

ESSE EST PERCIPI AND PERCEPT IDENTITY IN C. J. BOSTRÖM'S
PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract: Berkeley's '*esse is percipi*' has been criticized for implying epistemological solipsism, the main argument being that different minds cannot harbor numerically one and the same idea. Similarly, C. J. Boström, the dominating Swedish philosopher in the 19th century, was early scorned because his principle of *esse est percipi* allegedly contradicts the simultaneous claim that two spirits (God and a human, or two humans) can perceive the same thing under qualitatively different appearances. Whereas the criticism against Berkeley is here regarded as valid, it is argued that Boström successfully defended himself by employing a dual concept of meaning, resembling Frege's *Sinn* and *Bedeutung* some thirty years later, and by postulating an ontology that permits human minds to share in the divine ideas that constitute reality.

Introduction

Christopher Jacob Boström (1797–1866) was professor of practical philosophy in Uppsala 1842–63 and the author of an idealistic system that was to influence Swedish philosophy and cultural life for decades.¹

Reminiscent of Berkeley, he taught that to be is to be perceived. I shall here discuss a specific criticism that has been raised against both of these idealists, *viz.* that the principle of *esse is (est) percipi*² implies that different minds cannot perceive the same object. The corollary that there is no common world of experience is at variance with other basic tenets of both the empiricist Berkeley and the rationalist Boström. Their systems would be inconsistent if, indeed, *esse is (est) percipi* implies epistemic solipsism. Here I shall argue that Boström escapes this kind of criticism with impunity, even though Berkeley does not.

Berkeley

It is Berkeley himself who states the problem. In the third dialogue between Hylas and Philonous,³ he puts the following question into Hylas' mouth:

'...Is it not your opinion that by our senses we perceive only the ideas existing in our minds?'

Philonous agrees and Hylas continues:

'But the same idea which is in my mind, cannot be in yours, or in any other mind. Doth it not therefore follow from your principles, that no two can see the same thing? And is not this highly absurd?'

Dicker⁴ analyzed this argument at length and found that Hylas reveals a devastating weakness in Berkeley's system. The conclusion follows from the premises that objects exist in minds as ideas, and that ideas cannot be shared between minds; in a numerical sense of the term 'same', the same idea cannot be in two minds. Durrant⁵ had found this kind of criticism to be valid as

regards sensations (*e.g.* of colors) that necessarily are private (although due to his understanding of the grammar of 'perception', Durrant considered perceptions to be public). Moreover, according to Durrant,⁶ short of disastrously depriving himself of sensation language altogether, the idealist is forced to contradiction in tacitly presupposing what he explicitly denies, *i. e.* that colors exist independently of being actually sensed.

In a long reply to Hylas, Philonous tries to dismiss the problem as a quibble about words. It is readily understood what is meant by 'the same' thing in common usage, he claims, namely qualitative identity:

'... men are used to apply the word *same* where no distinction or variety is perceived...'

As sorted out by Dicker,⁷ Philonous's lengthy lines on this point muddle the distinction between numerical sameness and qualitative sameness. Thus, according to Dicker's and Durrant's criticisms of Berkeley's *esse is percipi*, the principle absurdly implies numerical differences between certain qualitatively identical ideas or sensations that common sense and normal language treat as numerically identical.

Boström

About one and a half century after Berkeley, the doctrine of equating *esse* with *percipi* was criticized anew for not being compatible with the common sense opinion that two persons can perceive the same object. However, the starting point for attacking Boström's *esse est percipi* was not the qualitative similarity between numerically different ideas, but, rather, the dissimilarity between ideas in different minds.

