

Christer Svennerlind | Jan Almäng  
Rögnvaldur Ingthorsson (Eds.)

# **Johanssonian Investigations**

Essays in Honour of  
Ingvar Johansson on His Seventieth Birthday



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# Christopher Jacob Boström's Pre-Fregean Dual Conception of Meaning

Inge-Bert Täljedal

## 1. Question

Can two observers have different perceptions of the same object, if “to be” means “to be perceived”?

## 2. Historical Background, and Significance of Question

In 1859 a fierce debate broke out between the Swedish philosophers Christopher Jacob Boström and Johan Jacob Borelius.<sup>1</sup>

Boström was an heir of Plato, Leibniz, and Berkeley. He regarded the material world and our sensations as imperfect reflections of the true reality, which he considered to be spiritual in nature. And he taught that “to be” means “to be perceived”.

Borelius for his part was a Hegelian, and a dedicated one. He had long disapproved of Boström. In a book defending Hegel against one of Boström's associates, Borelius (1857:22–26) complained that Boström was an elusive target who preferred disseminating his ideas by lecturing instead of publishing in print. At the same time Borelius criticized Boström's philosophy in passing: an early treatise in Latin (Boström 1841) was found guilty of meta-ethical inconsequence, a flaw allegedly depending on Boström's adherence to the principle of *esse est percipi* (Borelius 1857:30).

Two years later, Boström opened himself to a more aggressive attack. Invited to have his *curriculum vitae* published in a reference work on notable Swedes, he took the opportunity of presenting a condensed survey of his elaborate philosophical system (Anonymous 1859:357–

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<sup>1</sup> Boström (1797–1866) was professor of practical philosophy at the University of Uppsala and had been so since 1842. The Boströmian school of thought — consisting of Boström himself and some of his pupils and their pupils — dominated Swedish philosophy during the second half of the nineteenth century and had a marked influence on the cultural climate in society at large. Borelius (1823–1909), a dissenting former student of Boström's, was to become professor of theoretical philosophy in Lund in 1866. At the time of their philosophical duel, Borelius held a position as schoolteacher at the little port town of Kalmar.

384).<sup>1</sup> He excused himself of some unavoidable obscurity due to the limited space. Nonetheless, an authentic exposition of his mature thinking was now publicly available. Borelius reacted swiftly and soon published an acrimonious pamphlet (Borelius 1859), the straightforward Swedish title of which means “Critique of the Boströmian Philosophy”. This booklet was an all-out offence, claiming to demonstrate the utter and hopeless inconsistency of Boström’s ontology and epistemology. Boström found himself forced to reply.

He did so in an anonymous<sup>2</sup> booklet, somewhat mockingly entitled (in Swedish) “The Speculative Philosopher Johan Jacob Borelius in Calmar” (Anonymous 1860). Insulting his opponent in the most contemptuous fashion, he opens by saying that Borelius is incapable of putting three sentences on paper without producing something that discloses ignorance, thoughtlessness, or disarray in the head.

Boström also made some serious philosophical attempts to defend himself. According to a knowledgeable judge like Nordin (1981:55–57), these attempts failed. However, I am not so sure. At any rate, one of Boström’s defence arguments is interesting in resembling Frege’s analysis of meaning three decades later. Here I suggest that this Frege-like argument rebuts Borelius’s specific inconsistency criticism, given Boström’s ontological premises.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. Brief Account of Boström’s Ontology

Borelius’s inconsistency criticism struck at the most original feature of Boström’s philosophy, *i.e.* his view that reality consists of a system of self-conscious entities, all of which are divine ideas. According to Boström, God is a person who encompasses everything that exists, and he has perfectly clear and complete ideas of everything.

To have an idea of something is to perceive it. Not only God perceives ideas. So do God’s ideas, too, *inter alia* the human beings. In contrast to God’s perfect ideas, the human perceptions are imperfect. In being

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<sup>1</sup> The article is anonymous but generally thought to be written by Boström himself. This assumption is strongly supported by a footnote to the title, stating that Boström had cooperated to make the philosophical account “reliable” and “authentic”.

<sup>2</sup> The formally anonymous author betrays a strong emotional involvement and an exceptional in-depth knowledge of the philosophical system under scrutiny. It is generally accepted without any doubt that the author is Boström himself.

<sup>3</sup> How Boström’s system fares with regard to other criticisms is a different story.

imperfect they provide incomplete or unclear knowledge of reality. The material world is phenomenal and consists of the human imperfect perceptions. However, the phenomenal world is not illusory. Illusions are imperfect perceptions of phenomena.

