

# Imaginative versus Analytical Experiences of Wines

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## **Abstract:**

The highly enjoyable experiences associated with drinking good wines have been widely misunderstood. It is common to regard wine appreciation as an analytical or quasi-scientific kind of activity, in which wine experts carefully distinguish the precise sensory qualities of each wine, and then pass on their accumulated factual knowledge to less experienced wine enthusiasts. However, this model of wine appreciation is seriously defective. One good way to show its defects is to provide a better and more fundamental scientific account of what is involved in wine appreciation. In order to do so, I outline a novel, evolutionarily based theory of perceptual consciousness that explains why there must be imaginative as well as analytical kinds of experiences of wines. In addition, imaginative wine experiences, unlike typical imaginative artistic experiences, may be shown to involve highly individualistic, improvisatory elements that help to give wine drinking a unique place among the recreational arts.

I shall argue that the highly enjoyable experiences associated with drinking good wines have been widely misunderstood. It is common to regard wine appreciation as an *analytical* or *quasi-scientific* kind of activity. Wine experts, in well-publicized comparative tasting sessions, carefully distinguish the precise sensory qualities of each wine, and then pass on their accumulated factual knowledge to less experienced wine enthusiasts. However, this analytical or purely factual model of wine appreciation is seriously defective. One good way to show its defects is to provide a better and more fundamental scientific account of what is involved in wine appreciation. In order to do so, I outline a novel, evolutionarily based theory of perceptual consciousness that explains why there must be *imaginative* as well as analytical kinds of experiences of wines. In addition, imaginative wine experiences, unlike typical imaginative artistic

experiences, may be shown to involve highly individualistic, *improvisatory* elements that help to give wine drinking a unique place among the recreational arts.

## **1. What it is Like to Consciously Experience a Wine**

How could the conscious experience of the captivating sensory qualities of a great chardonnay or pinot noir be explained in broadly scientific terms? This is a wine-centric version of what is generally considered to be a central problem in the philosophy of mind, namely that of the nature of consciousness. Also, it is easy to forget that the problem has not one, but two inseparably related dimensions. Not only are we conscious of particular sensory qualities of flavor, aroma and bouquet, tactile qualities and visual appearance when drinking a wine. But in addition, there is *something it is like* to experience those qualities. The nature of our own conscious enjoyment of those rewarding sensory qualities of a good wine is also part of what needs to be explained. I shall argue that this second element of personal appreciation is central to understanding why good wines are so highly prized, and that standard views of wine drinking are seriously deficient because they neglect it.

As for the issue of the nature of conscious experience, I do have a novel explanation to suggest, which works in part by breaking down the problem into manageable chunks. It is easy to forget that a wine, even one of high quality, may be consumed in a routine or habitual fashion--such as when lunching with friends, when the focus is on the

conversation rather than the wine or food. In such cases one may have little or no conscious appreciation of the qualities of the wine, nor any very definite conscious experience of what it is like to drink it. Nevertheless, it must be true that one has at least a *routine* kind of low-level or background kind of perception of the qualities of the wine in such cases. For doubtless you would instantly notice if the wine was spoiled, or if it had a different taste from its usual smooth excellence, or if it no longer went with the foods that it would otherwise complement. So the problem of explaining conscious appreciation of wines is only an *incremental* problem. It is the problem of what needs to be *added* to routine or background kinds of perception so as to explain the specifically conscious aspects of wine perception. We do not also have to explain what perception itself is--that can be taken for granted, or left to cognitive scientists.

Another manageable chunk of the problem of consciousness is implicit in the above discussion. If routine or habitual perception involves little or no conscious awareness, then presumably what makes some perceptual experiences of wine conscious is that they involve *non-routine* or *non-habitual* kinds of perception of those sensory qualities. But then we can reduce the problem of explaining the nature of conscious perceptual experience of wines to the problem of explaining what it is to perceive a wine in non-routine or non-habitual ways. In order to have a blanket term, I'll describe all such cases as involving *sophisticated* rather than routine perception.