In Boström's system,⁸ God encompasses everything and has clear and complete perceptions (ideas) of everything. Human minds share in God's ideas. However, unlike God's perception of his own perfect ideas, human perceptions are imperfect and so provide incomplete or unclear knowledge of reality. The human imperfect perceptions make up the material world. In being perceived by humans, material things are not merely illusory but phenomenal reflections of the true, divine reality. Although different human minds have different phenomenal perceptions, and therefore subjectively experience different phenomenal worlds, 'there is *only one single world*, when it is viewed *in its truth and perfection*.'⁹

In 1859, Boström's former student Johan Jacob Borelius¹⁰ published a pamphlet (transl. *Critique of the Boströmian Philosophy*) attacking his teacher for being fatally inconsistent. Borelius himself was an idealist but he found Boström's system utterly repugnant. At the root of the evil, he identified the principle of *esse est percipi*. The principle allegedly contradicts the view that perfect God and imperfect man can perceive the same object (author's translation from Swedish):¹¹

However, according to Professor Boström, *to be* means the same thing as *to be perceived*. That an idea, as perceived by God and by itself, is one and the same thus means that it *is perceived* as the same. Then one asks: *by whom* is it perceived as this one and the same idea in God's and its own perceptions? Not by itself, as it merely perceives itself as imperfect. Nor by God, because as far as it is perceived by him it is perfect. Hence, one is left with having to assume a third perceiving being in addition to both God and the idea, a being who

perceives the idea as both perfect and imperfect and, moreover, perceives these two distinct perceptions as one and the same. However, as such an assumption is not only absurd in itself but in conflict with the basic doctrine that nothing else exists but God and his ideas, already on this point the system turns out to be in total contradiction with itself.

The contradiction here demonstrated in Professor Boström's philosophy basically originates from the unjustified and gratuitous (not to say perverse) equating of the word 'be' with those of 'be perceived', which can be considered the fundamental delusion of the whole system...

Borelius emphasizes that the passive expression 'be perceived' signifies a relation, which the single word 'be' does not. Allegedly, this logical difference makes it impossible to equate 'be' with 'be perceived' consistently: what is perceived both must and cannot be distinguished from its perception; for God and a human being to perceive the same thing, God would have to be finite, or the finite human would have to be divine; some perceptions must be incomplete or obscure, while at the same time all perceptions must be complete and clear.

Borelius's criticism may look convincing. However, it appears to be based on an erroneous understanding of Boström's ontology and his employment of the *esse est percipi* principle. In an anonymous booklet¹² soon published in his defense, writing about himself in the third person, Boström explained that Borelius had simply misrepresented the relation between 'to be' and 'to be perceived':¹³

Professor Boström has not equated the words be and be perceived; he has said that they merely signify one and the same thing, albeit from somewhat different points of view.

Moreover:¹⁴

By the proposition that the words be and be perceived in reality signify one and the same thing, Professor Boström has not said or wanted to say anything else than how the words relate to each other concerning what they signify. He has had no reason or wish to say anything more. Thus, Lecturer Borelius is as mistaken when he thinks that Professor Boström has said *what* being is in relation to something else, as when he demands that Professor Boström also ought to have said what it is in itself. Nothing of that kind has ever been Professor Boström's intention...

Here Boström makes a sharp distinction between what words 'signify' (Swedish: *beteckna*) and what other informational content they might carry. In particular, he protests against having wanted his *esse est percipi* to clarify 'what' being (*esse*) is. He has only wanted to say that the expression 'to be' (*esse*) signifies the same thing as the expression 'be perceived' (*percipi*). The argument reminds one of the theories of meaning that Frege¹⁵ was to develop three decades later. Using Frege's terminology, I suggest that Boström should be understood as claiming that 'to be' (*esse*) has the same *Bedeutung* (reference) as 'to be perceived' (*percipi*), but not the same *Sinn* (sense). This interpretation is strongly supported by Boström's making an analogy with the relation between vertices and sides in plain geometric triangles:¹⁶

If, for example, in Geometry one can correctly say: every (closed three-sided figure, every) trilateral is a (tri-angular figure, a) triangle, and, vice versa: every (closed tri-angular figure, every) triangle is a (three-sided figure, a) trilateral, everyone realizes immediately that the words triangle and trilateral are but two different names for one and the same concept, namely for the usually so-called geometrical Triangle. This is not at all to deny that the names are taken from two different attributes of that which is named, and that the attribute three-sided is not the same as the attribute tri-angular. In any case, the three-sided figure cannot be anything else than the triangular figure, and vice versa. [...] So, it is also willingly admitted that the words be and be perceived can be aimed at different aspects of what both of them signify; but this fact does not preclude that that which is signified can be one and the same.

