

Reid's Direct Realism and Visible Figure

by Keith A. Wilson

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In Thomas Reid's account of visual perception, visible figure is described as both 'real and external' to the eye and as the 'immediate object of sight'. These claims appear to conflict with Reid's direct realism, since if the 'immediate' object of vision is also its direct object, then sight would be perceptually indirect due to the role of visible figure as a perceptual intermediary. I argue that this apparent threat to Reid's direct realism may be resolved by understanding visible figure as a set of geometrical properties that holds between an object's visible surfaces and some particular perspective or point of view. On this relational interpretation of visible figure, and once an ambiguity over the use of the term 'object' is resolved, Reid's account of vision is both epistemically and perceptually direct, as well as consistent with his account of the other senses and doctrine of signs.

I. Introduction

On the account of perception set out in Thomas Reid's *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*,¹ knowledge of objects in the external world is both perceptually and epistemically

¹ T. Reid, *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (Edinburgh UP, 1997) and *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man: A Critical Edition* (Edinburgh UP, 2002), hereafter abbreviated as *Inq* and *IP*, respectively.

direct.² As such, perception does not require awareness of intermediate entities, such as sense data or mental images, and is not based upon, nor inferred from, prior beliefs or knowledge. Whilst there has been much debate as to the precise nature of Reid's realism and whether it can properly be described as 'direct',³ one aspect of his account appears to present a particular problem in this regard, namely his treatment of visual perception. According to Reid, the 'immediate objects of sight' (*Inq* VI viii, p. 102; VI ix, p. 105) are not everyday macroscopic objects in the external world, as is the case for each of the other senses, but what Reid variously describes as 'visible or perspective appearance', 'apparent figure' and, most commonly, 'visible figure' (*Inq* VI ii, p. 81; VI iii, p. 82; VI vii–ix, pp. 95–103). Reid's notion of visible figure appears to be in tension with his direct realism since, if the 'immediate object' of vision is also its direct object, then it is unclear how our visual access to objects in the external world could be anything but mediate and indirect. This is arguably a problem even for versions of direct realism, such as Van Cleve (*op. cit.*), that are able to accommodate Reid's account of each of the other senses.

In this paper, I present an interpretation of Reid's conception of visible figure that I argue does not represent a serious threat to his direct realism about visual perception. I begin by briefly sketching Reid's account of perception (§II), followed by an examination of his notion of visible figure and its relation to non-visual sensations (§III). I then go on to discuss the nature of Reid's realism (§IV) and how this might be thought to be threatened by the presence of such a visual intermediary (§V). Finally, I argue that it is possible for Reid to maintain his direct realism despite the mediate nature of visual perception since visible figure is both a 'sign' of the real qualities of objects and an objective relation between object and perceiver (§VI). This in turn highlights a tension within Reid's account between two different roles

² I take it that Reid is, or at least seriously considers himself to be, a direct realist; cf. J. Van Cleve, 'Reid's Theory of Perception', in T. Cuneo and R. van Woudenberg (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Thomas Reid* (Cambridge UP, 2003), pp. 101–33; R. Copenhaver, 'Thomas Reid's Direct Realism', *Reid Studies*, 4 (2000), pp. 17–34, and 'A Realism for Reid: Mediated but Direct', *British Journal for the History of Philosophy*, 12 (2004), pp. 61–74.

³ See J. T. Buras, 'The Problem with Reid's Direct Realism', *The Philosophical Quarterly*, 52 (2002), pp. 457–77; K. De Rose, 'Reid's Anti-Sensationalism and His Realism', *The Philosophical Review*, 98 (2004), pp. 313–48; Copenhaver (*op. cit.*) and G. S. Pappas, 'Sensation and Perception in Reid', *Noûs*, 23 (1989), pp. 155–67, for a representative sample.

played by visible figure, as well as an ambiguity in Reid's use of the term 'object'. The latter, I argue, reflects a merely terminological confusion about the ontological status of visual figure to which Reid himself admits (*Inq* VI viii, p. 98), but which is not fatal to his account (§VII). Consequently, Reid's account of visual perception has at least as strong a claim to perceptual directness as his account of the other senses (the status of which I will not be concerned with here), and quite possibly somewhat stronger due to ontological differences between the nature of visible figures and non-visual sensations as Reid describes them.

II. Sensation and Perception

In contrast to the so-called 'theory of ideas' (*IP* II ix, p. 136) advanced by Descartes, Hume, and Locke amongst others, Reid rejected the notion that the objects of perception were ideas or impressions within the mind in favour of a direct realist account of perception. According to Reid, the object of a perception—or what I will call its *direct object*—is not something mental, but the object (or objects) in the external world that we normally take ourselves to be perceiving. For Reid, the conception and belief that accompany sensory experience are not the result of any rational deliberation or inference (*Inq* VI xx, p. 172). Rather, the mind is said to proceed directly from the 'sign' of an external object, such as a sensation of touch or smell, to what is 'signified', i.e. the object itself, placing us in direct epistemic contact with the external world. This may be contrasted with, for example, Hume's account of perception, which leaves an epistemic 'gap' between the immediate objects of experience—in Hume's case, impressions in the mind—and objects in the external world, thereby making room for the sort of systematic scepticism that Reid considered so abhorrent to common sense (*Inq* II ix, p. 28).

Central to Reid's account is the distinction, for which he was largely responsible, between *sensation* and *perception*.⁴ For Reid, a sensation is a 'simple act of mind' that 'accompanies' perception (*IP* I i, p. 37) and whose character is accessible to reflective awareness. Whilst the precise nature of sensation is a matter of some controversy

⁴ Price and Gibson in Van Cleve (p. 104).

amongst Reid scholars,⁵ this closely corresponds to what contemporary philosophers would call a ‘raw feel’ or quale. The sensation of pain, for example, involves a subject being conscious of a certain feeling, but not of any particular object that the feeling is of (though it does of course have some internal or external *cause*).

