seem to take to unproblematically support their interpretation:

[T]here seems to be no sensation that is appropriated to visible figure, or whose office it is to suggest it. It seems to be suggested immediately by the material impression upon the organ, of which we are not conscious... (Reid 1997: 101)

To say that a sensation is not ‘appropriated’ to visible figure and that there is no sensation ‘whose office’ is to suggest visible figure is to say that there is no sensation that human beings are given *for the purpose* of perceiving visible figure. There is no sensation that has been given the exclusive job, as it were, of suggesting visible figure. This contrasts with the sensation of pressure that has been given us for the purpose of perceiving hardness and softness in bodies; the sensation of pressure has no other function. But this isn’t to say that there is no sensation that suggests visible figure; a sensation could suggest visible figure without its office being to suggest it. And so it is with sensations of color; they suggest visible figure even though their primary purpose is to suggest color. So far, there is no reason to take the passage to support the interpretation that Falkenstein and Grandi favor. What of the remark that visible figure “seems to be suggested immediately by the material impression upon the organ”? This remark must be read in the context of the sentence that precedes it. Reid is occupying the point of the view of the designer and from this point of view, ‘immediate suggestion’ is just a synonym for ‘primary purpose’ or ‘office’. Reid is explaining what the designer uses the retinal impression to suggest, and in saying he uses it to suggest visible figure “immediately”, he is saying that the retinal impression is given *the job* of suggesting visible figure by the designer. Understood any other way, the remark is simply a *non sequitur*, that is, it doesn’t amount to the elaboration of the previous sentence that it is clearly intended to be. And so in saying that retinal impressions ‘immediately suggest’ visible figure, Reid is simply saying that it is something about the primary function of our retinal impressions, the function they were immediately given, that tells us that human beings have been designed for the purpose of perceiving visible figure.

However, the bulk of Falkenstein and Grandi’s article is not directed to textual matters, but rather to the question of the philosophical merits of the views we respectively attribute to Reid. Charity dictates that given two interpretations, both of which are textually consistent, we should prefer the interpretation which ascribes to Reid the more defensible view. While in my paper I rest very little weight on considerations of this sort in supporting my interpretation, I do suggest in passing that the popular view attributes to Reid an implausible theory since it commits him to denying that there are any differences in sensation in cases in which there are, in fact, manifest differences. Falkenstein and Grandi attack this claim. They argue, instead, that not only is the view they attribute to Reid immune to my objection, but that the view I attribute to him is indefensible. As I’ll show, their objections to the view I attribute to Reid are actually objections to the Standard Schema in

general; if their objections succeed, then they also show that Reid must be mistaken about how, for instance, the tactile perception of shape proceeds. Thus, while attending only to the case of the perception of visible figure, they provide good reasons to think their interpretation more charitable than mine; but when attending to the whole of Reid's theory of perception, those very same reasons show mine to be more charitable than theirs.

Much turns on examples with the following structure: At time t^1 I encounter sign L^1 and as a result of this encounter perceive object O to have shape S^1 . Then there's some sort of slight change, and, as a result, at t^2 I encounter sign L^2 and thus perceive O to have shape S^2 . Imagine that the change from t^1 to t^2 is minimal: all that changes is the sign that I encounter, and the resulting perception, and whatever else must change in order to enact those changes. If L^1 and L^2 are not sensations, then I do not experience any change in sensation, although I do experience a change in perception; if they are sensations, then I experience both a change in sensation and perception. Now imagine that I insist that there was a change in my sensations from t^1 to t^2 , and cite that as evidence for thinking that L^1 and L^2 are sensations. With respect to an example with just this structure, Falkenstein and Grandi argue that I might be making one of two mistakes (p. 119). I might be noticing that there is a change in perception and then, in a failure to track Reid's famous sensation-perception distinction, I might be calling that a change in sensation; or I might be inferring that there must have been a change in sensation given that there was a change in perception. Either way, I'm not justified in claiming that there was a change in my sensation. Notice that if they are right, then I'm not in position *to assert* that there has been a change in my sensation *even if there has been a change in my sensation*. Although Falkenstein and Grandi don't mean their point to apply to examples beyond the particular example I offer in my article, their point extends to any example with the same general structure. With respect to any example of this form, the perceiver can never be in a position to say whether the change he experiences is a change in sensation, or is just mistakenly taken by him to be such a change.

Now imagine that I have an ice cube (O) in my palm. At t^1 I have a certain sensation of pressure on my palm (L^1) and conceive of the cube as being cubical (S^1). At t^2 , the ice has melted, I have a different sensation of pressure on my palm (L^2) and conceive of O as being elliptical (S^2). When I insist that there has been a change in my tactile sensation, Falkenstein and Grandi's point provides me with grounds for concern about my judgment. Maybe all that's changed is my perception and I'm mixing up sensation and perception? After all, there has been a change in the physical impression on my palm; maybe the physical impression is the real sign of tangible shape? Would Reid be moved by this concern? Of course not, for he thinks that it is just introspectively obvious when one has enjoyed a change in sensation and when one has not. Thus, he would conclude, despite Falkenstein and Grandi's point, that there has been a change in his sensation, and

he would take that as evidence for thinking that sensations, and not physical impressions, are the signs of tangible shape.

