

Wine and Philosophy

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What could be more dull than the idea of a symposium? The word conjures up associations with dusty dons, tedious academic papers on deservedly obscure facts and theories. In universities these days, what used to be called 'symposia' are often called 'workshops' – perhaps in a feeble attempt to make the symposium sound more exciting. If this is your view of the symposium, you may be surprised to learn that the original ancient Greek symposium was a drinking party: the word derives from the Greek for 'drinking together'. A Greek symposium was a ritualised and often debauched affair. The master of the symposium would begin by drinking a small 'libation' of undiluted wine – the Greeks normally mixed their wine with water – and he would then decide in what proportion the wine was to be diluted to determine what kind of evening it was going to be. Plato's *Symposium*, a dialogue on the nature of love, describes the most famous symposium of all. The great philosopher Socrates dominates the discussion (as he normally did), drinks more than anyone else, and leaves the symposium sober in the early morning, with the inferior thinkers and drinkers comatose.

This is one of many links between philosophy and wine which trace back to the origins of philosophy in ancient Greece. The Greeks regarded the proper consumption of wine to be one of the marks of civilisation. As well as being used in religious rituals, wine was also thought to have many medicinal qualities. Hippocrates thought that pains of the eyes could be relieved by drinking pure wine, and that wine drunk with an equal proportion of water was a cure for anxiety and (rather oddly) yawning. Socrates was not

the only Greek philosopher who was known for his drinking. Diogenes answered the question of which wine he liked with one word: ‘another’s’. And the Stoic Chrysippus is rumoured to have died after a laughing fit induced by watching the effects of giving his donkey some unmixed wine.

However, the link between philosophy and wine runs deeper than anecdotes about the drinking habits of the great philosophers. For wine also provides philosophy with a vivid illustrations of one of the most difficult of philosophical problems: the relation between the objective and the subjective. In its everyday sense, the word ‘subjective’ can have a pejorative use (‘that’s just a subjective opinion’) but philosophers do not generally mean it like this. To the philosopher, the subjective is the realm of our own experience, or what is only accessible to a subject of experience; the objective is the world which is independent of our experience and accessible to many. So for example, seeing something is a subjective experience in this sense; while the things that we see are part of the objective world.

One traditional ambition of Western philosophy has been to give the most general and complete description possible of the world, as it is in itself. In recent philosophy, influenced by scientific theories, this ambition has been combined with a view of the world acquired from science. Therefore, the project of giving a complete objective description of the world has turned into the project of giving a complete scientific description of the world. But how does this project accommodate subjective experience? Can an account of our subjective experiences be incorporated into a fully objective or scientific conception of reality, or are they something which will be forever inaccessible to science?

The American philosopher Thomas Nagel dramatised this situation elegantly.

Nagel considered the case of the subjective experience of bats, who ‘see’ by a kind of sonar mechanism. He argued that no matter what we knew about the physical constitution of bats and how their perception works, we would never know enough to know what it was like to be a bat. And he concluded that as things presently are, this means that a completely objective description of reality is impossible. This sparked a huge debate in philosophy. Does this really mean that there are features of the world which science cannot find out about? And does mean that science must necessarily be incomplete? This is where wine comes in.

One of the things which makes wine-drinking interesting to philosophers is that is one of the few areas where there have been systematic attempts to describe an experience in detail. In effect, the study of wine is a good example of answering Nagel’s challenge: how to give an objective account of a subjective experience. Real difficulties arise when we try and describe the subjective qualities of an experience – say, an experience of a particular taste. Remember, if you can, the first time you tasted beer. If you are like most people, you will have hated the taste. If you now like beer, then ask yourself this question: is it *that* taste which you now like, or has the taste of beer *changed* for you gradually across time? Certainly, the objective nature of the beer might have remained the same over the years. But has your subjective experience changed or is it just your attitude to the experience which has changed? If you think the taste itself has changed, then how can it be that the beer *itself* really has this taste?

This raises a more general question: are tastes in the objects which we taste, or are they partly in the mind? Before we reflect upon it, we tend to think that the tastes are in

the objects: it is the sugar that is sweet, the cheese that is salty. But doubts arise when we start to consider how tastes can be altered by other tastes: we all know that orange juice, for example, tastes foul when you have just cleaned your teeth. And there are also strange phenomena which seem to demonstrate that tastes are not in the things themselves, but in our experience of them. There is a substance called ‘phenol-thio-urea’ for example, which tastes very bitter to seventy-five percent of people, but tastes like water to everyone else. Is it ‘really’ bitter? Suppose you say it is, and that therefore a quarter of the population are wrong. But now imagine that the other three-quarters died out, and only the quarter to whom it tastes like water remains. Is it still bitter, even though no-one can taste it? Surely not; but that then casts doubt on whether it was really bitter before.