In Reid’s account of touch, taste, hearing and smell, sensations assume the role of ‘signs’ of the internal or external states that give rise to them. This can happen in one of two ways: (i) by the operation of an innate ‘natural principle’ of our constitution (*Inq* V vi, p. 72), and (ii) by regular connections discovered through experience in ‘acquired perception’ (*Inq* VI xxiv, p. 191). In both cases, the connection between the sign and object(s) signified is contingent since it is conceivable that an entirely different sign, or set of signs, could perform precisely the same function (*Inq* VI viii, p. 100; VI xxi, p. 176). Thus, in contrast to later sense-datum theories of perception, sensations do not acquire meaning through any intrinsic representational or information-bearing properties, but rather stand in an extrinsic relation to the objects or events that they signify.⁶

Perception, on the other hand, consists of what Reid calls ‘conception and belief’ and is the bearer of intentional content (*Inq* VI xx, p. 168). For Reid, the perception of a seagull, for example, is *about* its object (the seagull) in a way that the sensations of sound and colour accompanying the perception are not. Such sensations are merely concomitant with the perception and so do not possess a direct object in the sense described above. Reid’s notion of conception is subtle and complex,⁷ but his intention seems to be that the direct object of perception—that is to say, the object that the perception is of—is always some concrete mind-independent object or property in the external world, rather than an idea or sense-impression as with the

⁵ Buras, for example, regards sensations as having representational content whilst Van Cleve and H. Benbaji, ‘Is Thomas Reid a Direct Realist about Perception?’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 17 (2007), pp. 1–29, take Reid to be an adverbialist about sensation.

⁶ Copenhaver, ‘A Realism for Reid’, pp. 71–72.

⁷ In Essay IV of the *Intellectual Powers* (pp. 203–44) he describes it as ‘simple apprehension’, which has cognitive but not propositional content, which is comparable to J. McDowell, ‘Avoiding the Myth of the Given’, in J. Lindgaard (ed.), *John McDowell: Experience, Norm, and Nature* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), pp. 1–14.

theories of Locke, Hume and Descartes. Belief or perceptual judgement, on the other hand, is essentially propositional and furnishes the perceiver with convictions concerning the concrete objects and properties they are experiencing. Such judgements can of course be mistaken, leading to the formation of erroneous beliefs. However, for Reid, such errors are not a result of perception *per se*, but of faulty judgement or interpretation of the 'signs' that comprise sensory experience (*Inq VI xxii*, p. 183). In both successful and unsuccessful cases, however, the mind proceeds directly from sign to what is signified 'without any reasoning or reflection' (*Inq VI xxi*, p. 178), making perception non-inferential, and therefore epistemically direct, on Reid's account.

Reid also says of sensations that they have 'no distinction from the act of mind by which [they are] felt' (*Inq VI xx*, p. 168) and, as such, are not themselves objects of perception. In the case of pain, for example (*ibid.*):

The form of the expression, *I feel pain*, might seem to imply, that the feeling is somehow distinct from the pain felt; yet, in reality, there is no distinction. As *thinking a thought* is an expression which could signify no more than *thinking*, so *feeling a pain* signifies no more than *being pained*. What we have said of pain is applicable to every other mere sensation.

This has led some commentators (e.g. Pappas, p. 162 and Van Cleve, p. 104) to suggest that Reid held a kind of adverbialist theory of perception, with sensations being adverbial 'manners of perceiving'.⁸ Regardless of the accuracy of this interpretation, however, it is essential for Reid that sensations are not themselves classed as objects of perception, at least in the normal case, since this would make them, rather than everyday mind-independent objects, the direct objects of perceptual experience.⁹ In that case, we could no longer be said to be in immediate perceptual contact with the external world: a result that undermines Reid's case for direct realism and against scepticism and the theory of ideas.

⁸ Cf. R. Nichols, *Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception* (Oxford UP, 2007), p. 85.

⁹ Sensations may, however, be the objects of *thoughts* through the faculties of memory or reflection. For Reid, reflection is a matter of thought and not of perception since it has an internal rather than external object (*IP I i*, p. 37; *Inq VII*, p. 208), and is not to be confused with consciousness as it arises later in life (*IP I i*, p. 42; *Inq I ii*, p. 15).

Although I do not wish to defend any particular claims concerning the epistemic virtues (or otherwise) of Reid's account of perception here, the above objection is particularly pertinent to the case of vision. Since the only sensory component of visual perception, according to Reid, is that of *colour* (*Inq* VI viii, p. 99), he explains the majority of what we see in terms of his notion of *visible figure*. Indeed, Reid goes on to argue that since sight would be possible without sensations of colour (*Inq* VI viii, p. 100), visible figure is independent of any form of sensation. Unlike sensation, visible figure is described as being both objective and mind-independent,¹⁰ and is, by Reid's own admission, the 'immediate object' of visual perception (*Inq* VI viii, p. 102). *Prima facie*, this claim appears to be inconsistent with Reid's claim that the direct objects of visual experiences are the ordinary objects we take ourselves to be perceiving—tables, seagulls, and so on. This threatens to replace his direct realism about visual perception with the indirect perception of objects via a visual intermediary—namely, visible figure—leaving Reid open to the criticism that either (a) his account of vision is incoherent on the basis that the notion of visible figure is inconsistent with his direct realism, or (b) contrary to his treatment of each of the other senses, he is an indirect realist about visual perception. It is these criticisms that I address and respond to throughout the remainder of this paper.

III. Visible Figure

Reid spends a sizeable part of Chapter VI of the *Inquiry* (VI vii–xix, pp. 95–167) describing the non-Euclidean geometry of visible figure, as established by empirical and geometrical study. This is in itself quite remarkable given that the relevant mathematical formalism would not be developed for another hundred years by German mathematician Bernhard Riemann.¹¹ In this chapter, Reid describes visible figures as being 'real and external object[s] to the eye' (*Inq* VI xiii, p. 101), differentiating them from the 'real' (i.e. actual or tangible) figures of objects as follows (*Inq* VI vii, p. 96.):

¹⁰ Cf. Nichols, p. 122.

