

Chapter 6: The Objectivity / Subjectivity Dilemma

We set out to build a tasting process that cuts through the preferences and biases of individual critics, and the noise of celebrity and marketing, to get to the wine in the glass.

Joshua Greene, *Wine & Spirits*

I think the wine trade is intrinsically bullshit-prone and therefore attracts bullshit artists.

Richard Quandt, *Journal of Wine Economics*

Wine tasting is not the only profession that has had disagreements between natural scientists focused on objectivity in their experimental methods, and social scientists trying to understand the subjectivities and aesthetics associated with particular cultural phenomena. This debate has divided scholars and philosophers for centuries. In general, objectivists assert there is an independent, objective reality that is accessible and knowable, primarily, through scientific methods and experiments. This works fairly well in physics and biology, and has been the gold standard in medical research for quite a while. However, the basic assumptions of the objectivist paradigm don't work as well with socially-constructed realities and phenomena like juvenile delinquency, love, marriage, literacy, and in this case understanding and evaluating the taste of a particular wine. Social scientists and humanists would suggest these are socially constructed, subjective phenomena that require different ways of understanding and evaluating them.

A Philosophical Discussion for Beginners

Let's begin by assuming there exists a single "real" taste of a particular wine. Whether

humans can objectively perceive or access the *real* taste of a wine aligns with a certain perspective in the philosophy of science known as essentialism, objectivism, or *positivism*. This philosophy is based on a *correspondence theory of truth*. The basic tenets of this perspective suggest there is an independent reality (taste of a wine) that exists separately from the observer (wine taster) and that experimental methods can bring us to an objective understanding or evaluation of said wine. From this perspective, it is posited the taste of a wine is something that exists in some way, to some degree, in some amount, inside the glass of wine and is separate from the act of tasting.

From the subjectivist or interpretivist perspective, whether a single, independent “real” taste of a wine exists or not, it is not available to humans because we can only know the world, or the taste of a wine, from a subjective position through the sensory apparatuses we have been endowed with as humans. Tasting is a complex human act which involves observing, analyzing, and understanding what one perceives in a glass of wine, not an experimentally objective way of measuring its components. Where the taste of a wine may or may not exist independently, the act of tasting always requires a human taster and involves aesthetics and subjectivities associated with the act of tasting. If you hold on for a bit, I promise I will link these philosophical perspectives with the taste of wine, or you can just drink some more wine now and skip this section.

Wine has certain physiochemical elements that cumulatively make up its existence or its reality. No one usually has an argument with that assertion. However, that doesn't mean these elements simply make up the taste of a wine. Our sensory apparatus, memories, cognitive capabilities, and our previous experiences with wine are always between us and the elements

in a particular glass of wine. There may be some level of objectivity in our perception of the physiochemical elements that are the essential properties of a wine, like pyrazines, terpenes, or thiols, but these elements alone do not make up the taste of a wine, or even more important its level of quality. Accessing the taste of a wine requires a drinking human being to engage in the act of tasting, analyzing, and judging.

We cannot step outside of the human, sensory process of tasting to come to know the wine in and of itself. We can only come to know a wine through the sensory apparatus we have available, and what our hominoid brains can process. To make things even more complicated, we also need to consider whether the act of tasting a wine changes the thing being tasted like some vineyard-based version of the Schrodinger cat experiment. We might also have to consider whether anyone, other than philosophers with an obsessive passion for wine, even give a shit about this. At this point, I often see some people's eyes rolling back in their heads or ignore the whole debacle and politely ask me to shut up and drink the wine in my glass.

In some ways, it is like the old philosophical conundrum; if a tree falls in the forest, does it make a sound even if no one is there to hear it? The answer depends on how you define sound, or in our discussions, taste. If you define sound as the *reception* of sound waves, then a person has to be there to receive them. If you define sound as the *emittance* of sound waves, then no one has to be there to hear it, and you just have to take it on faith that sounds are being emitted. It's the same with the taste of a wine. Is there an objective taste of a wine before someone tastes it? Or does the act of tasting create the taste of the wine? One way to look at it is, no taster, no taste. Regardless of whether the taste exists independently or not, there is no way of knowing objectively what the taste of a wine is.