Now return to the example from my paper: At t^1 I look through an out of focus telescope and perceive a barn to be roundish; at t^2 , after focusing the telescope, I perceive the barn to be barn-shaped. It seems to me that there has been a change in my color sensation, although there hasn't been a change in the color I perceive the object to have. Falkenstein and Grandi give me reasons to doubt my judgment to the effect that my sensation has changed, but since those reasons apply just as well to cases in which I know there's been a change in sensation (the tactile cases), I'm unmoved; if, in the tactile case, they don't convince me I'm mistaken, why should they convince me in this case? Falkenstein and Grandi are right that there is a way to describe my example consonant with their interpretation of Reid; doing so requires insisting that despite what introspection tells me, I'm not actually experiencing a change in sensation. But describing it that way would require denying Reid the sort of description he would give of parallel cases of tactile perception.

So, Falkenstein and Grandi have provided us with a reason why, given Reid's sensation-perception distinction, we should be suspicious of appeals to the deliverances of introspection in describing our sensations. But although their point may be well-placed, it can't tell us anything about how Reid is best interpreted. After all, Reid appeals constantly to introspection and relies on it unwaveringly to tell him about the nature of his sensations. As he puts the point:

[T]he last appeal, in subjects of this nature, must be to what a man feels and perceives in his own mind. (Reid 1997: 56)

Falkenstein and Grandi raise another, closely related, point. They suggest that in order to account for various commonplaces of visual perception, someone who accepts the view I attribute to Reid must appeal to 'local signs'; but, they claim, there is no reason to think there are such things. As they put it, local signs are "sensations or features of sensations that are specific to the part of the eye or the particular optic nerve that is affected" (p. 000). Someone who believes that there are local signs, then, believes that to see a barn-red object in the center of the visual field feels different from the way it feels to see it on the left. First, note that if local signs are required to account for the commonplaces Falkenstein and Grandi mention, then they are also required to account for commonplaces of tactile perception. If accounting for the fact that objects can change position without changing color requires appeal to local signs, for instance, then a similar appeal is required to account for the fact that things can change their tangible position without change in texture. So, Reid may be committed to the existence of local signs quite independently of the point in dispute. Still, what reason is there to think that one shouldn't believe there are local signs? Falkenstein and Grandi write,

If we actually experienced local signs we would to be able to answer some questions about them. We should be able to say if they differ from one another in degrees, like our sensations of heat, or are instead qualitatively distinct, like the different hues of colour. If they differ from one another in degrees, we should be able to say how many dimensions there are to these differences. Do they differ in just one dimension, like heat and cold; in two, like sound (pitch and loudness); or in more than two? If they are qualitatively distinct, we should be able to count up how many different qualities there are. We should be able to say if these qualities have a natural order in which they shade off into one another, like hues of colour, or are entirely unrelated to one another. Were we actually conscious of local signs, these questions ought not to embarrass us. (p. 122–3)

Now sensations are almost always distinguished from one another by noting distinctions between the qualities the sensations suggest. We distinguish the sensation one has when running one's hand over a smooth surface from that had when running one's hand over a rough surface by saying that the first is a 'smooth' sensation, the second a 'rough'. Sensations, however, are not actually rough or smooth, so we understand such talk figuratively; such talk marks differences between sensations that are otherwise difficult to articulate. So, what's the difference between the sensation of a barn-red object in the center of one's visual field and the sensation of it on the left? Answer: the first is a center-barn-red sensation and the second is a left-barn-red sensation. (Analogously, what's the difference between the sensation of a square object in the center of one's palm, and the sensation of it in the left of one's palm?) To require a more helpful description of the difference between the two sensations would be to impose a higher standard on our descriptions of visual sensations than we require of our descriptions of tactile sensations. Perhaps such a high standard is appropriate in both cases, but, if so, then the reasons given for thinking that there are no local visual sensations would also support the contention that there are no tactile sensations.

Again, Falkenstein and Grandi's objection, if successful, commits them to an objection to the view, that it is agreed Reid holds, that tactile perception takes place in accordance with the Standard Schema. So, even if their objection is successful, charity does not thereby dictate acceptance of their interpretation over mine. Quite the reverse: given that Reid accepts that tactile perception takes place in accordance with the Standard Schema, he either wasn't concerned by, or (more likely) didn't anticipate the sorts of objections that Falkenstein and Grandi raise; so, there's no reason to expect him to tailor his theory of visual perception so as to avoid them.² So, although Falkenstein and Grandi have made important progress on the project of assessing Reid's theory of perception – they have provided challenges to the Standard Schema, especially as a description of tactile perception, that anyone who wishes to defend Reid's theory ought to address – they have not

shown that Reid takes the perception of visible figure to mark an exception to the Standard Schema. Visual sensations, just like tactile, are difficult to distinguish in introspection from the perceptions to which they give rise. Once we do so, however, we can recognize that their office is to suggest color and to suggest visible figure only by coincidence; this helps us to see that it is really the office of the retinal impression to help us to see visible figure. But since it is *something's* office to do so, *contra* Berkeley, visible figure has as much reason to be considered real, and thus the object of a genuine science, as tangible figure does. At least, so Reid holds.

NOTES

¹ I'm grateful to Falkenstein for a very profitable e-mail exchange and for helpful comments on this reply.

² Falkenstein and Grandi also argue *ad hominem* that if what Reid really cared about, as I contend, was to show that the human mind was expressly designed to perceive visible figure (a claim which they deny), he could have argued for this conclusion even given their view of the manner through which the perception of visible figure proceeds. They are right that he *could* have so argued. However, all the texts that purportedly support Falkenstein and Grandi's position are texts in which Reid is offering the argument for the claim that human beings are expressly designed to perceive visible figure. Given that there are no other texts in which he says that the perception of visible figure marks an exception to the Standard Schema, mine is the more parsimonious, and hence the better, interpretation of the argument.