¹¹ R. Torretti, 'Nineteenth Century Geometry', in E. N. Zalta (ed.), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Summer 2010 Edition*, URL = <<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2010/entries/geometry-19th/>> (Stanford University, 2010).

[I]t is evident, that as the real figure of a body consists in the situation of its several parts with regard to one another, so its visible figure consists in the position of its several parts with regard to the eye; and as he that hath a distinct conception of the parts of the body with regard to one another, must have a distinct conception of its real figure; so he that conceives distinctly the position of its several parts with regard to the eye, must have a distinct conception of its visible figure.

Thus, whilst the significance of sensations is purely extrinsic, as described above, visible figures possess inherent representational structure concerning the position of objects ‘with regard to the eye’ (*ibid.*). Furthermore, any suitably equipped perceiver observing the object from the same direction and point of view would perceive precisely the same visible figure (*Inq* VI iv, pp. 84–85; Nichols, p. 122). Visible figures are therefore objectively accessible features of mind-independent reality rather than the kind of subjective acts of mind that, for Reid, constitute sensations.

In having both form and extension, visible figures also *resemble* their objects (*Inq* VI viii, p. 98), whereas sensations, being mental and so incapable of extension (as established by Berkeley, *Inq* VI vi, pp. 90–95), have ‘no direct object distinct from the act [of mind] itself’ (*IP* I i, p. 36). Visible figures may also be derived mathematically by projecting ‘right lines’ (*Inq* VI vii, p. 96) from the surfaces of objects to the geometrical surface of the perceiver’s retina. This procedure may even be carried out by someone who is blind, making visible figure, in contrast to tactile, auditory, olfactory and gustatory sensations, accessible to those who lack the requisite sensory faculties (albeit minus any accompanying sensation of colour).¹² For these reasons, Reid concludes that visible figures ‘cannot be called an impression upon the mind’—i.e. sensations or Lockean ideas—‘without the grossest abuse of language’ (*Inq* VI viii, pp. 100–1).

Reid’s notion of visible figure does, however, share certain features with his account of sensation. Despite their differing natures, both are said to function as ‘signs’ of external objects and their properties (*Inq* V iii, p. 60 and VI xxiii, p. 188),

¹² This case was most likely of particular interest to Reid due to his acquaintance with a Cambridge lecturer in geometry and optics (the ‘Dr Saunderson’ of *Inq* VI vii, p. 95) who was himself blind (Nichols, p. 5).

the sign being quickly 'passed over' by the mind and replaced by the perception (i.e. conception and belief) of those objects or properties (*Inq* V iii, p. 60; VI ii, p. 81; VI xx, p. 168). This is illustrated by Reid's example of the painter (*Inq* VI viii, p. 102), who reproduces the visible figures of objects, rather than their actual figures, such that for normal observers the resulting image functions as a 'sign' of whatever it is that the painting depicts. Note that even a painting, however, itself a facsimile of some visible figure, also *has* a visible figure, since we always see it as a physical object from some point of view, even though our minds are inclined to pass over this initial impression or 'sign' to the object(s) signified—whether this be the painting itself or what it depicts.

Just as sensations can become objects of thought through the faculty of reflection, visible figures can similarly become objects of experience—although not without some degree of effort or training on the part of the perceiver (*ibid.*). The painter, for example, trains himself to perceive visible figures directly, as opposed to the objects they normally signify, thus making conscious what is usually 'passed over' by the mind to the extent that 'it never had a name in any language' prior to Berkeley (*Inq* VI viii, p. 101; *IP* I i, p. 37). Unlike sensations, which are only experienced directly via memory or reflection, the experience of visible figure is distinctly perceptual since it relates the perceiver to some objective aspect of the external world. Visible figures can therefore be encountered in perception in two different ways: (i) as a 'sign' for some external object(s), and (ii) as visual objects in their own right.

Despite the above similarities, the lack of any compelling phenomenological evidence for the existence of a distinct sensation associated with vision other than that of colour leads Reid to conclude that it is visible figures, and not everyday objects proper, that are the immediate objects of visual perception (*Inq* VI viii, p. 102; VI ix, p. 105). This makes vision unique within Reid's account of perception in that it is the only one of the senses whose objects are not everyday physical objects. It also presents an apparent threat to Reid's direct realism since if the 'immediate' object of visual perception is also its *direct* object, then our perceptual access to the world through vision must be *indirect* since, by Reid's own admission, it is mediated by

visible figure. Nichols (p. 109) considers the possibility that this tension may represent a deliberate trade-off by Reid between the parsimony and explanatory power of his account, or that he may even have been unaware of its full implications (*ibid.* 111). However, the former seems implausible since Reid would hardly have advanced an account of visual perception that was so obviously guilty of the error for which he rejected the theory of ideas, whilst the latter gives Reid insufficient credit. To determine whether Reid's conception of visible figure presents a genuine threat to his direct realism we must therefore establish the precise nature of that realism and identify which aspect (or aspects) of it are threatened.

IV. Direct and Indirect Perception

Whilst it is relatively straightforward to define 'direct' in such a way that Reid comes out as a direct or indirect realist accordingly, a more pressing question at this point is whether Reid's own form of direct realism requires the immediacy of visual perception. To resolve this issue, it is first necessary to identify the specific meaning of, and relationship between, the notions of immediacy and directness within Reid's account. To this end, Pappas (p. 156) identifies two distinct forms of direct realism to which he takes Reid to subscribe: *perceptual direct realism* and *epistemic direct realism*.