Two persons need not have, and often do not have, identical perceptions of the same object. Notwithstanding the differences between divine perfect and human imperfect perceptions, and between the various human imperfect perceptions, there is but one world.

#### 4. Borelius's Attack

In line with his earlier and brief disapproval of Boström's ethics (Borelius 1857:30), Borelius (1859) focused his renewed and more generalized criticisms on Boström's adherence to the principle of *esse est percipi*. To equate "to be" with "to be perceived" seemed perverse, he said. In any case, the principle did not square with Boström's theory of the structure and organization of reality. According to Borelius, *esse est percipi* contradicts the view that perfect God and imperfect man can perceive the same object. He writes (translation from Swedish by the present author):

However, according to Professor Boström, *to be* [Swedish *vara*] means the same thing as *to be perceived* [Sw. *förnimmias*]. 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 [Sw. *förvänd*]) equating of the word "be" with those of "be perceived", which can be considered the fundamental delusion [Sw. *grundvillfarelsen*] of the whole system... (Borelius 1859: 15–16)

Borelius used two arguments to underpin his accusation that Boström's equating "be" with "be perceived" is a fundamental delusion. Firstly, if the words "*vara*" and "*förnimmas*" were literally to mean the same thing, equating them would result in no more than a mere tautology, a result that "probably not even Professor Boström intends" (Borelius 1859:16).

Secondly, the word "be" does not in itself imply any relation, whereas the passive expression "be perceived" does, namely between a perceiving someone and that which is perceived. Therefore, equating "be" with "be perceived" does not explain what being is in itself. Borelius discusses at length how in his mind this logical difference between "to be" (in itself), and "to be perceived" makes it impossible to equate these expressions without running into a number of inconsistencies (Borelius 1859:16–20):

1) that which is perceived must be and cannot be different from the perception of it;

2) God and a limited being cannot perceive the same object unless the limited being is God, which is absurd and against Boström's basic suppositions;

3) all perceptions must be complete and clear, but some perceptions must be incomplete or obscure or both;

4) the phenomenal, *i.e.* that which is less perfect than the essence (Sw. "*väsentet*"), and the illusory, *i.e.* that which is less perfect than the phenomenal, are at the same time different and identical manifestations of imperfection. Contrary to his claim, Boström cannot avoid the implication that the phenomenal world is illusory.

Surely, Borelius's attack looks devastating, if correctly describing Boström's theistic ontology as well as his employment of the *esse est percipi* principle.

## 5. Boström's Defence

### 5.1 The *esse est percipi* Principle

In a Latin dissertation that Boström had written to qualify him for the professorship in practical philosophy eighteen years earlier, he had indeed asserted the synonymy between "to be" and "to be perceived":

*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.*] (Boström 1841:260)

He confirmed this assertion in the outline of his mature philosophical system, although now somewhat in passing and without the Latin formula reminiscent of Berkeley (Anonymous 1859:365). In the booklet written specifically in his defence against Borelius, Boström does not shrink from upholding the *esse est percipi* principle. However, he counters Borelius's attack by explaining that Borelius had simply misrepresented the meaning of the synonymy between "to be" and "to be perceived". Boström writes about himself in the third person:

Professor Boström has not equated [Sw. *identifierat*] the words be [Sw. *vara*] and be perceived [Sw. *förnimmas*]; he has said that they merely signify one and the same thing, albeit from somewhat different points of view. (Anonymous 1860:62, footnote 114)

At first glance, the initial part of this statement seems patently false, given the quotation above from Boström's Latin dissertation in 1841: "*haec verba unum prorsus idemque significant*". If the reader is unprepared for a more specific reading of the Latin word "*significant*", it is natural to understand it in the same rather wide and imprecise sense as the Swedish word "*betyder*", which corresponds to "means" in English and is the term used in Boström's reference article (Anonymous 1859:365). However, from the second part of the last quotation it appears that Boström has a more limited meaning in mind: "*the same thing...from different points of view.*" He explains his intention further:

By the proposition that the words be and be perceived in reality signify one and the same thing, PB [Professor Boström] has not said or wanted to say anything else than how the words relate to each other concerning what they signify [*beteckna*]. He has had no reason or wish to say anything more. Thus, LB [Lecturer Borelius] is as mistaken when he thinks that PB has said *what* being [alt.: "that which is"; *det varande*]<sup>1</sup> is in relation to something else, as when he demands that PB also ought to have said what it is in itself [*i och för sig sjelft*].