Interestingly, the plane triangle was also to be used by Frege for demonstrating the connections between names, senses and reference: the one and only point of intersection between the three medians of the three vertices (A , B , C) in a triangle is fully defined by any two of the three possible pairs of medians ($A-B$, $A-C$, $B-C$). For example, the expression 'intersection of the medians from vertices A and B ' has another sense than the expression 'intersection of the medians from vertices A and C ', but both expressions refer to the same unique point of intersection. In Boström's example, the ideal plane triangle is unambiguously identified by either of the two

expressions (and their corresponding senses) 'having (precisely) three sides' and 'having (precisely) three vertices'.

Boström's analogy with the geometric triangle makes it clear how he wants us to understand his assertion that 'to be' (*esse*) and 'to be perceived' (*percipi*) are names of different aspects of 'one and the same': 'to be' and 'to be perceived' refer to this 'one and the same' *via* the two different aspects. There can be little doubt that the thing referred to by 'to be' or 'to be perceived' is any idea. This is so because both strings of letters are said to express that 'the being' or 'that which is perceived' determines the self-aware consciousness of an I or a living entity'.¹⁷ That is precisely what ideas do in Boström's ontology.

In view of the above, Boström's *esse est percipi* should not be understood as an explication of the concept of existence, nor to assert any causal relationship. The principle merely seems to say that literally everything is somehow perceived, and that everything perceived exists. As '*esse*' and '*percipi*' are meant to refer to the same thing via different senses, Boström can consistently claim that two minds may perceive the same thing differently. It is not the human imperfect perceptions that define the identity of an object, but God's perfect perceptions. Humans can perceive different, partial aspects of one and the same thing, the identity of which is determined by its place in the divine system of integrated ideas.

Do Dicker's and Durrant's criticisms of Berkeley hit Boström?

In virtue of his pre-Fregean distinction between sense and reference, Boström manages to rebut the criticism raised by Borelius, *i.e.* the allegation that *esse est percipi* does not allow different minds to perceive the same object differently. However, Boström's defense rests on a premise that was forcefully rejected by Dicker and Durrant in their criticisms of Berkeley, *i.e.* the assumption that numerically one and the same idea (Durrant: 'sensation') can be shared between minds, human or divine. Therefore, the question arises whether this kind of criticism against Berkeley can be extended as effectively to Boström. I do not think so.

Boström's theological ontology may appear strange to modern man and can, of course, be questioned as such. However, as it happens to be constructed, it contains the important notion that humans share in God's ideas. Whereas Berkeley makes a distinction between minds and ideas, to Boström everything, including human minds, is ideas or complexes of ideas. That is to say, humans are parts of the all-encompassing divine and integrated system of ideas, while at the same time harboring God's ideas in their minds; some ideas consciously, others subconsciously.

It is not easy to delineate exactly how Boström envisaged the relationship between human phenomenal perceptions and God's perfect ideas. Boström's own metaphor for the structure of the divine system of ideas was the series of natural numbers: every number includes, as it were, all smaller numbers as its positive determinations, and is itself included as a positive determination in higher numbers.¹⁸ According to the intended gist of this analogy, reality consists of a hierarchical series of ever more perfect

ideas, each of which contain less perfect ideas as its positive determinations. Although God does not stand in direct or immediate relation to the merely phenomenal, as he perceives perfectly what human beings perceive imperfectly,¹⁹ he nonetheless must be understood as having a containing relation to the human perceptions in virtue of Boström's claim that the phenomenally perceiving human minds are themselves divine ideas, too.