As we wander further along this philosophical path, we might want to change tactics and consider whether objectivity is even desirable, let alone possible. The infamous German philosopher and cultural critic Frederic Nietzsche offers two ideas that may shed some light on our desire to change tactics. First, he suggests there are no *pure facts*, there are only *interpretations* made by human beings. In relation to wine tasting, he would assert there are no objective facts about which wines are better, only human beings that have decided (interpreted) which ones are better based on some socially-constructed criteria that have been developed by wine experts over time, and additionally, have to be expressed through language.

Nietzsche's second point, which relates directly to the concept of the wine expert, is that various interpretations thrive not because they are fair or "objective," but because they have the brute strength of consensus behind them. In other words, wine experts have developed a particular way of tasting and talking and this *consensus* way of doing so masquerades as a sense of objectivity. Many wine critics have hurled the accusation of subjectivity at those tasters they disagree with, while asserting the objectivity of their own judgments. If every wine expert suddenly likes higher alcohol, fruit forward wines (which may in fact be the case currently) then those wines are deemed as being of higher quality, but that doesn't make it objective.

The real quality of a particular wine may be in the eye of the beholder as much as it is in the glass. This assertion, which aligns with a subjective, interpretivist epistemology, raises the ire of many of the natural scientists and certain wine experts I have read and researched for this project. Many of these wine critics suggest if we follow down this path, we end up in *subjectivity hell* where whatever wine anyone likes is representative of a what makes up quality

wine. According to wine critics, this is to be avoided at all costs. I would suggest I understand where these critics are coming from, especially because it might put them out of the expert business.

The whole crux of the issue boils down to whether we simply *identify* the essence or quality of a wine in a score or review or *create* the essence or quality by reviewing and scoring it. I will stake out the middle ground and suggest it is a bit of both. You only get one chance to drink a particular wine, at a particular time and place. No one can come back days later and validate or replicate your experiences and evaluations. This presents a challenge to the basic scientific procedures used in experimental methods. A bottle from the same vintage, vineyard, barrel, and varietal may have subtle differences even if it is opened under the same conditions. As the saying goes, you cannot step into the same river (or wine) twice.

Challenges with Objectivity in Wine Tasting

Although, Matt Kramer states that objectivity in wine tasting does exist, he contends that it exists on a rather small plane, has a laboratory-like feel to it, and does not directly influence the day to day experiences of the average wine drinker. I agree. Kramer contends, objectivity is based on the application of “scientific” procedures, like blind tasting or the *tasting triangle* to arrive at reliable and replicable results. However, Kramer goes on to state, “it is a fact – that good and less good [wine] exist independently of our personal preferences.” This statement aligns with the objectivist perspective described previously. Whether there is more agreement at the level of perception than interpretation, Kramer believes that wine tasting is not a completely subjective experience.

Barry Smith, a wine enthusiast and the Director of the University of London’s School of

Philosophy, begins with the assertion that identifying the physiochemical and enzymatic properties of a wine does not reveal the taste of that wine. Knowing the percentage of alcohol, the acidity, and other objectively measurable elements does not equal understating the taste of a wine. The question he begins with is there something in a wine glass that is available for tasters to detect? If so, he wants to know whether our sensations are an adequate guide to discovering and evaluating the qualities inherent in a particular wine?

One of the challenges Smith conveyed was the fact that tasting the wine destroys the object of perception, or the challenges of a lack of *object permanence*. Unlike looking at a painting or listening to a song on a CD, when we drink a sip of wine, we consume it and forever eliminate the object of our experience. Wine may be an independent phenomenon that exists objectively in a glass but our interactions with it are fleeting and not available to re-experience once the wine is gone. Smith also separates the taste of a wine, which he considers an independent entity, from the act of tasting a wine, which he considers a subjective experience. I agree with his conclusions and suggest the properties of a wine may or not be objective, but our experiences of it are *always* subjectively based.

Jamie Goode, an acclaimed scientist-wine critic has brought a scientific perspective to wine tasting and the challenges with objectivity. He has challenged the objective notion of a “one-true-taste” of a wine even being accessible to tasters. However, he does not give up the scientific possibility of this being accessible in the future. He is a scientist. He sees the experiment as the gold-standard of empirical research, but he does like to hedge his bets. Goode rejects the idea that wine tasting is a completely subjective experiences. However, he does suggest there is not always a single true or valid interpretation of a wine, but that should

be what we try and attain through scientific methods. He certainly falls in the science side of the artistic-scientific debate.