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<sup>1</sup> The alternative translation seems grammatically more correct but philosophically less clear or to the point. The sentence is a direct riposte to Borelius, who uses the word *varat* ("being" in the definite form) as the name of the concept of existence.

Nothing of that kind has ever been PB's intention and it is only LB's muddled head that has wanted to bring it in here in order to get something to criticize. (Anonymous 1860:65–66, footnote 120)

Evidently, Boström wants to make a distinction between different senses of meaning. He has never wanted to say what *esse* means “in itself”, only how it relates to *percipi* concerning what the words “signify”. In his Latin dissertation (Boström 1841/1883), he allows for a distinction between different senses of “be” on the one hand, and corresponding different senses of “be perceived” on the other. He also states that the correspondence relation reflects the fact that the two expressions quite generally “signify” [*beteckna*] one and the same thing. Perhaps the intention here is first of all that the two expressions are generally employed as parallel names of the same sense, although there are different senses, each of which can be named in two different ways.<sup>1</sup> However, further down in the text Boström acknowledges that a thing can be “in and for itself” (perceived by the divine spirit), while being only phenomenally perceived by human beings:

Consequently, we are pleased to admit that the things are not in and for themselves, *i.e.* in the divine spirit, because they are perceived by us, only one bears in mind that we do not perceive everything as it is in and for itself. (Boström 1841/1883:265)

Clearly, the intention here is that the attributes *to be in itself* and *to be perceived by us* apply to the same thing, notwithstanding that the thing is in one way to God and in another to humans. Thus, one and the same thing can “be” in at least two different ways simultaneously, because it is perceived in two different ways.

The more mature Boström's (1860) taking refuge in a clearly dual conception of meaning seems to come close to Frege's theory thirty-two years later (Frege 1892). When Borelius quarrels with Boström over the meaning of the expressions “*esse*”/“*vara*” (be) and “*percipi*”/“*för-*

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<sup>1</sup> Explaining why the *esse est percipi* principle is often doubted, Boström writes: “...the expression “be perceived” is taken in several, more or less determined, senses that are usually not very carefully kept apart. [...] And for each shade of meaning of the words “be perceived”, there is a corresponding shade of the word “be”, because on the whole, both expressions signify one and the same.” (Boström 1841/1883:263)

*nimmas*” (be perceived), Frege is only twelve years old. If one allows oneself to borrow anachronistically from Frege’s future terminology, it seems reasonable to understand Boström as claiming that it is not the *Sinn*, the sense, of “to be” that is equal to the *Sinn* of “to be perceived”. Rather, it is the *Bedeutung*, the reference or denotation, of the two expressions that should be understood as identical. He illustrates his point by referring to plane geometry:

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 [*bestämningar*] 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 tri-angular 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. (Anonymous 1890:64–65)

Frege, too, was to exploit the properties of a triangle for didactic purposes. To illustrate that different names can be linked to different senses and yet refer to the same object, he draws attention to the intersection of the three medians from the vertices of a triangle: the one and only point of intersection is fully defined by any two of the medians. Similarly with Boström, as his intention no doubt must be understood, the plane geometrical figure of the triangle is unambiguously picked out by any one of the two different names and corresponding senses: “having [precisely] three sides” and “having [precisely] three vertices”.

The above derivations of alleged inconsistencies (Borelius 1859:16–20) are based on the perhaps rather natural assumption that Boström aimed at explaining the very essence of existence, of being in itself. Sometimes Borelius (1859: 15) argues as if Boström intended his equating of “to be” with “to be perceived” to hold for the sense (*Sinn*) of the two expressions, in other words that the two strings of letters are different names of the sense of “to be”. On the other hand, Borelius (1859:

16) grants that Boström has probably not wanted to pronounce a mere tautology.