As we have already established, Reid's account is epistemically direct in that perceptual knowledge is held to be both immediate and non-inferential; i.e. it is not based upon any prior knowledge or beliefs, a position that Reid endorses throughout the *Inquiry* (e.g. VI ii, p. 81; VI xx, p. 168, 172; VI xiv, p. 199). Accordingly, '[p]erception, whether original or acquired, implies no exercise of reason' (*Inq* VI xx, p. 173). That is to say, perception—i.e. conception and belief—is a result of the operation of natural and acquired principles of our constitution, and not of any process of inference, whether conscious or otherwise. This does not of course rule out the existence of such prior beliefs, the possession of which may in some cases be necessary for acquiring the relevant conceptual or recognitional capacities. Rather, Reid's claim is that perceptual beliefs are not grounded by or inferred from those prior beliefs.

Perceptual direct realism, on the other hand, consists of both a metaphysical and a perceptual thesis. The metaphysical thesis states that the objects of perception exist independently of both perceptions and perceivers, and that they are the bearers of at least some of their perceived qualities—typically the primary qualities of shape and extension. This accounts for the straightforwardly realist aspect of Reid’s theory. The perceptual thesis, on the other hand, is intended to rule out the presence of perceptual intermediaries, such as sense data or Lockean ideas. Pappas defines this thesis in terms of a subject *S*’s perceiving an object *x* where it is false that *S* would only perceive *x* if they were to perceive some other object *y*, and neither *x* nor *y* are parts nor constituents of each other (Pappas, pp. 156–7). This formulation, however, suffers from two flaws. First, it requires that the relevant intermediaries themselves be perceived. This is not obviously the case for Lockean ideas—surely a paradigm case of mediated perception—whose relations to the subject are not perceptual, but rather one of ‘apprehension’ or awareness.¹³ Second, it is vulnerable to counterexamples involving objects that can only be seen in conjunction with some other object—as part of the background, for example—erroneously classing such perceptions as indirect (Van Cleve, p. 117). For these reasons, Van Cleve (p. 118) suggests the following revision to Pappas’s account:

(PDR) *S* directly perceives *O* at *t* =_{df} (1) *S* perceives *x* at *t*; and, (2) there is no object *y* distinct from *x* such that *S* perceives *x* in virtue of being acquainted with *y*.

According to the revised formulation, which I take to be a reasonable approximation of Reid’s position, perception is only indirect in cases where the subject perceives ‘in virtue of being acquainted with’ some other object; e.g. a sense datum.¹⁴ This avoids the above objections, but raises the further question of whether Reid’s account of

¹³ P. D. Cummins, ‘Pappas on the Role of Sensations in Reid’s Theory of Perception’, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, 50 (1990), pp. 755–62; Van Cleve, p. 118.

¹⁴ The notion of *acquaintance* employed here is clearly in need of further elucidation. For present purposes, however, it will suffice to take this to involve a perceptual encounter with the object itself as opposed to some other entity.

vision is rendered perceptually indirect by the role of visible figure as a 'sign' of external objects.

In the case of non-visual sensations, Van Cleve (p. 119) finds the above worry to be unfounded, since they 'are not *objects* at all ... but states of a subject—manners in which a subject is affected' (cf. Benbaji), and so we are not acquainted with them in the relevant sense. Whilst this may be true of sensations, however, the same cannot be said of visible figures, which, as previously noted, Reid holds to be 'real and extended object[s]' in their own right (*Inq* VI viii, p. 101). On a straightforward reading of PDR, Reid's account of vision would be rendered perceptually indirect due to the objective nature of visible figure. In the following section, I suggest a way in which this might be resolved by clarifying the nature of visible figure and what is involved in standing in an acquaintance relationship to it. First, however, I first wish to address Reid's notion of immediacy and the extent to which it determines the direct objects of perception.

We can first rule out the notion that Reid's account of perception involves some kind of mythical connection between the mind and the world that contains no intervening stages whatsoever. Reid himself describes many such mediating entities, including light rays, which communicate the visual appearances of objects to the eye, and impulses in the sense organs and nervous system (the latter of which are not to be confused with sensations as they occur in the body and not the mind—*Inq* VI viii, p. 100). Since all perception arguably involves some form of mediation, the presence of an additional mediating entity in the form of visible figure should not automatically lead us to conclude that Reid is an indirect realist without further argument to that effect.

Attempting to analyse the notion of immediacy in terms of a causal relation runs into similar difficulties in that every perceptual event is preceded by a chain of causally connected events. For example, light from the sun may strike the surface of an object, some of which is reflected towards the eye, thereby forming an image upon the surface of the retina, in turn causing an electrical signal to be transmitted to the brain, and so on. Clearly we do not take the *light*—not to mention the nuclear reactions near the surface of the sun that generated it—to be an immediate object of

perception. Immediacy and directness must therefore be determined by factors other than mere causal connection. Furthermore, whilst it is tempting to assume, as per Pappas (p. 160) and Buras (p. 462), that Reid takes bodily impressions to be the causes of sensations, which in turn cause perceptions, Reid himself is careful to avoid using the term 'causation'. Instead, he points out its ambiguity (*Inq* II ix, p. 40) with the vulgar usage signifying little more than constant conjunction regardless of whether there is any genuine efficacy.¹⁵ This is compounded by the difficulty of explaining how a purely physical event can cause a mental one, not to mention Reid's own account of causation in terms of signs and what they signify (*Inq* VI xxiv, p. 198).

Reid himself states that external objects 'occasion' or 'suggest' sensations, which subsequently give rise to the corresponding perception. Aside from the presence of the mediating entities described above, however, he gives no account of any specific mechanism by which this takes place—something Reid declares to be most 'unaccountable' (*Inq* VI vi, p. 91). He does, however, give a clear indication of sequence, describing perception as a 'process' or 'train of operations' (*Inq* VI xxi, p. 174) in which sensation is 'followed by' conception and belief (*ibid.*). Whilst this might suggest the existence of some as-yet-undiscovered causal mechanism, Reid conspicuously stops short of saying that one stage *causes* the other. This is perhaps partly because he holds that only substances with wills—i.e. agents—are causes in the fullest sense.¹⁶ However, it may also be because he does not consider causal relations to be logically necessary for perception (cf. *Inq* VI xxi, p. 176). We must therefore be wary of attributing any substantive role to causation in determining immediacy or directness within Reid's account.

