

Comments on Falkenstein's "Hume and Reid on Memory"

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The contrast between the views that Lorne Falkenstein calls "presentist" and "expansivist" might be regarded as a contrast between the way in which we could be aware of the passage of time or the way in which we could have a specifically sensory awareness of the passage. Of these two options, the second is the one Falkenstein starts with (and I shall regard it as providing his official version of the contrast), but in seeking to reclaim both Reid and Hume for the expansivist party, it seems that Falkenstein attributes positions to them that more plausibly represent the first option. I want to consider this apparent shift, but I begin with some remarks about the contrast as Falkenstein originally draws it.

On the expansivist view, my sensory awareness of time's passage is similar to my sensory awareness of a spatial expanse: just as all the points in an experienced spatial expanse are simultaneously available to my sight, so too are all the points of an experienced temporal series. Thus, just as I sense the shape of the clock hand, "I sense the movement of the hand" (1).¹ On the opposing presentist view, I must rely on memory in addition to my sight in order to become aware of the movement of the hand. Which view is superior?

Although Falkenstein says that the expansivist view is "not a popular one" and that it "contradicts" (2) the opinion that the past does not exist (or, better, cannot be sensed), his sympathies, as evinced by his reinterpretations of Reid and Hume, are clearly expansivist. But he does not state his reason. His spotlight on the clock-hand example, and on what the expansivist

¹ References to page numbers in Falkenstein are in parentheses; references to page numbers in Hume's *Treatise* ('T', Selby-Bigge/Nidditch ed.) and Reid's *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* ('IP', Brody ed.) are in square brackets.

says about it, suggests a possible reason, namely, that the presentist is unable to affirm the thought that I see the hand move. But the presentist *is* able to affirm this thought.

When the presentist says that I see the hand move, he could mean—as Falkenstein takes him to mean—that I see only *static instants* in the history of the hand’s movements, on the basis of which I merely infer motion. But the presentist could also mean that I see whatever I see via momentary glimpses, and that it is indeed *motion*, in this case, that I see thus. The difference between the two readings is like the difference between the claim that a painting cannot depict a moving object (at all) and the claim that it can depict such a thing, though the spectator is shown only one aspect at any one time. The first reading is unattractive, and for the same reason that an old epistemological doctrine, that we do not see a material object because we see merely its surface, is unattractive. The wise presentist can and should endorse the second reading; and so it is not presentism *as such* that leads to a denial of sensed movement. What the presentist must deny, on the second reading, is merely the weaker claim that our glimpses of a thing are other than momentary in their character.

If the presentist’s commitments are so understood, the merits of presentism are more visible too. After all, the best explanation of the fact that we cannot have sensory awareness of multiple moments concurrently is that the moments themselves are not coeval, for if they are not coeval, they are not simultaneously accessible to the senses. But presentism is not only independently plausible; Reid explicitly accepts it, and given his acceptance, we might ask why Falkenstein is intent on casting Reid as “an expansivist in all but the name” (5). Falkenstein’s answer to this question appears to be twofold. First, Falkenstein says that Reid has the resources to hold that “we ... conceive an object as present or past, or as moving or altering over time” and

that “we believe in the existence of its successive states,” where the intended contrast is with conception and belief that are fixed on an object in its present state (2). Second, Falkenstein thinks that the difference, for Reid, between memory access and sensory-perceptual access to an object is trivial, that the “only difference is in their names” (4). I take up these reasons in reverse order.

To attribute to Reid the thought that the particular mental operation by which we apprehend an object is a relatively minor matter is to go very much against the grain of the text. Reid supposed that Hume and other philosophers had been into error by thinking that “conception, perception by the senses, and memory, are only different ways of perceiving ideas in our own minds” [IP 387]. And Reid made a similar criticism, specifically in regard to Locke’s theory of personal identity, when he said that Locke’s approach was such as to “confound” memory and present consciousness, thereby making it possible to run together the “testimony” of one faculty with “the cause of the thing testified” [IP 358-59]. In order to overrule Reid’s avowed presentism, we seemingly have to overrule Reid’s insistence on the importance of distinguishing varieties of mental acts.

Insouciance concerning the choice of mental act whereby we apprehend an object makes it easier to make the shift noted earlier, between the narrower construal of presentism as a view about sensory awareness and its wider construal as a view about awareness *simpliciter*. But if we take pains not to make that shift, and turn now to Falkenstein’s other reason for treating Reid as an expansivist, we can examine it separately. The view that Falkenstein thinks Reid has the resources to resist is the view that the unwise presentist would embrace. If the presentist is wise, however, Falkenstein’s real target would seem to be not presentism as such, but an atomism

about moments (whether or not they are present moments), and that the real alternative is accordingly not expansivism, but holism.

This reinterpretation of the debate—that is, of the commitments at stake in the debate—makes much better sense of Falkenstein’s claim that “Hume’s account of memory is in a way more expansivist than Reid’s” (14). As stated, the claim has an odd ring, inasmuch as the strictly conceived expansivist has less need to account for memory, in the first place, than the strictly conceived presentist (whose explanation of perception invokes memory) does. But this is merely a cavil. For Falkenstein’s substantive point is that Hume is more of what Falkenstein *calls* an expansivist than Reid. And what Falkenstein means is that Hume in effect insists that memories are not isolated episodes: “a *single idea* fails to constitute a memory” (13, my emphasis). Instead, memories are defined by their position in a narrative context, and since narratives themselves take time to tell, no memory is complete in itself at a given moment. This holistic thesis about particular memories indeed goes beyond Reid. In my view, this thesis is the single most important idea in Falkenstein’s paper, and it is quite a valuable one. But I do not think that the presentist/expansivist contrast allows Falkenstein to do justice to his valuable idea.