Now any scientifically respectable general account of sophisticated perception, or perceptual consciousness, would have to eventually include an explanation of its potential

evolutionary advantages to creatures possessing it. By putting the emphasis on the sophisticated or non-routine aspects of conscious perception, this problem becomes more tractable. My suggestion is that sophisticated perception is typically *problem-solving* perception. Routine, non-conscious perception does not solve any problems, it just routinely collects information and uses it in routine ways. Those creatures capable, in addition, of using perception to find solutions to problems facing them would presumably have an evolutionary advantage over other creatures that lacked such perceptual problem solving abilities.

For example, if a hungry chimpanzee can see a banana high in a tree, and see a nearby stick, and be prompted by these perceptions to knock down the banana using the stick, then the chimp would have engaged in a potentially evolutionarily advantageous form of perceptual problem solving. In such a case, the function of the chimp's perceptual processes would not just be that of routine information-collection about bananas and sticks, but it would also include the function of that information *prompting the chimp to fully engage all of its problem solving abilities* in an effort to figure out how get the banana. My claim is that in general, perception becomes conscious when it prompts the perceiver to engage in some such sophisticated problem solving activities, and, as illustrated, potentially there may be evolutionary support for this claim. I'll call this the *self-prompting* view of consciousness, since according to it, a perception becomes conscious when it *prompts the perceiver herself to engage in sophisticated problem solving*. Of course, the possible level of sophistication depends on the general level of abilities of the species in question.

But how would this self-prompting theory apply to what apparently are purely sensory kinds of perception, such as those involved in wine drinking? It might look as if the cautious, but hopeful, experience of the first taste of an untried but well-recommended bottle of cabernet sauvignon is far removed from issues of problem solving, or of the survival of species. However, consider the evolutionary importance of tastes. Slight differences in taste of one item over another, such as in the eating of different kinds of mushroom, might make all the difference between eating a nutritious food and consuming a deadly poison. Also, as we all know, it is easy to casually swallow food items, such as cooked meats or eggs, without really paying any conscious attention to whether they taste completely fresh or not, and hence to suffer the consequences of food-poisoning in some cases. As for wines, during the early history of our species all kinds of experiments with a wide variety of natural substances mixed into naturally fermenting liquids must have occurred, and taste would have been a significant indicator of potential risk versus benefit.

An analytical, fully conscious attention to tastes as such presumably involves, among other things, a very thorough cognitive search of memories of previous good versus questionable tastes, and a consideration of general principles of cautious eating and drinking, including a rough calculation of the potential benefits versus costs of consuming the particular item in question. Any such activities would involve the workings of sophisticated problem solving abilities that are mainly unavailable to perceivers during episodes of more routine, non-conscious kinds of perception. Hence

our current abilities to consciously experience the pleasantly astringent taste of a good riesling, or the extended depths of flavor of a choice syrah, have their roots in evolutionary contingencies and perceptual problem solving abilities, even if the most salient evolutionary risk/benefit factors are no longer operative in current societies.

Nevertheless, if the current self-prompting view is correct, conscious perceptual or sensory experience of any kind always has been, and still is, a form of perceptually prompted sophisticated problem solving. So more needs to be said as to how this approach could help to explain our everyday enjoyable experiences of wines.

## **2. Evolutionary Factors in the Enjoyment of Wines**

The problem of consciousness is a hard problem because it has many dimensions. So far we have made some progress in explaining what it is to be conscious of some perceptual or sensory qualities. But as of now, we have no account of what makes some special wines worthy of great enthusiasm, nor of what is involved in more common cases of enjoyment of the qualities of a good wine. As a case in point, the earlier, evolutionary argument as to how conscious experience of the flavors of wines might be a vital factor in avoiding health risks--in drinking miscellaneous fermented liquids--does nothing to explain why the healthy wines might taste better than the potentially dangerous ones. The highly specific sensory pleasures associated with the drinking of a few special wines

still need to be explained, even if we have potentially succeeded in explaining, in generic terms, the evolutionary origins of conscious experience of any kind.

At this point some much broader evolutionary considerations must be introduced.