A more effective account of what establishes the direct object of visual perception may perhaps be given in terms of a counterfactual analysis of its necessary and sufficient conditions. When I see an object—a tree, for example—it forms both the *occasion for* and *content of* my perception, thus giving rise to the

¹⁵ The direct perception of causation had already been ruled out by Hume (1.3.2).

¹⁶ R. Copenhaver, Rebecca, 'Is Thomas Reid a Mysterian?', *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 44 (2006), pp. 449–66, at p. 453.

conception and belief that there is a tree before me (cf. *Inq* VI xx, p. 168). Were this object not present then I would, by definition, be unable to perceive that particular tree.¹⁷ The same cannot be said of sensations, however, since even if I fail to be conscious of any particular sensation that accompanies a visual perception—the sensation of greenness, for example—I may still be able to perceive the tree. This is arguably also the case for many non-visual perceptions. I am not necessarily aware of the particular sensation of touch as my hands rest upon the table, for example, but rather of the table itself, and so on. Thus, although sensations may ‘occasion’ or give rise to conception and belief, experiencing or attending to the sensation is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for perception. Indeed, such sensations may conceivably be entirely absent from perceptual experience (*Inq* VI viii, p. 100).

Unlike sensation, however, visible figure is both objective and necessary (in humans, at least) for visual perception, and cannot exist independently of an external object and point of view. This in itself gives some clue as to its nature, as discussed below. As in the case of sensations, we can imagine that visual perception, or something very much like it, might be possible for some creatures (though not for us) in the absence of visible figure.¹⁸ The fact that visible figures are always of some actual object or objects without which they would not exist suggests that in the case of visual perception it is *objects in the world*, and not sensations or visible figures, that form the direct objects of our perceptions (cf. *Inq* VI xxi, p. 176; Nichols, p. 137).

The above considerations may be restated as the claim that there is an internal relation between the perceiver, objects and visible figure such that the visible figure cannot exist in the absence of the relevant objects. Consequently, whilst visible figure may be the ‘immediate’ object of visual perception in a strictly literal sense, it does not constitute its direct object, as defined above. Instead, this is determined by the external object (or objects) with which we ordinarily take ourselves to be acquainted (cf. Van Cleve, p. 119). However, this leaves us with a puzzle. Since visible figure is supposed to fulfil the same role in Reid’s account of visual

¹⁷ A hallucination, for example, would not count as a case of perception for Reid (cf. Copenhaver ‘Reid’s Direct Realism’).

¹⁸ Deriving their properties mathematically does not count as seeing since the experience is not a purely perceptual one.

perception as sensation does for each of the other senses—i.e. as the ‘sign’ of some external object—it now seems as if we have *two* direct objects of visual perception: the ‘immediate object’ or ‘sign’, i.e. visible figure, and the external object (or objects) that it signifies. Reid himself acknowledges as much, stating that ‘the thing signified, when it is introduced to the thought, is an object of thought *no less immediate* than the sign was before: and there are here *two objects of thought*, one succeeding another’ (*IP* II ix, p. 134; my emphasis).

Whilst this duality may help to explain certain visual phenomena, such as the way that a circular plate can appear both elliptical (its visible figure) and round (its actual figure) (*Inq* VI ii, p. 79), or the decreasing apparent size (i.e. visible figure) of a receding object whose actual figure remains constant (*Inq* VI iii, p. 84), it fails to settle the question of Reid’s direct realism. On the one hand, according to PDR, visual perception might be considered indirect on the basis that we perceive external objects in virtue of being acquainted with their visible figures and not their actual figures. However, if acquaintance entails an encounter with the objects themselves, or some aspect of them without which visible figure would not exist, then perhaps visual perception may be considered direct after all. Furthermore, it is no longer straightforward to determine whether Reid’s account can properly be considered epistemically direct, since it is unclear which sense of ‘immediate’ is operating here. To resolve this issue, we must determine the precise relation between objects, visible figures and perceivers that is so central to Reid’s account of visual perception.

V. The Relational Conception of Visible Figure

As described above, visible figure is both the ‘immediate object’ of visual perception and mathematically derivable from the real locations and figures of external objects relative to the eye. Whilst it is clear that, for Reid, visible figures are not sensations, but objectively accessible features of the external world, it is less clear precisely what kind of features they are. Indeed, Reid himself professes to be at a loss over which metaphysical category visible figure should belong to (*Inq* VI viii, p. 98), suggesting that there is something peculiar about its ontological status as compared to that of

concretely existing external objects. According to Nichols, this peculiarity may properly be attributed to its relational character.¹⁹

Unlike sensations, which are mind-dependent and so only accessible to an individual subject, visible figures are objectively accessible to all visually capable perceivers. Despite being the proximate objects of vision, their existence and properties are wholly dependent upon the relation between the location, orientation and geometry of the perceiver's eye and those external objects that fall within its field of view (Nichols, *Thomas Reid's Theory of Perception*, p. 123). This is why it is possible for even non-visually able perceivers to derive the properties of any given visible figure from the geometrical relations between the surfaces of external objects and the eye, as Reid often emphasises (e.g. *Inq VI vii*, pp. 95–96). Visible figure therefore belongs to the metaphysical category of *relational properties*—or, more accurately, *sets* of relational properties. Such properties are ontologically dependent upon the presence of the relevant external object(s) along with the geometrical properties of the human eye: i.e. a concave, spherically-shaped projection surface. This does not render visible figures mind-dependent since their properties are determined solely by their physical geometry (Nichols, p. 115) rather than being dependent upon the presence of a perceiver as in the case of sensations. Indeed, different visible figures may be derived for differently shaped projection surfaces, such as a Euclidean plane or the kind of centrally magnifying lens possessed by vultures and other birds of prey.²⁰ There are therefore an *infinite* number of possible visible figures for any given set of objects, only a tiny fraction of which we are able to detect with the human eye due to limitations of size, geometry and distance (cf. Nichols, p. 119). In each case, however, these figures may be derived from the real properties of objects relative to the eye, and so are both fully objective and mind-independent.