At any rate, Boström clearly wants Borelius to accept that “to be” (*esse*) and “to be perceived” (*percipi*), are names of different aspects of “one and the same” and so refer to this “same” in an indirect fashion, *via* these two different aspects. The question arises what kind of thing he has in mind when claiming that it could be one and the same. Since, in addition to God, only ideas exist, it seems natural to interpret Boström as intending that the expressions “be” and “be perceived” refer to each and every idea as the *Bedeutung* of the expressions. Immediately after he has made the analogy with the geometrical triangle, he writes:

For both of them [“to be” and “to be perceived”] express that the being or that which is perceived determines the self-aware consciousness of an I or a living entity (Sw. *bestämmer ett Jags eller ett lefvande väsens sjelfmedvetande*). (Anonymous 1890:65)

Although somewhat obliquely worded, this explanation is conformable with the interpretation that *esse* and *percipi* (whether taken as names of conceptual aspects, or as conceptual aspects) pick out ideas as their *Bedeutung*. This conclusion follows from the above quotation and the premises that it is ideas that determine the consciousness of living entities and that living entities are themselves ideas. Understood in this way, Boström’s version of the *esse est percipi* seems to mean nothing more than the fundamental ontological doctrine of idealism: everything that exists is somehow perceived, and everything that is perceived exists. In this general form, the doctrine does not necessarily imply anything specific about the nature of the infallible link between perception and existence, be it semantic or causal or just a plain and primitive ontological fact.

## 5.2 Sameness, Completeness, and Clarity

That God and human beings cannot perceive the same object is one of the absurdities that Borelius claimed to have derived from his understanding of the *esse est percipi* principle. Boström responded to this specific challenge by reflecting on the concepts of sameness, completeness, and clarity.

He underlines that infinite God has his ideas in common with the finite human beings. Humans are nothing but divine ideas:

Both the “finite being” and the infinite essence do indeed have the same content (...) in their consciousness (see footnote 127), namely the divine idea or perception. (Anonymous 1860:69, footnote 129)

The difference between God and human individuals is “formal”:

But from that [the numerical identity of divine and human ideas] it does not follow that all of them [the ideas] can be perceived with the same formal perfection or the same clarity and distinctness and truth by her [the human being] as by God. (Anonymous 1860:68, footnote 127)

Humans perceive the ideas less perfectly and less clearly than God, who perceives them perfectly. Thus, the consistency of Boström’s ontology requires that he can satisfactorily account for degrees of perfection in the perception of one and the same thing.

Because of the difference in the perfection of perception, one and the same thing must appear [Sw. *visa sig*] in one way to God, and in another way to human beings. To a human, the ideas may even appear more or less as the opposite of what they are “in their truth”, *i.e.* clearly different from how they appear to God (Anonymous 1860: 68, footnote 127). However, that a certain thing appears in one way to man and in another to God should not be taken to imply that important attributes are missing in the human perception of the thing. The identity of a thing requires that all of its essential attributes be present, or else the thing will have changed into another, non-identical thing (Anonymous 1860:73, footnote 132).

That the same ideas appear differently to God and man is so obvious to Boström that it “does not seem to need any proof”. Be that as it may, intuitively one can perhaps construct Boström’s intention as follows. For two perceptions to be of one and the same thing, both of them must be complete, *i.e.* all the ideas that make up the essential attributes of the thing must be present in both perceptions. This requirement is compatible with the claim that the ideas appear differently to God and man, since completeness is not the same as clarity. To illustrate the difference between completeness and clarity, Boström considers the viewing of the front of a building (Anonymous 1860:74, footnote 132). If one sees only a part of the front, then one does not in fact see the front but something else, namely a part of the front — a part which does not have all the

essential attributes of the whole front. If, on the other hand, one sees the whole front, then one perceives all its essential attributes. Yet some detailed attributes of the front are more conspicuous than others, and more so from one distance than from another. Therefore one sees the front more clearly at a close distance than from further away. The more clearly one sees it, the more perfect the perception. But everything in the front is there and somehow affects the observer's total perception of it.

This illustration depends on the basic assumption that ideas are composite entities. Boströmian ideas typically consist of other ideas. For example, a human being is an idea in God and at the same time perceives many ideas. Similarly, each object in the material phenomenal world typically consists of many ideas. A material thing, as humans perceive it, is thus a complex idea that is composed of more elementary ideas of various clarity. In contrast, all God's ideas are perfectly clear to him.

In the same vein one can understand a further illustration offered by Boström to explain how perceptions can differ between different human observers of one and the same object. Tacitly alluding to the Epicurean-Lucretian tradition and Descartes's sixth meditation, he considers two persons who are looking at a tower from some distance. Boström asks:

If, for example, two different persons see an angular tower, and thus either of them has it within his field of vision, then, of course, this is the real perception of both. But what prevents that one of them, standing closer to the tower, can see the tower as angular, while the other, standing farther away from it, by contrast can see it as round? And are not then the perceptions of both in a certain respect the same, and relatively or in a certain respect another? (Anonymous 1860:69–70, footnote 129)