Human feelings of delight, attraction and enjoyment initially earned their evolutionary keep as reinforcers of survival-enhancing behaviors such as conquering enemies, achieving success in food distribution in a tribe, and other problem solving activities of every kind--all activities closely related to consciousness. But once the relevant cognitive and affective mechanisms were in place, they became available for re-use in entertainment, artistic activities and play--in *recreation*, in a word. Such recreational activities also have a more indirect survival value in maintaining and enhancing mental health and cognitive abilities even when no immediate, real-world problems have to be solved. So the apparent mystery about how some wines can cause intense enjoyment, or even passion, is not as inexplicable as it might initially seem. It is not the intense feelings as such that need to be explained, because such manifestations under *some* recreative circumstances are an inevitable by-product of the relevant evolutionary mechanisms. Creatures incapable of intense feelings under a wide variety of circumstances, and of the motivations integrally involved in them, would not survive. So the problem may be characterized as follows: why does wine in general, and then *this* wine rather than *that* wine, trigger such strong emotional reactions?

This problem too may be broken down further. Consciousness is, on the present account, a problem solving perceptual mechanism, and given the vast range of problems needing

to be solved in order to ensure survival, character traits such as wide-ranging curiosity and inquisitiveness are at a premium. (For example, Alexander Fleming would never have discovered penicillin if he had not been curious about the strange activity on one of his culture plates). Now the early discovery of alcoholic, wine-like liquids was inevitable in human society, because their existence depends only on naturally occurring fermentation processes associated with the gathering and storage of fruits and berries. Since the consumption of food and liquids is biologically necessary for survival in any case, *some* foods and drinks that are readily available in typical environments must have a potentially attractive taste that behaviorally prompts further consumption of them. Since wines are derived from nutritious fruits and berries that do have an attractive taste, it is no surprise that wines in general have tastes that are positively regarded by most consumers of them.

Also, the tastes associated with wines must have become the object of the above-mentioned widespread curiosity and investigation. Later searches for a better-tasting wine by careful choice of grape, terroir and cultivation methods uses the same analytical problem solving skills as the search for the solution to any other more central human problem. Consequently it is no accident, or mystery, why some wines are generally agreed to taste much better than others, since those results stem from intensive investigations over many hundreds of years by thousands of highly motivated individuals, whose whole careers depend on convincing a buying public of the superior attractiveness of their products--a public which is already biologically predisposed, as discussed above, to be favorably attracted toward wines in general.



### **3. The Place of Imagination and Representation in Wine Experiences**

The overall picture of how wines are able to achieve their remarkable experiential effects on wine-drinkers is not yet complete. Yet another broad factor must be introduced into the discussion, which will serve to unify the other factors into a satisfying explanatory whole. To begin, recall that the sophisticated problem solving approach to conscious experience is basically defended in terms of its contributions to evolutionary fitness. Then, as a by-product, the experiential aspects of leisure or recreational activities such as wine drinking are explained in terms of re-use of the pre-existing cognitive powers which were primarily shaped by the relevant evolutionary forces. But it yet remains to be explained exactly *how* recreational activities re-use those cognitive powers in a way relevant to wines.

Some useful analogies can be found in the arts, which constitute a whole category of recreational activities in their own right. In broad terms, artistic meaning is imaginative or representational meaning that re-uses human cognitive and affective powers in a kind of trade-off. Pictures, novels, music, theater pieces, dances, and so on can provide a much broader range of kinds of meaningful experience than more everyday, practical or prosaic experiences. But the cost of this increased expressive power of the arts is that the kinds of meaning achieved are only *imaginative* or *representational* rather than literal or real. The thrilling victories or bittersweet love experienced while one watches a good

film are not experiences of anything real, and the tempestuous emotions felt in listening to a late Beethoven string quartet have no reality independent of the immediate experience of them by a sensitive listener.

Nevertheless, clearly it would be a serious mistake to confuse the rich experiential meaning of a passage in a Beethoven string quartet with the purely sensory configuration of heard sounds, by means of which those meanings are conveyed to a receptive listener. The listener must, in some broad sense, be attaching a representational or imaginative *meaning* to the sounds, even though there is no literal or easily describable way to specify what the sounds mean or represent independent of the listener's experience of them. I claim that an analogous distinction holds for the receptive wine-drinker's experience of a great wine. In that case too it would be a serious mistake to confuse the rich experiential meaning of the flavors and aromas of a wine with the purely sensory configuration of those tastes and aromas themselves. With wine as with music, it is not the sensory qualities as such, but rather what they *represent*--in the relevant broad, non-literal sense being appealed to--that constitutes their experiential meaning.