Evidence for a relational account of visible figure can be found in Reid's definition of them as 'the position of the several parts of the [real] body with regard

¹⁹ R. Nichols, 'Visible Figure and Reid's Theory of Visual Perception', *Hume Studies*, 28 (2002), pp. 49–82, at p. 61.

²⁰ A. W. Snyder and W. H. Miller, 'Telephoto Lens System of Falconiform Eyes', *Nature*, 275 (1978), pp. 127–29.

to the eye' (*Inq* VI viii, p. 98). On the suggested interpretation, visible figures are essentially perspectival in that they reflect the appearance of a given object (or objects) from the perspective of a particular observer or point of view. As such, they possess geometrical properties that both resemble and are derivable from the external objects in question (*Inq* VI ix, p. 106) along with their distance from the eye.²¹

Such relational entities should not be conflated with retinal images, which are physical objects and so cannot explain the perception of other external objects on pain of infinite regress.²² Neither can they be straightforwardly equated with the content of 'looks' statements, since such looks are subjective and may vary between observers. For Reid, a circular plate does not necessarily look elliptical when viewed at an angle. Rather, to an untrained observer who is attending to the object's real figure it looks circular. It is only by attending to the visible figure—something that takes a degree of effort and training, as exemplified by the case of the artist—that one becomes aware of its elliptical perspectival appearance. In both cases, however, the visible figure forms the immediate (i.e. proximal) object of perception, but only in the latter does it form the direct object of the resulting conception and belief as part of the content of perception. Thus, visible figure only corresponds to the way that things look in the special sense of 'looks' employed by artists and philosophers, and not in the ordinary sense of the term since we are not normally aware of an object's visible figure, which is 'passed over' in favour of the object itself.

Assuming that the relational account of visible figure is correct, we might legitimately ask whether there is any evidence to suggest that Reid is a direct realist about the perception of relations. As Nichols (p. 122) points out, Reid claims that the fact that 'my foot is longer than my finger' (*IP* VI i, p. 422)—a relational property *par excellence*—can be perceived immediately and non-inferentially, just as he does for visible figure. Whilst this lends some support to the relational conception of visible figure, as well as making a case for Reid being a realist about such relations, it does little to secure the perceptual directness of Reid's account. Indeed, one might argue

²¹ This gives rise to a further dilemma I discuss in the following section.

²² Cf. Nichols, 'Visible Figure', p. 56.

precisely the opposite as follows: if visible figures are real and external to the eye, then they are in some sense on a par with the external objects that are their relata. This strengthens the case that it is visible figures, and not the objects they signify, that are the direct objects of perception, and so the problem recurs. Consequently (or so the argument goes) this renders Reid an indirect realist about the visual perception of everyday, i.e. non-relational, external objects. To defend Reid against this claim, we must finally turn to what I will call his *doctrine of signs*.

VI. Reid's Doctrine of Signs

Throughout the *Inquiry*, Reid likens the sensible and visible 'signs' that lead the mind to form non-inferential conception and belief to a kind of 'visual language' (*Inq* VI ii, p. 82; VI xix, p. 166, VI xxiv, p. 190)—a notion he inherits from Berkeley. To the modern ear, this may seem like mere rhetorical flourish, but given Reid's disdain for the 'way of analogy' (*Inq* VII, p. 203) it seems reasonable to assume that the comparison is intended to capture an important aspect of his account. Central to this idea is the notion that in recognising or 'interpreting' (*Inq* VI xxiii, p. 189) signs, the mind immediately and involuntarily forms both conception and belief concerning that which is signified—in the case of perception, some object in the external world. According to Reid, there are three ways in which such associations may be established: (i) naturally, in virtue of our innate constitution, as in the case of colour (*Inq* VI xx, p. 171); (ii) acquired through custom or habit, as in the case of depth perception (*Inq* VI xx, p. 172); and (iii) acquired through the operation of reason (*Inq* VI xxi, p. 177). In each case, however, once established, the transition from sign to what is signified occurs solely through the operation of our constitution and not through any further process of reasoning or inference.²³ Learning a new sign can therefore be understood in terms of acquiring the ability to form the relevant non-inferential associations, i.e. *know-how*, as opposed to the acquisition of any kind of propositional knowledge concerning the link between the sign and what it signifies, i.e. *knowledge-that* (though this may also be present in some cases). As with sensations, we may be completely unaware of the sign, which

²³ *Inq* VI ii, p. 81; Copenhaver, 'Reid's Direct Realism', p. 70.

immediately gives way to an awareness of the relevant object(s). However, since both visible and real figures can become direct objects of perception when attended to in the appropriate manner, this creates the impression that there are two objects of vision (*IP* II ix, p. 134). It is only once we clearly identify the role of each of these so-called objects within the perceptual process that the distinction between signs and what they signify becomes clear.

As noted above, visible figure performs the same function for Reid in the case of visual perception as sensation does for non-visual perception: that is, as a sign for some external object (*Inq* VI xxii, p. 186). The apprehension of visible figure can therefore be regarded as an intermediate stage in the formation of a fully fledged visual perception (i.e. conception and belief). Furthermore, once the relational nature of visible figure is taken into account it becomes clear that any perceptual encounter with a visible figure necessarily involves an encounter with some everyday external object—or at least some aspect of it. On Reid's view, therefore, it is not that we are visually aware of external objects 'in virtue of being acquainted with' their visible figures, to use Van Cleve's expression, but rather that *we are acquainted with visible figure in virtue of being acquainted with external objects*. Thus, if we take PDR to be an accurate formulation of Reid's direct realism, then we perceive real figure by being directly acquainted with the *relation between* an external object and our eyes—a relation which gives us perceptual access to the object from some particular perspective. Such a relation does, in an important metaphysical sense, constitute a form of acquaintance with those external objects that we ordinarily take our visual perceptions to be of, since one cannot be acquainted with a relation without also being in some sense acquainted with its relata. Despite being mind-independent, visible figures are therefore not objects in their own right, but *objects seen from some particular perspective*. On this reading of PDR, Reid's conception of visible figure need not render him an indirect realist about visual perception.