The greatest philosopher of modern times, Immanuel Kant, claimed that ‘the taste of a wine does not belong to the objective determinations of the wine’. Suppose we agree with him. Where does that leave those people, like wine writers, who try and systematically describe the experience of tasting wine? Are they just sounding off about their own subjective experiences? This cannot be correct. It is natural to see wine writers as giving an objective description of a subjective experience. Their descriptions are objective because they expect that others will be able to understand their descriptions and (they hope) agree with them. But how well do the wine writers succeed? Opinions differ. Descriptions of wines are often mocked, often with good reason (remember Thurber’s ‘naïve domestic burgundy but I think you’ll be amused by its presumption’). Nonetheless, the fact remains that there is an extraordinarily wide variety of terms for discussing the subjective experience of drinking wine. We have nothing like this for many other

experiences: think how bad most of us are at describing the experience of pain when asked by our doctors.

Many descriptions of wines are not controversial at all. They rely on simple comparisons with other tastes: so pinot noir tastes like raspberries; cabernet sauvignon like blackcurrant; sauvignon blanc is like gooseberries. It is not really surprising, after all, that a product made from grapes should taste like other berries. Also easy to grasp are the terms describing the structure of a wine: ‘big’ meaning high in alcohol, ‘crisp’ for acidic and so on. After a little experience with wine, it can also become easy to recognise why wine writers describe a wine with too much acidity as ‘green’. Perhaps we understand this by association with the tartness of unripe fruit; or perhaps with the pale colour of a sharp white wine. These comparisons shade imperceptibly into analogies which then take on a life of their own. Jancis Robinson points out that although we find it natural to describe gewürztraminer as ‘spicy’ it doesn’t taste like any actual spice at all, but more like lychees. After a while you forget which parts of the vocabulary are metaphors, which are similes and which are just unclassifiable attempts to compare unlike phenomena: I think I understand ‘road tar’ but ‘wet slate’ is still a mystery to me. Occasionally, however, these attempts can achieve something almost poetic: the incomparable Robinson has been reported as describing a Pomerol from a great vintage as ‘like velvet – with a pattern on it’.

Sometimes the enthusiasm of the writer carries them away. Consider Robert Parker’s description of a Chateau Latour: ‘this sexy, opulent, open-knit effort... dense ruby/purple, with a sweet evolved nose of black fruits, cedar, spice box, and liquid minerals’. (*Liquid* minerals?) The description is massively appealing, as Parker might

himself put it; but do we really know what ‘sexy’ means when applied to a wine, other than giving an indication that the writer likes it? If we did, then maybe we would know what to make of a Chilean shiraz being described (by the self-consciously funky American wine magazine, *Wine X*) as ‘an S&M party with 100 of your closest friends - leather, spice and a little tight’. Or maybe not.

Despite these excesses, there is some reason to think that wine vocabulary can do a good job of providing a kind of objective description of a subjective phenomenon. But Thomas Nagel’s worry still remains: in what sense can these descriptions *really* tell us what the experience is like? For it seems obvious that no matter how many wine books you had read, the descriptions would mean nothing to you if you had not tasted wine. We can make this point with a thought-experiment: suppose that the science of wine, oenology, was far more advanced than it is now, and we could know everything that there is to know about the physical processes involved in wine-making, and the psychology of tasting it. Now imagine that someone who had never ever tasted wine had made a scientific study of all these theories, and became a world expert on oenology and psychology. It seems obvious that no matter how much they knew, they would learn something new when they tasted wine for the first time. So the scientific story about wine cannot be the whole story. The point applies, of course, to all kinds of experience. Bertrand Russell applied it to visual experience: ‘it is obvious’ he wrote ‘that a man who can see knows things which a blind man cannot know; but a blind man can know the whole of physics. Thus the knowledge which other men have and he has not is not a part of physics.’

This might seem like an obvious truism until we realise that it has a striking consequence: that there are necessary limits to our scientific or objective knowledge of the world. This sceptical view has had some distinguished advocates: Einstein is supposed to have said that science cannot give us the taste of chicken soup. And if we follow the argument through, we must admit that neither can science give us the taste of Chateau Latour. Or wet slate for that matter.

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