In response to Boström's self-defence, Borelius soon fired off a new round of sharp criticisms in a subsequent second instalment of his "*Kritik*". Among other things he there scrutinizes the arguments about completeness and clarity, and the building-front and tower examples (Borelius 1860: 21–25). Boström's opinion about the tower case is branded as outright childish and as proving nothing else than his inability to grasp the criticisms raised against him. That Boström's tower argument misses the point is also the judgement of a modern commentator (Nordin 1981:56). So it must perhaps seem, if, as Borelius appears to

do, one equates the *Sinn* of “being” with the *Sinn* of “being perceived”. On that premise it is indeed hard to avoid the conclusion that if two persons, *A* and *B*, perceive the same object (the same instantiation of *being*; say, the same tower), then *A* perceives it exactly as *B* perceives it. On the other hand, that implication does not hold if, as Boström seems to do, one intends that “being” has the same *Bedeutung* as “being perceived”, though not necessarily the same *Sinn*.

Still, it must be admitted that Boström is not very lucid when discussing the concepts of *completeness* and *clarity*, and the difference between *being perceived* and *appear*. Borelius (1860: 22) scornfully remarks that his own philosophical knowledge breaks down against “Boström’s wise teaching, the quintessence of which” is that one can “perceive something without its being consciously noticeable”. Moreover, we may ask, how can the perception of anything be incomplete (e.g. the part of the building-front) in the sense of not containing all the essential attributes of the complete thing (the whole building-front), if human beings have literally all ideas in common with God, albeit with different degrees of clarity?

To avoid the blatant self-contradiction on this point, a charitable interpretation of Boström must undoubtedly allow a somewhat peculiar reading of “perceive” and “perception”. It should permit all human beings to perceive all of God’s ideas without noticing most of them, and some to be perceived in such an unclear fashion as to make them appear the opposite of what they are to perfectly perceiving God. Perhaps Boström is best saved from total disaster, if one understands man’s unclear (or even unconscious) perceptive sharing in the totality of God’s ideas as some kind of potentiality. If a human being is consciously aware of an idea, then it is one of God’s ideas that has been actualized in the awareness of that human being, albeit more or less clearly; there are no ideas outside God. That an idea is perceived by a human being even when he is not aware of it, could simply mean that it is always possible for the human being to be made aware of it.

Although Boström portrays the divine reality as a systematic whole of interlocking ideas, he obviously reckons with things within that whole.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> How the absolute whole relates to finite things is a fundamental problem for Boströmians that cannot be dealt with here. Interestingly, Sahlin’s (1858: 12–15) proposal of a one-sided relation bears a certain resemblance to the realist Johans-

The interpretation that God's ideas are present in human beings as potential objects of awareness is compatible with the assumption that only some of the ideas are consciously actualized to any degree of clarity. By appealing to such a difference in actuality, it seems possible to justify the view that one can perceive separate things, which have distinct identities determined by their different attributes (Anonymous 1860:73, footnote 132), in spite of the fact that he potentially perceives all God's ideas. On this interpretation, the perception of a part of a building-front contains only a limited number of those actually noticeable attributes that one is aware of when perceiving the whole building-front.

### 6. Objective Identity and Phenomenal Difference

How, then, shall we understand that it is one and the same tower that is differently perceived by *A* and *B*? About a century later, Marc-Wogau (1967: 139) suggested that the object seen by *A* and that seen by *B* may be labelled "the same object" because *A* and *B* locate what they immediately see to the same part of the common space. In realistic materialist ontologies, the identity of physical objects is generally understood in terms of their space and time coordinates. According to Boström's idealism, both the tower, as perceived by humans, *and* space-time are phenomena, and there is no material tower to occupy an area of space-time independently of any divine or human perception.

However, since the phenomena reflect the perfect reality in God, albeit in an imperfect manner, a specific tower should be definable by virtue of its relations to other ideas in the complete divine system of ideas. Let us assume that the tower is square from the divine perspective, meaning that its being circular would be inconsistent with the rest of the divine system of ideas. Since humans perceive things less clearly than God, it is only to be expected that the perceptions of *A* and *B* can be dominated by different elementary ideas in the complex of divine ideas that constitute the tower. Of course, the ideas of *A* and *B* must not contradict each other, or else the observers will not be looking at the same

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son's (1989: 130–138) Husserl-inspired concept of one-sided existential dependence, although there are distinct differences. According to Sahlin, things of graded reality depend on the absolute. In Johansson's illustrative case, a heap depends on its pieces, and reality is not graded.

object. Whereas *being round* and *being square* are incompatible ideas, *looking round from distance  $d_1$*  and *looking square from distance  $d_2$*  are not. The last-mentioned two ideas can be instantiated by a square tower, and with few additional assumptions by a round one. For example, if something throws a vertical shadow on a circular wall, it might look angular at a certain distance.