The proposed interpretation makes sense of Reid's apparently conflicting claims that visible figure is the 'immediate object' of visual perception and that visual perception is direct. The former claim is supported by the fact that visible figure is the proximal object initially encountered within visual perception that functions as a

'sign' of some external object. The latter claim is supported by the fact that a perceiver can only be acquainted with visible figure when they stand in the relation of *being acquainted with* to some external object. Consequently, that object's real figure comes to form part of the content of the resulting conception and belief, making it the direct object of perceptual experience. Furthermore, in the normal case, such 'perception' of visible figure immediately and non-inferentially gives way to the perception of external objects by means of a natural operation of the mind. This is consistent with the account that Reid gives of each of the other sensory modalities.

My interpretation of Reid can be summarised as follows. According to PDR, perception is indirect when based upon acquaintance with an object that is metaphysically distinct from the one that is, as a matter of fact, perceived. However, visible figure is relational, and so *not* distinct from the external objects of perception. Rather, visible figure is a product of the mind-independent relation between that object and the location, orientation and geometry of the perceiver's eye. Any encounter with a given visible figure is thus, as a matter of metaphysical necessity, an encounter with some external object (or objects), since such a relation can only exist in the presence of its relata. Consequently, on a relational understanding of visible figure, Reid's account of vision may be taken to be perceptually direct under PDR.²⁴ Furthermore, the visual apprehension of external objects does not require that subjects form any conception or belief concerning visible figure *per se*. Instead, according to Reid's doctrine of signs, we 'pass over' the visible figure as a sign of some real figure, which is the normal object of conception and belief, and thus of perception.²⁵ Along with Reid's claim that the transition from sign (the visible figure) to what is signified (the real figure) is non-inferential, this renders Reid's account of visual perception epistemically direct. Reid therefore qualifies as a direct realist under both of the notions of directness that Pappas describes.

²⁴ Similar considerations apply to Pappas's definition of perceptual direct realism, though the resulting notion of parthood would require some further analysis (cf. Nichols, 'Visible Figure', p. 72).

²⁵ As noted above, visible figures, like sensations, can also be attended to directly, albeit with some degree of effort or training.

VII. Objections

The above argument is open to a number of obvious objections. First, even if we grant that being acquainted with an object's visible figure necessarily involves an encounter with some aspect of that object—namely its relation to the perceiver—it might still be argued that we perceive real figure *in virtue of* visible figure, since we cannot, according to Reid, perceive the former without first encountering the latter. To counter this, it might be pointed out that since visual perception is conceivable in the absence of visible figure (*Inq* VI xxi, p. 176), acquaintance with visible figure is not essential to visual perception. That it does involve such acquaintance is a merely contingent fact about human physiology. This response, however, would be unsatisfactory since the claim is not that visual perception is necessarily indirect, but that it is indirect *in us*. A better response would be to question which sense of 'direct' is being employed here, and whether Reid is committed to understanding directness in this way and not as formulated by PDR. Furthermore, as I argue above, it is not the proximal object that is first encountered in visual perception that determines its direct object, but the objects upon which perception metaphysically depends. In the case of visual perception, we do not perceive external objects in virtue of being acquainted with their visual appearances, but rather we are acquainted with them from some particular point of view. On this view, a circular object's appearing elliptical and the similar appearance of a genuinely elliptical object are two different states of affairs that have nothing in common except that, in a certain sense of 'looks', both objects look elliptical. Neither case, however, involves the existence of an intermediate entity that *is* elliptical. Rather, it is the geometrical similarities between the two sets of relations (i.e. visible figures) that makes them appear in some way similar. There is no need to introduce any further perceived entity that instantiates the perceived 'look'.

A related objection is that to be acquainted with an object's visible figure is not thereby to be acquainted with that object's real figure, or with the object itself. Such entities are, after all, ontologically distinct. In defence of this claim we might appeal to the analogous relation between an object and its surfaces or properties. It might be held, for example, that we see objects in virtue of seeing their visible surfaces.

Does this mean that we do not see the objects themselves, but only their surfaces? Intuitively, it seems not, since to see an object's surfaces is to see part of that object, and therefore to see (in the relevant sense of 'seeing') the object. Similarly, if we were to hold that we saw objects in virtue of seeing their properties—shape, colour, and so on—this would not make us indirect realists, since those properties are themselves aspects of the objects we perceive. Consequently, a direct realist need not be committed to the implausible thesis that in order to perceive an object *simpliciter* we would need to perceive it in some sense independently of its properties. If, as I claim, visible figures are no more than sets of an object's properties, albeit in relation to a particular point of view and geometry, there does not appear to be any reason to deny that being acquainted with an object's visible figure is at least partly constitutive of being acquainted with the object itself and (some of) its real properties.

A further challenge concerns the allegedly non-inferential status of Reid's doctrine of signs. Given the central role that this doctrine plays in Reid's account of the senses, the directness of Reid's account may be thought to stand or fall with the plausibility of the doctrine. If the transition from sign (e.g. visual figure) to what is signified (i.e. external objects) turned out to involve some form of inference, conscious or otherwise, then Reid's account not just of vision, but of all the senses would be rendered epistemically indirect. This conclusion, however, would be too quick since, as I have argued above, there are ontological differences between visible figures and sensations that may be brought to bear in evaluating the issue of epistemic directness. In particular, the fact that visible figures bear an intrinsic relation to the external objects that are their *relata* means that the prospects of Reid being a direct realist about vision are arguably even stronger than in the case of the other senses. Consequently, even if Reid were held to be an indirect realist about taste, touch, hearing and smell, it would not automatically follow that he is an indirect realist about vision since visible figures are, as discussed above, themselves aspects of external objects. Conversely, if Reid's account of the other senses is deemed to be epistemically and perceptually direct then, according to the above

interpretation of visible figure, visual perception should prove equally unproblematic.