Some cases of abstract painting, such as the works of Kandinsky, or of Picasso during his cubist period, also provide helpful analogies. A purely literal account of the visual content of a cubist picture would involve exhaustive descriptions of lines, quasi-rectangular shapes, the colors in each region of the picture, and so on. But any art critic who claimed that such a strictly literal description of a Picasso painting exhaustively described its full artistic meaning would be laughed out of the profession. Even though

abstract paintings do not represent familiar objects or people, they still have a broadly non-literal meaning that cannot be identified with any literal catalog of the sensory qualities of areas on the surface of the painting. Yet in the case of wines, exactly this kind of gross confusion of exhaustive literal descriptions of sensory qualities with experiential meaning constitutes the ruling orthodoxy in discussions of wine.

This is not to say that wine is an art form, or that individual wines are artworks (though see the succeeding sections for some related discussion). But it is to say that conscious experiences are meaningful either in analytical, ultimately survival-related ways--because of the sophisticated kinds of cognitive processing that they prompt--or in imaginative, broadly recreational ways that are dependent on sophisticated kinds of re-use of those same cognitive mechanisms.

#### **4. More on Imaginative Experiences of Wines**

The imaginative or representational status of meaningful experiences of wines will now be discussed further. The basic idea is that just as the surface of an abstract painting, or the sounds of musical instruments, can have a imaginative or representational role in artistic experiences of them, so also can the flavors, aromas and colors of a wine have an imaginative role in appropriately receptive experiences of them. For example, it can be *as if* a favorite wine has transported you to a richly resonant, better place, whose presence around you, and whose desirable qualities, are reinforced by each succeeding taste of the

wine. But of course, it is literally false that the wine has transported you to anywhere, since the experience is a purely imaginative one. Or, perhaps more commonly, the experience of the sensory qualities of a good wine as being *well-balanced*, or as having other desirable features, involves an evaluative judgment that applies only to the wine as imaginatively experienced, rather than to a purely analytical perception of it. Similarly, a judgment that a string quartet provides a well-balanced or high quality performance of a work pertains to the work as imaginatively experienced, not to the mere sensory qualities of the notes.

The possibility of such imaginative experiences of wines has not gone completely unrecognized traditionally. Usually such experiences have been explained as consisting in mere personal associations with, interpretations of, or reactions to, a distinct sensory experience of the wine itself. So a *two-part* analysis of wine perception is assumed, according to which strictly only the first, purely sensory part is genuinely perceptual. But this traditional view seriously distorts the facts about our actual experiences of wines. We do not *first* analytically perceive the sensory qualities, and *then*, somewhat later, react to them in some subjective way. Instead, there is a single, unified imaginative experience of enjoying the flavors and aromas of the wine.

To be sure, no one denies that it is possible to taste a wine in a purely analytical way, just as no one denies that it is possible to analytically perceive the surface of a painting, or the sounds made by a string quartet. Nevertheless, the underlying view of perceptual experience assumed by the traditional two-part analysis--as involving a purely sensory

component, plus a distinct non-perceptual component, such as a feeling of pleasure or approval caused by the perception--has long since been abandoned in cognitive science and the philosophy of perception.

The current imaginative account of wine perception also integrates well with the current self-prompting theory of conscious experience. The theory predicts that the only aspects of perception that are consciously experienced are those aspects that require *sophisticated processing*. Now as indicated above, the perceiver can decide whether to perceive things in an analytical or in an imaginative manner. In the analytical or survival-related mode, the sophisticated processing would include exhaustive memory searches and assessments of risks and benefits in ingesting the wine. By contrast, in the imaginative or recreational mode, the purely sensory data is only superficially or routinely perceived, and hence it is not consciously experienced as such. Instead, all of the sophisticated processing goes into the creation of the conscious imaginative experience of the wine.

Hence, to summarize, the self-prompting theory predicts that there must be a *fundamental division* of perceptual experiences into survival-related analytical kinds on the one hand, and recreational imaginative kinds on the other hand. Standard theories of perception completely neglect imaginative kinds, probably because even now--nearly one hundred and fifty years after Darwin wrote *The Origin of Species*--they fail to give any consideration to the fundamental significance of evolutionary factors in structuring human perceptual consciousness. In the case of wines, this is a disastrous mistake to

make, because the perceptual experience of wines provides a paradigm case, if anything does, of an imaginative, almost purely recreational kind of perceptual experience.