Another important consideration is that tasters often comment on elements that are *missing* from a particular wine. For example, tasters may say a wine is lacking acidity, balance, tannins, or complexity. If tasters did not have any preconceived expectations how a particular wine should taste, how would they know what is missing? This makes the case for semi-blinded wine tastings, where certain elements are revealed to support the assessment of a wine, but not so much to bias the tasting. I contend, as long as humans rely on their limited and often biased, sensory apparatus, subjectivity will be a part of the wine tasting and evaluative processes.

A researcher named Jonathan Cohen, has taken issues with the assumption that blind tasting should be considered the *gold standard* of impartiality in assessing wine. He proposed that there are advantages to blind tasting wines, for example, it reduces many distorting influences and preconceptions, and eliminates or drastically reduces confirmation bias, defined as what happens when we know the price of a wine and how it alters our expectations. You can see there are possible advantages and challenges trying to make any tasting procedure more reliable and replicable.

In a column in the *New York Times Book Review*, Leslie Jamison talks about the fantasy of objectivity and how it creates pressure for wine critics to maintain a *vener of impartiality*. She suggested wine critics often call particular evaluations *objective* to give them credence, and call others *subjective* to denigrate them. It becomes a language game rather than searching for the elusive veneer of objectivity. Jamison cites the Oxford English Dictionary's definition of

objectivity separating the object of perception (taste of wine) from the subjective action (wine tasting). Even if an objective, independent phenomenon exists, like the taste of a wine, the wine expert would still need to use a subjective medium (language) to represent his or her perceptions and evaluations.

Challenges with Subjectivity in Wine Tasting

The taste of a wine is thought to be part of the wine itself, however we have no way of accessing that taste except through our senses. This is where subjectivity comes into play. Everyone has different sensory capabilities and differences in sensory apparatus and experiences. Lawrence Osborne asserts there are only a special few wine experts that can help the novice wine drinker *sort out* the world of wine. But alas, he drops the bomb on unsuspecting wine drinkers when he suggests tasting is a mysterious skill, a nuanced zone of pleasure, one not given to us through books (although he was, in fact, writing one at the time). He suggests, “taste is not given from one person to another, nor a result of study, rather it is a talent for living life.” That seems rather vague and unscientific, but I like his sentiment.

Osborne further suggested biological tasting mechanisms are universal, with no one person provided with much more sensory equipment than any other; though some, like Robert Parker Jr., have in fact claimed superior sensory apparatus. However, Osborne does state that taste has no subjective truth that can be measured, but can only be developed by actions, like tasting wine, which is a form of pleasure itself. He goes on to suggest there are some truths that only experienced wine connoisseurs will have access. So, if Robert Parker likes a wine, and then we taste it and we like the wine as well, then does it have a higher intrinsic value, or do we just like the wines that Robert Parker liked?

Mr. Osborne goes on to entertain his readers with tales of finding and drinking some of the best wines we average, mortal drinkers will probably never experience, from places we will probably never visit, with wine makers we will probably never meet. His stories are quite entertaining, and I enjoyed reading his books, but as for developing skill and objectivity in wine tasting, I am still searching for my personal zone of pleasure rather than a scientific procedure.

How could we ever know if someone else has constructed the same understanding, or experienced a glass of wine in the same manner that we have? I don't think we can. And this my friends presents us with one of the biggest challenges we face in the world of wine criticism. Actually, in most forms of criticism, for example music, art, and film. Can we ever really know that someone else has experienced a wine in the same way as we have, or do we just play language games, stating things like, "it's a highly tannic red wine, replete with notes of plum and black currant, a slight scent of pencil-shavings" and continue to fool ourselves into thinking we actually can defend this pronouncement as objective?

The famous pragmatist philosopher William James asserted that human beings select certain attributes from the "blooming, buzzing confusion" that surrounds our being to attend to at any one time. We cannot take in all the stimuli available to us at any one moment, so we use selective attention to attend to certain things and not others. In fact, our attention can be directed and misdirected at time. George Lakoff, in his influential book, *Don't Think of an Elephant!*, suggests that we can be influenced to think about certain things by merely suggesting them, as in the case of the elephant. So, when I am tasting a wine and someone says, "I taste pineapple" chances are someone will agree, or someone will smell or taste pineapple as well. Our language and descriptions affect our perceptions and vica versa.

Daniel Salzman has suggested that no event or object is ever experienced in perfect, objective isolation. It is instead subject to our past experiences, our current mood, our expectations, and any number of incidental details. Where we taste a wine, with whom we taste, what we have eaten, whether we just brushed our teeth, whether we are happy or sad, whether we are at an expensive winery with the wine-maker all affect how a wine tastes.