Another analogy that may come to mind, somewhat daringly as Boström himself does not use it, is that of a Venn-like diagram. Of course, its phenomenally spatial character limits its degree of correspondence to the allegedly extraspatial system of divine reality. Yet, it illustrates that one can consistently hold that two human minds (two separate delineated surfaces in the diagram) and a divine idea (a third delineated surface) partially overlap such that each of the human minds contains an incomplete something of the divine idea (different or more or less the same 'something' for the two minds), while both the human minds and the divine idea are parts of an even larger surface (the totality of the divine system of ideas). In his rebuttal to Borelius, Boström explicitly writes that the same idea is present in the finite minds of humans as in the infinite mind of God.²⁰ That 'same' here means numerical, and not qualitative, identity is obvious from the fact that it is a fundamental tenet in Boström's ontology that God's ideas are perfect whereas those of human beings are not.

Conclusion

In line with Dicker's reasoning, it seems fair to conclude that the *esse* is *percipi* implies epistemological solipsism in the context of Berkeley's

ontology. In contrast, the *esse est percipi* in Boströms philosophical system does not appear to have the same absurd implication. Consistency is obtained by Boström's pre-Fregean dual conception of meaning as regards the meanings of *esse* and *percipi*, in conjunction with his theory of the structure of the divine system of ideas.

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Notes

1. C. J. Boström, *Philosophy of Religion*, translated by V. E. Beck and R. N. Beck (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1962). Boström wrote in Latin and Swedish. This book is an English presentation of his philosophy and contains translated lecture notes (taken in Swedish and first edited by Boström's student and later colleague Sigurd Ribbing), a translated outline of Boström's philosophy of religion written in Swedish by himself, and an introductory essay by R. N. Beck on Boström and his philosophy.

2. G. Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Rockville: Arc Manor (1710/2008), p. 28, about unthinking things: 'Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.' C. J. Boström, *Dissertatio de notionibus religionis, sapientiae et virtutis: earumque inter se nexu*, in H. Edfeldt (ed.), *Skrifter af Christopher Jacob Boström*, vol. 1. (Uppsala 1841/1883: Victor Roos), p. 260: '*Esse est percipi, et percipi est esse; haec verba unum prorsus idemque significant.*' [To be is to be perceived, and to be perceived is to be; these words signify exactly the same thing.]

3. G. Berkeley, *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, D. D., Bishop of Cloyne*, vol. 1, edited by G. N. Wright (London: Thomas Tegg, (1713/1843), p. 215.

4. G. Dicker, *Berkeley's Idealism. A Critical Examination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 281–295. G. Dicker, *Berkeley's Idealism. A Critical Examination* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 281–295.

5. M. Durrant, 'On Moore's Refutation of *Esse is Percipi*', *Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 23, pp. 26–47 (2000).

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–47.

7. Dicker, pp. 291–295.

8. Boström, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. xix–xxiv.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 153.

10. J. J. Borelius, *Kritik öfver den Boströmska Filosofien. Första Häftet. Statsläran* [Critique of the Boströmian Philosophy. First Installment. Political Theory] (Stockholm: Z. Hæggströms Förlag, 1859). Borelius (1823–1909) was a leading Hegelian in Sweden and professor of theoretical philosophy in Lund 1866–98.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 15–16.

12. Anonymous, *Den Speculativa Philosophen Johan Jacob Borelius i Calmar* [The Speculative Philosopher Johan Jacob Borelius at Calmar] (Uppsala: Esaias Edquist, 1860). The content of the booklet makes it impossible to doubt the received view that the author is Boström himself.
13. Ibid., p. 62.
14. Ibid., pp. 65–66.
15. G. Frege, 'Über Sinn und Bedeutung', *Zeitschrift für Philosophie und philosophische Kritik, NF*, vol. 100, pp. 25–50 (1892).
16. Anonymous, *Den Speculativa Philosophen*, pp. 64–65.
17. Ibid., p. 65.
18. Boström, *Philosophy of Religion*, p. xx.
19. Ibid., p. xxiv.
20. Anonymous, *Den Speculativa Philosophen*, p. 69. Also see Boström, *Philosophy of Religion*, pp. 156–161, in particular section 50, for an English presentation of the relationship between ideas as perceived by God and by finite minds.