Expression and Objectivity in the Case of Wine: Defending the Aesthetic Terroir of Tastes and Smells

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Abstract
This paper provides an account of the nature of our appreciation of wine, and a defence of the aesthetic value of tastes and smells. Focusing primarily on Roger Scruton’s recent claims, I argue against him that our appreciation of wine meets his own constraints on aesthetic interest and, moreover, that the cultural significance he grants to wine is in large part grounded in its aesthetic value. I show that Scruton’s claims are thus in tension with each other, not because he has misunderstood the nature of aesthetic interest, but because he fails to appreciate the aesthetic capabilities of wine. Appealing to a well-known argument of Kendall Walton’s, I defend the aesthetic interest and value of tastes and smells by demonstrating that our judgements of wine can be correct or incorrect relative to the categories that govern its production and proper appreciation and understanding. I thereby show that tastes and smells can attain aesthetic significance in virtue of the types of objects they constitute. In particular, I hold that this significance, in the case of wine, rests in large part on its ability to be expressive and to embody certain kinds of meaning.

Introduction
On the hitherto rare occasions that philosophers have deigned to discuss tastes and smells in relation to aesthetic interest and value, they have generally either excluded them – and by extension the objects they constitute – from the domain of the aesthetic altogether, or they have claimed that whatever aesthetic value is possessed by tastes and smells is trivial, attenuated, or otherwise lacking in significance. Very recently, however, there has been a flurry of discussion on this area, focusing in particular on wine as an object of philosophical interest,

1 For extended discussion see Sibley 2001: 207-255.
and a number of philosophers have defended the aesthetic value of tastes and smells, and the aesthetic significance of wine\(^2\). However, I contend that they have in general underestimated or misconceived this aesthetic significance, primarily because they have provided no adequate philosophical account of the nature of wine and of our proper appreciation of it\(^3\). The main aim of my paper is to provide such an account.

I do so by focussing on one of the most important contributions to this discussion, that made by Roger Scruton in his paper *The Philosophy of Wine* (2007) in which he offers strong and eloquent claims for the cultural significance of wine and for the importance of its intoxicating power in what he calls «the life of a rational being». He claims, for instance, that «what we taste in the wine is not just the fruit and its ferment», for in «savouring [wine] we are knowing – by acquaintance, as it were – the history, geography and customs of a community»\(^4\). However, in keeping with an old and formidable tradition of philosophical reflection on the nature of tastes and smells, Scruton also argues that our experience of wine is not genuinely aesthetic, or is, at best, only marginally so.

I will argue, against Scruton, that our appreciation of wine meets Scruton's own constraints on aesthetic interest and, moreover, the cultural significance Scruton grants to wine is in large part grounded in its aesthetic value. I thus show that Scruton's claims are in tension with each other, not because he has misunderstood the nature of aesthetic interest, but because he fails to appreciate the aesthetic capabilities of wine.

Briefly, I defend the aesthetic interest and value of tastes and smells by showing that descriptive and evaluative judgements about wine are subject to strong normative standards of evaluation and interpretation. Specifically, appealing to a well-known argument of Kendall Walton's, I argue that these judgements can be correct or incorrect relative to the categories that govern wine's production and its proper appreciation and understanding. I thereby show that tastes and smells can attain aesthetic significance in virtue of the types of objects they constitute. In particular, I hold that this significance, in the case of wine, rests in large part on its ability to be expressive and to embody certain kinds of meaning.

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\(^2\)See the collections of papers in Smith 2007a and Allhof 2008.

\(^3\)The most notable exceptions to this are the excellent discussions by Smith 2007b and Bender 2008. I more or less agree with both Smith's and Bender's accounts of the nature of wine tasting, the objectivity of wine judgements, and the nature and role of wine criticism and expertise. Although nothing I say in what follows is strictly incompatible with their accounts, therefore, my paper aims to (a) provide the necessary background category-relative framework missing from their discussions and which is ultimately required to ground their arguments, and (b) to go beyond their accounts in demonstrating the expressive potential of wine.