The final and most serious challenge to Reid's position I wish to consider here concerns the fundamental nature of visible figure itself. As Nichols points out, Reid's account requires visible figure to be both relational in character and the bearer of geometrical properties, as described in his 'geometry of visibles' (*Inq VI ix*, pp. 103–112). The suggestion that both roles can be satisfied by a single entity is, as Nichols ('Visible Figure', p. 76) puts it, 'bound to smell fishy'. To satisfy both criteria, such relations, or rather sets of relations, would themselves have to possess geometrical properties—something that Nichols finds implausible (*ibid.*). This judgement is, however, open to question. Provided that some kind of metric can be applied to the relevant relations, they could indeed be considered to possess the same kinds of geometrical properties as mathematical figures.²⁶ However, Reid also states that visible figure may be 'represented by that part of the surface of the sphere, on which it might be projected' (*Inq VI ix*, p. 104). This suggests that the relevant geometrical properties may not be properties of visible figure *per se*, but of its projection upon a suitably shaped surface, such as the human retina. Although this may help to reconcile the apparent dual nature of visible figures as sets of relations between real figures and the eye as well as geometrical figures in their own right, the textual evidence on this point is admittedly ambiguous.²⁷ An alternative suggestion would be to reject the claim that visible figures literally possess geometrical properties in favour of a set of geometric-like relations that hold between the various relational properties of which they are constituted. This would weaken the sense in which the relevant properties can be considered 'figures' in order to avoid making any implausible metaphysical claims. Each of the above readings, however, requires a degree of departure from the text that makes it difficult to claim that it accurately reflects Reid's official view. Indeed, the fact that

²⁶ For further discussion along these lines, see J. Van Cleve, 'Thomas Reid's Geometry of Visibles', *The Philosophical Review*, 111 (2002), pp. 373–416.

²⁷ Cf. *Inq VI ix*, p. 103.

Reid himself finds it difficult to pin down the ontological nature of visible figure suggests that there may well be more than one notion of 'object' in play here.

The above considerations reveal a tension at the heart of Reid's account of visual perception. On the one hand, Reid claims that visible figures are—quite literally, in my view—mere relations between the various parts of objects and the eye. On the other, considerations arising from his doctrine of signs and geometry of visibles, along with the desire to give an account of visual perception that is consistent with each of the other sense modalities, leads Reid to talk about visible figures as 'objects' in their own right. The latter considerations place visible figure on a par with other objects that are 'real and external to the eye' (*Inq* VI xiii, p. 101) and possess the same kinds of geometrical properties as the real figures of objects. This dual nature most likely underlies Reid's uncertainty over which metaphysical category visible figure belongs to, since it in effect belongs to two: relational properties and external objects. Given this apparent duality, it might be alleged that there is not one notion of visible figure here, but two, making Reid guilty of equivocation. The dilemma for Reid's account may be stated as follows: either (a) visible figures are relational, in which case they are not objects as Reid claims, or (b) they are geometrical, in which case they are independent of real figure, thereby rendering vision perceptually indirect.

Whilst Reid's talk of visible figures as 'objects' is certainly misleading, it is my contention that once this terminology is dropped and we recognise visible figures as the relational entities that Reid intended, his account does constitute a form of direct realism about visual perception (albeit with the attendant difficulty of ascribing geometrical properties to relational entities discussed above). Although visible figures are undoubtedly *objective* in the sense of being intersubjectively accessible, mind-independent aspects of reality, they have no independent existence over and above that of their relata—namely, external objects and some particular perspective (though not necessarily a perceiver). As with sensations, visible figures may constitute objects of reflective thought without being independently existing objects as such. Consequently, Reid's talk of visible figures as 'objects' may be regarded as a terminological slip arising from his conflating the objective nature of relational

properties with the geometrical properties of the retinal images that they generate. This should not be taken to mean, however, that visible figures are independently existing external objects, since it is only by understanding visible figure in terms of the relations between a perceiver and external objects that we can make sense of Reid's account of visual perception.

VIII. Conclusion

Interpreting Reid's account of visual perception in the context of his doctrine of signs in conjunction with a relational conception of visible figure enables us to reconcile the apparently conflicting claims he makes concerning the immediacy and directness of visual perception. The relational nature of visible figures means that subjects who perceptually experience them are thereby acquainted with an aspect of some external object, or objects. Thus, Reid's claim that visible figure is the 'immediate' (i.e. proximal) object of perception need not affect the directness of visual perception in any philosophically significant way since an encounter with visible figure is just an encounter with an external object from some particular point of view or perspective. Furthermore, visible figure plays a role analogous to that of sensation in each of the other sense modalities—namely, as a 'sign' of external objects. This renders Reid's treatment of visual perception consistent with his account of the other senses despite differences between the ontological status of visible figures, which are objective and mind-independent, and sensations, which are subjective and mind-dependent. Consequently, Reid's claim to direct realism about visual perception is at least as strong as it is in the case of each of the other senses—and quite possibly more so due to the inherently relational nature of visible figure. Such differences, however, can be put down to genuine metaphysical and phenomenological differences between vision and the other senses rather than any inconsistency or oversight on Reid's part.²⁸

²⁸ This paper has benefited from invaluable comments and feedback from James Harris, Rebecca Copenhaver, Bill Brewer, Matthew Soteriou, Louise Richardson, John Morrison and anonymous reviewers from *The Philosophical Quarterly*.