## **5. The Neglected Role of Alcoholic Content in Experiences of Wines**

Another underappreciated factor in understanding wine experiences is as follows. It is easy to forget that wines have a significant advantage in the competition for attention and influence in human recreational activities. Wine is an *alcoholic* beverage, and alcohol is a potent drug, many of whose effects are well known. It might be thought that great wines must be valued solely for their taste, rather than for any ancillary effects of their relatively tasteless alcoholic content. But any who are tempted to believe this are invited to conduct the following experiment. Obtain a range of the best available non-alcoholic wines (there are only a few of any quality). These few claim to be carefully prepared from fine wines that have the alcohol removed only after the final stages of processing, so that the resulting tastes do resemble those of the real wines from which they are derived. Some have apparently even won competitions in taste comparisons with alcoholic wines. But I suspect that you, like me, will find that these products, though having recognizable tastes and aromas, are nevertheless *dead on arrival*. They have none of the life and animation of natural wines, and *what it is like* to drink them is completely different from what it is like to drink real wines, in spite of some similarities in sensory qualities. (Some writers describe the difference as being that alcoholic wines have more body or texture because of the alcohol, but there is much more to it than that.) This experiment is

particularly salient because it shows the falsity or hollowness of standard kinds of discussions of the qualities of wines based on comparative wine-tasting sessions, which attempt to explain wine experiences exclusively in terms of the perceived sensory qualities of a wine.

But why should the presence of alcohol in wines make such a difference? My speculation is that it makes a difference, not to the sensory characteristics of the wine itself, but instead to *oneself*, while one is experiencing the wine. The alcohol turns a sober or prosaic sensory experience into a less inhibited, mildly hallucinogenic experience in which the cognitive system of the drinker has been transformed into one having more dreamlike and suggestible characteristics. Under such conditions one's critical faculties become disarmed, and wider ranges of affective and cognitive exploration become possible, of which one's fully sober self would normally be incapable. (Doubtless this kind of explanation is oversimplified, but it identifies a factor that must not be ignored). The alcoholic content of the wine provides a kind of permission, or entry ticket, into a parallel world in which--in the terminology of Immanuel Kant--a *free play of the imagination* can take place. In this manner a richness and depth of cognitive processing can be achieved that no sensory qualities--no matter how complex or refined they might be--could succeed in prompting by themselves.

## 6. Wine Drinking and Improvisatory Theater

This concluding section will attempt to further pin down the precise relations of imaginative wine experience to perceptual experiences in the arts. A basic distinction is that the purely sensory qualities of a wine, though complex in their own way, nevertheless can be experienced to the full within a period that is usually considerably less than a minute. (Which is not to deny that wines can be enjoyed over much longer periods). But clearly plays or pieces of music involve a significantly greater range of complex factors, a full experience of which may take an hour or more. Also, the complexity of visual data derivable from the surface of a painting is many orders of magnitude greater than that of the tastes or smells associated with a wine. Even the best wine critic would be very happy to identify, say, seventeen distinct sensory components and their magnitudes in a wine, but even a tiny corner of a painting supplies much more sensory data.

I acknowledge that these distinctions are genuine and significant, but nevertheless claim that they are the *wrong comparisons* to make between wine experiences and artistic experiences. A wine is not like an artwork. Instead, what it is like is a *sensory theme*, upon which the drinker carries out *art-like improvisations*. Drinking a glass or more of a wine, I claim, involves a series of related imaginative improvisations, in which the common theme of the sensory qualities of the wine is subject to a variety of spontaneous variations, each involving a different kind or kinds of sophisticated imaginative processing of the same sensory data. On this view, drinking a wine is not like



experiencing a previously finished artwork, but instead it is an exploratory, spontaneous activity in which *you yourself* are the artist or creator of what you experience. In these respects it is like the fertile activity of a jazz artist as he creatively improvises on a standard jazz tune, or, more specifically, like the spontaneous, try-anything creativity of an actor in an improvisatory theater production, who decides herself what to say at any moment rather than following a pre-existing script.

This is not to deny that, in the case of a familiar wine, one can have a high degree of certainty as to what one's imaginative interaction with it will be like. I suggest that there is an initial period of adjustment with an unfamiliar wine, in which one tries out various imaginative attitudes toward it, before settling on one that seems most appropriate to its qualities, as well as most satisfying to oneself. Thereafter one expects to be able to engage in the same familiar kinds of interaction with that wine in subsequent sessions. But this definite knowledge of what to expect with a familiar wine is fully consistent with its improvisatory origins.