\(^4\)Scruton 2007: 16.
1. Scruton’s scepticism

Scruton’s scepticism about the aesthetic interest and value of wine depends upon his scepticism about the aesthetic interest and value of tastes and smells. His attack draws upon a traditional distinction between the purely sensory or gustatory pleasures of taste and smell and the putatively more cognitive or intellectual pleasures belonging to the distal senses of sight and sound, which, it is claimed, are the hallmarks of aesthetic interest. He says that our purely sensory, gustatory pleasures lack «the intellectual intimations that are the hallmark of aesthetic interest. Sensory pleasure is available whatever the state of your education; aesthetic pleasure depends upon knowledge, comparison and culture…».

The force of this distinction in turn depends in large part on Scruton’s own theory of aesthetic interest, articulated as interest in an object for its own sake, where this is defined as «a desire to go on hearing, looking at, or in some other way having experience of X, where there is no reason for this desire in terms of any other desire or appetite that the experience of X may fulfil, and where the desire arises out of, and is accompanied by, the thought of X…».

In accordance with this theory, Scruton also holds that aesthetic judgements are amenable to reasoning, can be appropriate, and hence are subject to certain normative constraints. In this light, tastes and smells, and the objects, such as wine, which are constituted by them, are not the kinds of things that either support or reward aesthetic interest:

You happen to like white wine, I prefer red […] It is felt that these are ultimate facts, beyond which one cannot go. And it is further held, on account of this, that here there can be little point in employing ideas of “right” or “wrong”, of “good” taste and “bad” […] Of course there is discussion of wine […] But even if one were to take the chatter of wine snobbery with […] seriousness, this would still not suffice to turn discussion into reasoning.

An obvious objection one might make to Scruton’s claims is that the notion of aesthetic interest on which they depend is unjustifiably narrow and overly demanding.

After all, many non-representational artworks, and perhaps all natural objects and phenomena, arguably lack the “intellectual intimations” that Scruton’s conception of aesthetic interest demands, yet it would be highly counterintuitive to exclude these from the realm of the aesthetic. I won’t pursue this line of objec-

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5 Idem: 3.

6 Scruton 1974: 148. The notion of “thought” captures a range of mental states, with a particular emphasis on the role of imaginative attention that characterises a large part of our aesthetic experience.

7 Scruton 1979: 115.
tion here, however, primarily because I think that Scruton’s notion of aesthetic interest is very plausible and should be maintained.

A more promising counter-argument consists in showing that insofar as Scruton’s sceptical claims are directed at tastes and smells themselves as objects of perception – independent of the objects that possess them – his arguments apply equally to the colours, shapes and sounds that he holds are, in contrast, amenable to aesthetic interest. There simply are no aesthetically relevant differences between the objects of our different senses.

This is broadly the strategy pursued by Frank Sibley in his exemplary paper *Tastes, Smells, and Aesthetics* (2001) which is, I think, largely successful in undermining many of the supposed distinctions between the merely gustatory and properly aesthetic senses (and their objects) on which Scruton’s position depends. Sibley argues persuasively that tastes and smells can be objects of genuine aesthetic attention for they meet all of Scruton’s requirements: they can be appreciated for their own sake; they can exhibit certain kinds of ordering and dimensional structuring; their appreciation can admit a high degree of complex imaginative and cognitive attention, and this is manifested in rich, complex description, both literal and metaphorical. Furthermore, these descriptions and evaluations can be appropriate, reason-based, informative, and hence can sustain some degree of objectivity.