Frederic Brochet, a PhD candidate at the University of Bordeaux conducted a study to understand whether visual cues affected the way people perceived the taste of wine. In this study, he took two glasses of white wine and dyed one red with a flavorless dye. He then asked wine students to share thoughts on the taste of each wine. The students talked about the wine dyed red as if it was an actual red wine and described the white wine as a white wine even though they were the same exact wine. He went on to suggest that, in general, descriptions of smell are almost entirely based on what we see.

There are other factors that have been shown to influence one's experiences with wine. First, our vinous memories are not exact, though some wine experts are better at calling forth their sensory experiences than others. Second, our expectations of what we are drinking affects what we taste. This is the primary reason for tasting wines blind, a topic I will take up in a later chapter. Other studies have shown that people's tastes are affected by knowing the price of a wine. If they are told the wine is expensive, they talk about the wine in a certain way and generally rate it as better. If they are told it is a cheap wine, they use simpler words and rate it lower.

One Possible Way Forward

So, you might be asking (at this point for a stiff drink) what the purpose of this sidetrack

into philosophy and science may do for us as wine drinkers. Well, here is my point – if it boils down to how we *talk and write* about wine that really matters, the important question is what types of talk and writing are helpful? Taking a more pragmatic stance, the question shouldn't be whether the evaluation is objective or not, but whether the tasting note or review is *useful*. Does reading a review of a particular wine help me select, enjoy, or recommend wines to others? The most important consideration for me is whether a review helps enhance my experience of drinking it, not whether the review or evaluation is a more objective assessment of the qualities of the wine.

One thing for sure, I will not single-handedly solve the conundrum of the objectivity-subjectivity debate by writing this chapter. The rift between various artistic and scientific perspectives plays out across universities, think tanks, museums, and yes indeed, various forms of wine writing. An important question to consider at this point is whether expert tasters have more acute sensory apparatus, more experiences tasting a wide range of wines, or do they just have a more privileged way of talking and vocabulary for describing what they taste and experience?

Wine and Philosophy Notes

So What?

So, what do we know for sure from all of this debate and angst about objective and subjective perspectives on tasting wine? First, no one can taste or experience a wine *for* you.

Wine experts can taste a wine and tell you things about it, but just like reading a book, no one can experience the wine or the story for you.

Second, more of the experiences you have tasting wine should be invitational and not confrontational. In other words, going to a wine tasting event or informally tasting wine with friends should make you want to do it again and again. Reading one's favorite wine critic should help enhance wine tasting experiences rather than reading about what tasters do right or wrong. Each time you try a new wine, it should encourage you to try another and explore wines even further. Our experiences with wine should open our horizons, not shut down the wine road ahead.

Third, if we make the shift from the *taste* of a wine, the physiochemical elements and characteristics that are interred in a wine, to the act of *tasting* a wine, we automatically have to include the specific context of the tasting event. Where was it tasted? Under what conditions was it tasted? What glassware was used? What temperature was the wine served at? What location, time of year, time of day? All these things affect how we perceive what is in a glass of wine. Hugh Johnson (2016) suggest we should describe wines using verbs more than adjectives. Focus on *doing* rather than *being*. Describing what a wine does when tasting it may be more interesting than trying to describe what it is.

Finally, I suggest we consider three dimensions when tasting a wine: 1) Before the Bottle, 2) In the Bottle, and 3) With the Bottle. The first dimension, *before the bottle*, focuses on the grapes themselves, the region and terrior where the wines comes from, the vineyards, the production methods, the price one pays for the wine, and everything that goes into making and acquiring a wine. The second dimension, *in the bottle*, which may be the most closely

associated with an objective stance, focuses on the characteristics of what is in the glass. The characteristics of the wine itself, its age and condition, and all the scientifically-based descriptors one can identify would be included. The third dimension, *with the bottle*, would focus on the setting and conditions under which the wine was consumed. The temperature of the wine, the type of glass, the food paired with it, the people around you and all that contextual stuff many critics try to control or leave behind.

All three of these matter. Our tasting notes should include as much information as possible about each of these dimensions. Our experiences with a wine are constituted by more than just the elements of the wine in the glass. Rather than seeing these external variables as something to control, let's look at them as essential elements in the taste and experience of a wine.