The objective tower — or, to use idealistic language, the *true* tower — may be understood as a complex of consistent ideas in God's conscious mind, a complex that gives God a complete and perfect comprehension of the tower in all its aspects and relations. The analogy with realistic metaphysics is obvious. To a materialist, the tower consists of entities that stand in lawful and consistent relations to time, space, and other material entities in the world. As little as any observer can overview all of those relations when reflecting upon the tower, as little *A* and *B* can take into account all the relevant ideas in God's mind that pertain to the complex of ideas making up the true tower.<sup>1</sup> The phenomena perceived by *A* and *B* are partial aspects of the true tower.

According to Boström, the perceptions of *A* and *B* are the same in one respect, but different in another. What are these two “respects”?

The respect according to which the perceptions are different should be straightforward enough: the ideas about which the observers are aware appear different to *A* and *B*, respectively. It is less obvious in which respect the objects of perception are the same. From the above interpretative reconstruction of Boström's analysis of the building-front case, it follows that the object of perception could be the same in *A*'s and *B*'s perceptions, if both perceptions contain the same essential attributes of the object in the form of actualized ideas. Clearly, the attributes *looking round from distance  $d_1$*  (*D1*) and *looking square from distance  $d_2$*  (*D2*) are not attributes of a phenomenal object of perception common to both *A* and *B*. By abstracting from *D1* and *D2* one can perhaps construct a theoretical object that could be said to be the same for *A* and *B* in not containing any idea about the angularity or roundness of the tower.

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<sup>1</sup> For God to be able to identify the true tower as something specific, the complex of ideas making up his perceptions of the true tower must somehow be distinguishable from God's other ideas, whether by degree of closeness to a conceptual centre or by demarcation. It cannot be by degrees of clarity, as all God's ideas are perfectly clear. The solution to this problem is irrelevant for the present argument.

However, as it is highly unlikely that *A* and *B* would be under the impression of perceiving a tower that is neither angular nor round (in addition to perceiving separate roundness or angularity), such a theoretical construct is much too abstract and far-fetched to seem like a reasonable interpretation of Boström's intention.

More likely, it is the objective tower, as defined by God, that Boström has in mind as the object common to both *A*'s and *B*'s perceptions. Although neither *A* nor *B* can perceive the tower in the same way as God, their perceptions refer to the objective ("true") tower in virtue of their being perceptions of some of the essential ideas that constitute the tower. In this respect, the two different phenomenal perceptions are perceptions of the same tower.

In the tower case, as presented by Boström, it is a stated premise that the tower is as a matter of fact angular, although it is seen as such by only one of the observers.<sup>1</sup> Boström does not explain why the more distant observer sees it as round, but his arguments about the building-front example makes it likely that he considers the distant observer to have less clear a perception than the more closely-standing one. The concept of clarity is not explicated, except for being contrasted with completeness. Whereas completeness is intended as a quantitative concept regarding the number of ideas perceived, clarity is apparently meant as a quality of individual ideas. According to Borelius (1859: 18), Boström's attempt to distinguish between degrees of completeness or clarity is a logical mistake, given the principle of *esse est percipi*. Again, this criticism hinges on Borelius's interpreting the principle as an equivalence between senses rather than between references, and so does not require further consideration here.

However, one may ask in what sense the perception of roundness could be considered unclear. The very concept of roundness is not any more obscure than that of angularity. Moreover, Boström emphasizes that each of the observers has a "real" perception, regardless of the difference between them. The most reasonable interpretation seems to be that roundness, although really perceived by the distant observer, is not

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<sup>1</sup> Descartes (sixth meditation) is less explicit. Noting that towers may seem round at a distance and angular on closer inspection, he finds the senses to be unreliable but does not claim that the close-up appearance is more correct than the view at a distance.

the shape of the true tower as perceived by God. The angularity of the true tower reflects that God does not perceive the tower from a distance and perceives every idea pertaining to it in a consistent fashion. It is difficult, not to say impossible, to envisage geometrical forms outside phenomenal space. However, although God's own perceptions are not bounded by space and time, he is omniscient (Anonymous 1859:364) and so should be aware of how the imperfect human beings perceive roundness and angularity.<sup>1</sup> At any rate, the doctrine that there is a relation of graded perfection between shared human and divine ideas (Anonymous 1860:68–69, footnotes 127–129) implies that the phenomenal roundness and angularity must somehow map to specific correspondences in the divine system of ideas.