Nonetheless, whilst defending their properly aesthetic status, Sibley himself expresses scepticism about the ability of tastes and smells to provide anything other than relatively minor, trivial aesthetic value, and he makes some relatively disparaging remarks about the aesthetic value of wine *vis-à-vis* its lack of expressive capabilities⁸. Moreover, Scruton’s recent paper provides some further important arguments that Sibley’s account fails to address adequately. These arguments can be divided, roughly, into two sets of claims. The first set, (A), is designed to distinguish tastes and smells from visual perception:

(A)
– (Representation) «Unlike the senses of sight and hearing, [tastes and smells] do not represent a world independent of themselves, and therefore provide nothing, other than themselves to contemplate…»⁹.
– (Aspect Perception) «there seems to be no clear parallel case of “smelling as” or “smelling in” that we have in visual perception»¹⁰.

⁸ «For aesthetic importance there is presumably no case for setting a Chanel perfume against a Leonardo, or a Chateau-Lafite against the *Missa Solemnis*, or even perhaps against a reasonably good sonnet […] unlike the major arts, they have no expressive connections with emotions, love or hate, grief, joy, terror, suffering, yearning, pity, or sorrow – or with plot or character development» (Sibley 2001: 248-249). Compare also: «Even if tastes and smells are possible objects of aesthetic interest and delight, their importance is no doubt minor, even, some might think, necessarily trilling…» (idem: 212).

⁹ Scruton 2007: 3-4.

¹⁰ *Idem:* 5.
– (Conceptual content) «Visual experience has a content that must be described in conceptual terms […] [In contrast] I might say of the ice-cream in my hand that it tastes of chocolate or that it tastes like chocolate, but not that I taste it as chocolate, as though taste were in itself a form of judgement».

– (Description – Wine) «The distinction here is reflected in the difference between the cogent accounts of paintings given by critics, and the far-fetched and whimsical descriptions of wines given by the likes of Robert Parker. Winespeak is in some way ungrounded, for it is not describing the way the wine is, but merely the way it tastes. And tastes are not representations of the objects that possess them».

Scruton acknowledges, however, that in these respects there are no aesthetically relevant differences between tastes and smells, on the one hand, and sounds on the other. So, in order to preserve the aesthetic interest of the latter he provides some further distinguishing features.

(B)
– (Organisation) Unlike sounds, tastes and smells «show no intrinsic ordering and no clear transitions […] put them together and they mingle, losing their character […] they remain free-floating and unrelated, unable to generate expectation, tension, harmony, suspension or release». Thus:

– (Association) They acquire meaning by «association rather than expression» and by «context rather than content», unlike sounds «which can bear within themselves all the meaning that human beings are able to communicate».

Briefly, I think that Sibley’s scepticism can be allayed, and Scruton’s recent arguments refuted, by demonstrating how, in the case of wine, smells and tastes can be structured in such a way in wine that they, and hence the wine-object they constitute, can attain aesthetic significance partly in virtue of possessing expressive properties.

2. Categories, Norms, Conventions

The panoply of ways in which wine can be described defies straightforward analysis, ranging from the simple and descriptive – “strong”, “fruity” – through the elaborate, metaphorical, and evaluative – “silky”, “restrained”, “aggressive”,

13 Idem: 5.
14 Idem: 5.
“elegant”, “feminine”, “sophisticated” – to the apparently ludicrous: «It will never win a race but it’s a wonderful little jogger»\(^\text{15}\).

What, if anything, grounds such judgements? We frequently describe tastes and smells in terms of the substances which they resemble and of which they remind us, and this has a chemical basis that grounds the literal use of certain descriptions, ranging from the broad and generic – “floral”, “vegetative”, “pungent” – to the specific: “oaky”, “buttery”, “peppery”, “honeyed”, “burnt toast”, “wet cardboard”. It is thus possible, in the case of wine, to provide some standardisation and categorisation for such descriptions, as illustrated by the well-known Wine Aroma Wheel used by wine tasters.

