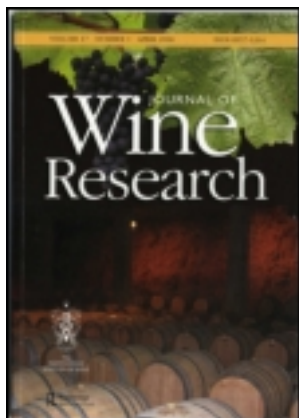


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### The Philosophy of Wine: A Case of Truth, Beauty and Intoxication

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This book is a consolidation of the series ‘Recent advances in polyphenol research’. We do congratulate the editors for the work performed putting together interesting issues raised in the last International Conference on Polyphenols.

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**The Philosophy of Wine: A Case of Truth, Beauty and Intoxication**, by Cain Todd, Durham, Acumen, 2010, 224 pp., £19.19, ISBN-10: 1814652505

This is a book that says a lot about truth (in its many guises), a bit about beauty, and precious little (until the last three pages) about intoxication. The main text is a philosophical discussion about subjectivity versus objectivity as it applies to wine tasting. As such it is a book about taste, and may prove an interesting philosophical excursion for wine professionals, if they can become intrigued by the topic. Maybe a better way to think about the problem is that it is less about taste and preference, and more about judgments and accuracy. My old friend, Harry Waugh, when asked about the accurateness of his palate, often said that he had not mistaken a Bordeaux for a Burgundy since lunch.

Todd drives us beyond the platitudes. No simple ‘*chacun a son gout*’ or ‘*De gustibus non disputandum est*’ will suffice. He tries to develop ‘a limited relativist position: limited because, *as a matter of fact*, many categories and norms are clearly established as correct, and judgments of wine made relative to them will be truth apt’ (p. 131). It presumably is relativist because two or more different judgments may be correct (p. 131) and justifications of aesthetic judgments are defeasible (p. 130). Where defeasible, for Todd, seems to mean there could be opposing or different judgments that one can understand though not agree with. The problem here is not the redundancy of the relativist criteria, but that Todd has bought into the subjective (relativist, value laden) versus objective (absolute norms, standards, unproblematic facts) dichotomy.

In Chapter 2, he first introduces the reader to a set of distinctions that set him up for his problematic end point. The first distinction is *descriptive* versus *evaluative*. The second is *literal* versus *metaphorical* descriptions of wine tastes and smells (p. 48). There is no space here to go into detail about why both of these distinctions fail. The first was well challenged by Austin (1962) in *How to Do Things with Words*, where he wanted to ‘play old Harry with two fetishes’: the fact/value and the true/false dichotomies (p. 150). The inadequacy of the dichotomy was clearly shown earlier by Foot (1958), an ethicist, who pointed out that calling someone ‘rude’ was both descriptive and evaluative. In wine speak ‘well balanced’ is both descriptive and evaluative.

The literal/metaphorical distinction has been hammered many times, but probably most effectively by Lakoff (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). That some Bordeaux have a blackcurrant smell or there is a tarryness to some Rhone wines is not metaphorical. In fact, there are no other descriptors for remarking these features of those wines. There is no literal. This is as true in the sciences as in aesthetics and daily life (Machamer, 2000).

Despite this main problem, Todd's book is well worth reading. It raises many of the right questions about the nature and problems associated with wine judgments, and how it is that we might justify them. I found the book well written and easy to read. There were some small problems. I shall only point out a few:

'Flabby', he says, 'is primarily used to describe wines that are lacking in the acidity necessary to give them sufficient body' (p. 49). Certainly 'flabby' denotes lack of acidity, but the relationship of acidity to body is quite complex and not as presumed here. 'Acid' describes physical parameters and is a taste detection term. 'Body' describes viscosity and texture, and is a mouth-feel term.

Good uses of metaphors to describe wines can never be 'reduced' to non-metaphorical or literal descriptions though sometimes, as Todd says, we can explicate or justify the appropriateness of the metaphor by using other terms that are more easily seen to be apt (p. 58). Effective or informative metaphors are irreducible (cf. p. 58). Though of course there are some objective descriptions, as discussed on page 53, 'ethyl acetate' denotes a property that I prefer to avoid. If we call it 'nail polish remover' would it become a metaphor?

It is not clear that any appeal to David Hume's use of colour judgments as objective will help anyone. It is quite unclear if colours refer to, so '*real properties*' in the world' (p. 86).

Let me end this short review by affirming an important aspect of judgments, especially wine judgments, that Todd got quite right. Wines, as well as most things, can only be judged with respect to a reference class. That is, 'they must be understood as involving an implicit "for wines of type  $x$ "' (p. 63). This relates to the point he makes later, when citing and agreeing with Kendall Walton, that we look for properties upon which to base a judgment relative to a category (p. 102). It makes no sense to criticize Beaujolais for not being Bordeaux or Burgundy. You may not like the cherry up-front fruit of Beaujolais. So do not drink it. Go buy Bordeaux or Burgundy instead. This is a question of preference, of likes and dislikes, and of context. Likes vary with contexts (including temporal contexts) both inter- and intra-personally. Most people do not like to listen to the same music in the morning as they do at night, or at a party, or when trying to instill romance in a companion. I think it was Cyril Ray who once wrote: when sitting in the hills above Asti at sunset, preferably with someone you love, Asti spumante can seem like the nectar of the gods; at all other times drink champagne.

The distinction I believe that Todd should have used is between judgments of likes and dislikes (or preferences) and judgments of good and bad (as in well-made or exemplary of a category). My wife, Barbara, does not like sweet wines. Though when I poured her a glass of the 1962 Chateau d'Yquem, she almost changed her preference scale. She does have a very good palate. She could tell it was an excellent wine, so she refused to use the category 'sweet wine' to classify it. This like/good distinction is well illustrated by a musical analogy (used by me above, and brought up by Todd, page 148 and following). When I was being raised in New York, many recent immigrants to the USA had fled Hitler's Europe. Many of them were Jewish and many very musical. They could not abide listening to Wagner, though they would judge that, musically, he was a very good composer.

Likes and dislikes are often based on one's past experiences and associations with those experiences. Likes can change. So too the ability to make good judgments of quality can change. Training is possible, probably more so than Adrienne Lehrer would allow (See pp. 50–51). Todd's book is worth reading because it may help you to think through how to change both your preferences and your understanding.

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