## 7. Discussion

Once of high academic and social status, Boström's philosophy is long obsolete and at times even looked upon as ridiculous. Not only Borelius but also more modern philosophers, notably Phalén (1911) and Wedberg (1937), have criticized Boströmianism for fundamental inconsistencies. In the present paper, I have tried to show that Boström's adherence to the principle of *esse est percipi* is not self-contradictory in the way asserted by Borelius. Although I have suggested how to vindicate Boström on this specific point, I do not wish to make any claims regarding his philosophy in general. Nor, of course, do I propose that Boström exerted any influence on Frege. Still, I find it interesting that Boström and Frege entertained similar views of how different senses can point to one and the same reference. The similarity is enhanced by the fact that both of them used the geometrical properties of the triangle as evidence. Kremer (2010) has underlined that Frege's distinction between sense and reference has deep historical roots. The similarity between Boström's

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<sup>1</sup> Boström is not entirely clear on this point. "Thus, we must ask, as we human beings know that God is omniscient, why could we not also know that that which is perceived imperfectly by us can and must be perceived perfectly by him?" (Anonymous 1860:64, footnote 111). At the same time: "...there are no ideas of plants or animals with God, since as such they are nothing but phenomena in and for us as rational beings." (Anonymous 1859:369). Can omniscient God know how humans experience plants and animals without God having any idea of plants and animals, or does not omniscience imply knowing how humans experience plants and animals?

dual conception of meaning and Frege's more developed theory may reflect that the two philosophers were similarly influenced by their predecessors, for example by Kant's distinction between the object matter of a cognition and the way in which we cognize it (Kremer 2010:237).

From the debate between Borelius (1859, 1860) and Boström (1860), the evidence in favour of understanding Boström's *esse est percipi* as an equivalence between references rather than between senses seems clear enough. Further evidence can be adduced from the more comprehensive presentations of Boström's system that were to appear in several editions during the decades to come. For example:

To *be* is to be *perceived*, and to be perceived is to be, both expressions have the same meaning [*betydelse*] and extension.

For as far as something is perceived by us, it *is* also to us, and as far as something is to us, it is also perceived by us; (...) True enough, the concepts of to be and to be perceived are usually posited against each other; however, for a start, this is due to the fact that the perceptions by the senses [sensory system; *sinnen*] (content, the sensuous things) are less proper perceptions than those of the power of imagination [*föreställningsförmågan*] (the imaginations), and still less proper perceptions than those of the reasoning power [*tankeförmågan*] (the thoughts, the concepts). One posits the first-mentioned perceptions as the objects or the (only relative) being against the two last-mentioned ones as the (more proper) perceptions, because only in and by the latter does the spirit become more genuinely aware and conscious of the former ones as well. However, at a higher level of development and culture, too, it is possible to consider one and the same perception, *e.g.* one and the same concept, as a *perception* on one hand and as a *being* on the other, depending on whether one predominantly reflects upon its character of self-awareness or upon its other attributes. Thus, for example, on the one hand one talks about the concept of the circle, and on the other about the (mathematical) circle, although in reality both are one and the same thing. (Boström 1884:5–6).

Whatever else might be said about this explication, it demonstrates Boström's intention that *be* and *be perceived* refer to one and the same thing by virtue of differently naming different aspects of it.

Against this background, it is somewhat puzzling that Phalén (1911: 5–6) without noticeable hesitation attributes to Boströmianism the same interpretation of the *esse est percipi* principle that I have here criticized in Borelius (1859, 1860) for misrepresenting Boström’s intention. Although Phalén’s analysis directly occupies itself with the work of Boström’s successor on the chair of practical philosophy (Sahlin 1882, 1883, 1884), his critique explicitly aims at the logic of “the Boströmian school”. If Phalén’s understanding of Sahlin is correct, it would indicate a significant difference between Boström and Sahlin. However, it is questionable whether Sahlin does in fact maintain a Borelian interpretation of the *esse est percipi* principle. He writes:

The purer the truth that is contained in the knowledge, the more complete the thinking by which the knowledge is owned; and the more perfect the knowledge-owning thinking is in relation to its object, the purer is the truth that is contained in this knowledge. (Sahlin 1882: 5–6)

If the thinking upon, and knowledge of, an object, *i.e.* its perception, can be graded with respect to the perfection of the knowledge in relation to the object known, then the perception and the being cannot be one and the same aspect of the object, although the object itself is but one.