An advantage of this 'imaginative improvisatory theater' approach to wine drinking is that it helps to explain the crucial role of the alcoholic content in experiences of wine, as discussed in the previous section. Most people are much too inhibited to think of themselves as being capable of engaging in any artistic-like activity, let alone of a kind that requires them to freely and creatively extemporize a personal performance or interpretation of something. So the reason why non-alcoholic 'wines' are experienced as being 'dead' or inert is because they do nothing to energize *you*, the drinker, into the kinds

of personal imaginative efforts that are needed to make the drinking of the wine into a varied, lively and personally satisfying improvisatory series of experiences revolving around the particular wine that you are drinking.

The improvisatory approach also throws light on the issue of wine quality. It is a fact, bemoaned by wine experts generally, that the majority of people seem to enjoy mass-produced fruit-forward wines more than the complex specialty wines favored by enthusiasts. Now if wines were like artworks, for which there are standards of quality independent of individual tastes, the situation would indeed be cause for concern. It would show that most people have deplorably bad taste with respect to wines. However, once it is recognized that a wine is only the raw material for a series of highly personal improvisational experiences, the problem disappears. What works best in stimulating my spontaneous improvisations may not work best in stimulating yours, and vice-versa. The differences can be explained in terms of harmless, non-judgmental differences in individual psychology, rather than as showing that some people have a better appreciation of wine quality than others. Of course, differences in knowledge and enthusiasm concerning wines will still persist, but those who harbor secret admiration for some wines that are out of favor with the critics need no longer feel guilty concerning their tastes.

As for the issue of whether wine drinking actually *is* currently a variety of improvisatory theater, or whether that is just the closest analogy to it in the art world, I favor the latter conclusion. Many activities in the art world require explicit artistic intentions in order to

count as art-related. For example, someone who molds a lump of clay in various ways in order to improve her hand dexterity does not qualify as being engaged in creating a sculpture, even if all of the hand movements, and the various configurations of the clay, could have been part of deliberate artistic activity by a genuine sculptor. Since most people do not drink wines with the intention of engaging in improvisatory theater, that is a good reason for denying that they are so engaged. Nevertheless, my point remains that the perceptual and psychological processes involved in wine drinking and improvisatory theater are intimately related, apart from the purely intentional aspects. Hence if the present theory of wine drinking should catch on and become popular--so that wine enthusiasts would come to think of themselves as being engaged in a form of improvisatory theater--then nothing more would be required for them to be correct in their belief.

To conclude, here is some more evidence in favor of an improvisatory approach to wine drinking. For most art enthusiasts, the ideal experience of an artwork, such as a film or piece of music, is one in which one's attention is completely concentrated on the artwork in question, with no interruptions. (There is nothing more annoying than being distracted at a crucial point in an absorbing movie). So if a wine were like an artwork, one would expect that total concentration would be the standard for wine experiences as well.

However, clearly this is not so. Wine enthusiasts as a group are generally happy to enjoy their favorite wines while eating and conversing with others, even though art enthusiasts as a group would typically resent such interruptions and distractions.

More specifically, music is an art of sound, and it is competing *sounds* that are distracting, such as conversation, or the sound of a lawn mower. Someone who blocks your *view* of a painting or movie destroys your enjoyment of that visual art. But most wine lovers have no problem ingesting a wide range of foods and other drinks along with their favorite wines. Why is this? The difference can be explained by the improvisatory nature of wine experiences. Since these experiences are freely created by the drinker, and since there are no independent standards of an ideal or fully concentrated wine experience--as there are for experiences of artworks of various kinds--wine-drinkers can be much more flexible and relaxed about the conditions under which they experience wines.

To be sure, some distractions could be significant enough so that the wine itself is no longer consciously experienced at all for a period of time. But since the drinker's improvisatory freedom in experiencing the wine has no restrictions beyond his own spontaneous current preferences, there is nothing questionable about the behavior of someone who chooses to have her wine experiences in an intermittent way. The tastes of wines, and how we choose to experience them, are indeed purely matters of personal imagination.