In my remaining remarks, I want to reinforce this suggestion by looking briefly at two other elements in Falkenstein’s discussion: (i) the inference drawn from Reid’s criticism of Hume’s account of memory, and (ii) the *Treatise* passage (2.3.7) that is the “most explicit presentation” of the superior account that Falkenstein proffers on Hume’s behalf (14).

(i) Falkenstein argues that Hume’s second “difference” between memory and imagination, that memory is tied down to the original order and form of the impressions, divides into two components, that of being tied down as such and that of being tied down to the original

order and form. Falkenstein apparently thinks that Reid's criticism of Hume's account is successful to this extent, that we do not "find by experience" that an impression makes a repeat appearance (as a memory) before the mind. Reid's success on this score motivates Falkenstein's bifurcation of Hume's notion of being tied down, since the idea that the memory is merely tied down in a way that the imagination is not, irrespective of the original order and form, is proof against Reid's criticism. I have some doubts, however, about the need for this bifurcation.

Reid's point is that we already have an immediate awareness of the past if we are able to say that an impression has undergone a memory-repetition. It is not clear that Reid's point should be conceded. For Reid seems to suppose that we make a comparison between an idea (the alleged or provisional memory) and an impression, and that only an immediate awareness of the past would allow us to make that comparison. The difficulty is that *we* might not compare perceptions at all. In his treatment of personal identity, Hume flirted with the notion that the mind—some mind, not necessarily our own—makes such comparisons in order to supply the resemblance relations needed for Hume's associative account, but the awkwardness of Hume's maneuver testifies to the difficulty that attaches to any making of these comparisons. But even if Reid's point about our already having an awareness of the past is conceded, it does not follow that Hume's claim that memory is tied down to the original order and form is defective as a (partial) criterion of what a memory is. The most that follows is that preservation of the original order and form does not allow us to *recognize* a memory-repetition.

So we do not yet have a motivation to excise the order-and-form motif from Hume's characterization of the second difference between memory and imagination. Absent a compelling motivation, there would seem to be no grounds for thinking that being tied down is

distinguishable from being tied down with respect to a certain order, which may or may not be discernible in a sequence of memories. However, if we think that there needs to be something on the basis of which we do recognize a difference between a memory and a mere fancy, we could *further* characterize the order to which memory is tied down as a holistic, narrative order. We would then be following Falkenstein's lead on the issue that counts.

(ii) Hume's sections on the effects of space and time on imagination and sentiment are often neglected, and we should salute Falkenstein for his attention to some of this material. Nevertheless, I have reservations about the use to which he puts it, and my concerns are threefold.

First, one of Hume's central ambitions in these sections is to show that space and time are *different* in their effects, and Hume's explanation of the difference crucially depends on presentism. To enlist section 7 in the expansivist campaign is to read the text in a way that is quite contrary to Hume's manifest intentions.

Second, the traversal of past time that interests Hume is not an exercise of *remembering*, but of *imagining the past* (where there is no question of a person's having been a first-hand witness of the imagined events). That the exercise is so understood is more evident in section 8, where Hume speaks of the value we place on ancient Greek medals and on efforts to ascertain the facts of Chaldean and Egyptian history. The difference between remembering and imagining the past is important because the imaginary exercise that Hume describes is one that involves both the whole person—as section 8, again, makes more evident, in its contrast of our imaginative dispositions with those of Milton's descent-averse angels—and a movement of the person from the time and place in which the imaginer happens to be to a time and place where the imaginer

has not been (and will not be). In the case of a merely remembered event, there is no need to posit a person's notional *movement* at all, since the event occurred at a time and place where the presence of the person is already assured.

There is moreover no textual support elsewhere for the idea of a roaming rememberer: it is the imaginer who is cast in that role (as at [T 24], which tells us that “the fancy runs from one end of the universe to the other in collecting those ideas, which belong to any subject”). Also, Hume's remark that an idea of memory “is somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea” in its vivacity [T 8] should be a cautionary note. Because it is a puzzling remark to interpret literally, it is perhaps best read—though I cannot defend the suggestion now—as saying that memories behave sometimes like ideas proper (which are the province of imagination), sometimes like impressions. (A similar ambiguity affects our conception of what we see when we look at photographs.) To the extent that memories are re-occurrences of impressions, we do not have to suppose that Hume's notional movement plays any part in our having them, since it plays no part in sense perception.

My third, and final, concern is built on the second, and can be stated succinctly. The sense in which our imaginings are “from now” in section 7 is not, and cannot be, the same sense in which they would be “from now” if expansivism were true. On the expansivist view, the phrase ‘from now’ is like the phrase ‘from here’—that is, time is experientially similar to space—and a person's entire field of impressions, at one time, includes the focal perceptual area (which gives the word ‘from’ its meaning here) as well as the periphery. But in 2.3.7 the analogue of the periphery—the events that I have not witnessed first-hand—lie outside the field of my impressions altogether. My imagining of the past is constrained by my awareness of my own

time, and the temporal distance between me and the past event has to be surmounted if the imagining is to succeed, but there is no counterpart to this idea of a surmountable constraint in the case of perception (or even memory) on an expansivist construal.