Assuming that Boström’s *esse est percipi* should be understood as expressing identity between the reference of *esse* and that of *percipi*, we may finally ask what Boström holds to be the sense of *esse*, *i.e.* the most fundamental or primitive meaning of existence in itself. According to Wedberg (1937: 120–136), being in this sense is tantamount to having the character of determination, of being determined.<sup>1</sup> However, Wedberg is not entirely clear as to the relationship between the fundamental ontological significance of determination on the one hand and the epistemological significance of perception on the other. He concludes the following about the *esse est percipi* principle:

The doctrine says that the property of being something determined coincides with the property of being perceived. If one abstracts per-

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<sup>1</sup> In the passage quoted by Wedberg, Boström talks about a perceived object’s determining the perceiving agent’s conscience as a necessary condition for the perception. Presumably, Wedberg has tacitly and reasonably assumed that for an object to determine something else, the object itself must be determined.

ception from a determined thing, then the thing itself evaporates. (Wedberg 1937:134)

Of course, according to Boström's ontology nothing can be determined unless it is perceived, for the simple reason that everything that exists is perceived, and everything that is perceived exists. The existence of the true tower is tantamount to its being determined by God's perfect ideas, not by *A*'s or *B*'s different and imperfect perceptions.<sup>1</sup> Yet, *A* and *B* see the same tower by virtue of the referencing relationships that hold between the true tower and their phenomenal perceptions which are different aspects of the true tower. So, for the above quotation from Wedberg (1937) not to be misleading, "coincides" must concern the reference-aspect of meaning, not the sense-aspect, and be read as short for "has the same reference as".

Commenting on Boström's above argument (Anonymous 1860:65–66, footnote 120; third quotation under 5.1), Wedberg writes:

For as we have tried to show, in Boström's doctrine of be and be perceived there is precisely an identification of that which is — in the sense of that which is determined — with its relation to the perception of it. Therefore, Borelius's criticism amounts to a correct remark that that which is must be something determined already independently of this relation. (Wedberg 1937:135, footnote)

Here no attention is given to Boström's distinction between perfect (divine) and imperfect (human) perception, or between the corresponding forms of being, *i.e.* being truly in and for itself, and being phenomenally for human observers. There is undoubtedly in Boström's doctrine an identification of that which is truly with that which is perceived by God. However, it is also Boström's opinion that one and the same thing can "be" in different ways simultaneously, because it is perceived in different ways. In addition to being truly, due to God's perceptions, a thing can exist phenomenally in various ways, corres-

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<sup>1</sup> Already in Boström's early Latin treatise (translation from Bygdén's Swedish): "For that which is contained in the divine spirit, by whom everything is perceived in its truth and as it is in itself, is said to be *in and for itself*; and that which is perceived by us humans is either this divine spirit's perceptions or phenomena thereof, which phenomena can have no existence of any kind without the former [divine perceptions]. (Boström 1841/1883:265)

ponding to the perceptions of one or more human observers. Although phenomena are not identified with true objects, they refer to true objects by being aspects of them. This reference relation certainly presupposes that the object is something determined independently of the human perception; it is determined by the divine perceptions. However, it seems unwarranted to interpret *esse est percipi* as more generally implying that determination must be independent of or logically prior to perception. According to a more plausible interpretation of Boström's intention, the existence of God's ideas is not a requisite for, but an aspect of, his perfect perceptions of them.

### 8. Summary

In 1859–1860, Johan Jacob Borelius published two diatribes against Christopher Jacob Boström, the then dominating philosopher in Sweden. Boström was accused of inconsistency, because he asserted the principle of *esse est percipi* while at the same time maintaining that different agents can perceive one and the same thing differently. It is suggested that Borelius misunderstood Boström's intention. In his printed defence, in 1860, Boström clarifies his use of a dual conception of meaning, resembling Frege's distinction between *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (reference) some thirty years later. Boström appears to equate the reference of *esse* with that of *percipi*, whereas Borelius argued as if the principle concerned the senses of the two expressions. According to Borelius, two observers cannot possibly have different perceptions of the same object, if "to be" means "to be perceived". In Boström's view, as reconstructed here, two different phenomenal perceptions may well refer to one and the same true object, of which the phenomena are aspects. The true object exists in virtue of its being determined by God's perfect ideas.

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