If our literal, descriptive vocabulary in this area seems relatively limited, there is no reason to think that this is anything but a contingent matter. Nothing like a comprehensive list of the enormous range of chemicals present in all of the myriad variety of compounds in complex objects like wine has been compiled, partly due to the sheer number and partly to the complexity and volatility of the olfactory compounds involved. But although the state of knowledge of such compounds is presently relatively primitive, there is nothing in principle to stop an identification of all of them. We do not, as it happens, generally make the admittedly large effort required to learn to discriminate and describe tastes and smells in the way we perhaps do with sights and sounds. If this effort is made, however, it is clear that there is nothing about our perceptual abilities, as such, to discriminate tastes and smells that suggests we could not in principle put a great many names to a great many substances if we so chose. It should be unsurprising that this requires, like anything, a certain degree of knowledge, experience, training, and a developed standardized vocabulary\(^\text{16}\).

In large part, the appropriateness or correctness of metaphorical descriptions is justified by the reasons that can be given to support them, and these reasons are also ultimately grounded in perceptible properties of the wine. This allows both for the evolution of certain conventional metaphors, and agreement concerning the criteria for their application, as well as for flexibility and imagination in their deployment along certain dimensions and within certain parameters. For example, a lack of acidity in certain wines licences the descriptions “labby”, “hollow”, “lacking in backbone”. If a highly tannic and alcoholic wine is “robust”, “hefty”, “tough”,

\(^{15}\) Quoted in Sibley 2001: 238. Compare also: «The first is extrovert, handsome, and charming, destined to be head of school […] and for a brilliant career. The second is reticent, attractive in character, promising at least a top second at university» (idem: 238). For a comprehensive list of wine descriptions see Peynaud 1987.

\(^{16}\) There would, however, be little point in using chemical names to describe the smells and tastes of wine, for such names merely name and do not help us describe our perceptual experience. That is why meaningful description instead requires us to use analogies with substances we already recognise. For a comprehensive discussion of these issues see Sibley 2001, and Peynaud 1987.
beefy”, “ruggedly masculine”, it cannot also be, and would be falsely described as, “weak”, “puny”, “lightweight”, “elegant”, “feminine”17.

Clearly, levels of agreement may differ along various axes here, concerning for example how fine-grained the judgements are, as well as certain factors that might be affected by personal preference. What you call “emaciated” I might call merely “slender”, what you call “coarse” I call “refreshingly aggressive”, what you call “extrovert” and “charming” I call “a show-off” and “arrogant”. One need not expect wine experts to agree precisely on each and every metaphorical description, any more than one would expect this of, say, music critics.

But such disagreement does not by itself preclude reasoned discussion about our respective judgements, and the ability to “see the point” of the respective ascriptions. There is a continuum on which “emaciated” and “slender”, “coarse” and “aggressive”, “arrogant” and “extroverted” lie in close enough relation to each other for judgements to make sense and for disagreements to be explained. If you call the tannins of a wine “aggressive”, whereas I call them “refined”, then that may mark a possibly irresolvable difference in taste. More likely, however, it can be explained with reference to a range of normative factors that can account for such marked disagreement: I have a cold; I’ve not compared it to other relevantly similar wines; I am inexperienced and possess limited background knowledge; I have failed to master the conventional vocabulary, and so on. This ability to provide reasons for agreement and disagreement thus presupposes some notion of “ideal”, or at least “appropriate” observers and standard observation conditions, as well as the employment of a conventional critical vocabulary18.

As in other areas of appreciation, however, what we perceive and experience in wine is not anchored solely in basic “un-interpreted” perceptual properties, for it is contoured and coloured by a range of background factors including education, knowledge, culture, imagination, categorisation, comparison, intention, and so on19. Kendall Walton famously demonstrated that what aesthetic properties a work of art is perceived to have depends on which of its non-aesthetic properties are standard, variable, and contra-standard relative to the categories in which it is perceived. Moreover, he argued that in some cases it is «correct to perceive a work in certain categories, and incorrect to perceive it in others; that
is, our judgements of it when we perceive it in the former are likely to be true, and those we make when perceiving it in the latter false.\textsuperscript{20}

I contend that a proper, appropriate understanding and appreciation of wine – and the aesthetic judgements grounded therein – is category-relative in a directly analogous way. A brief and simplified list of such wine-categories would include:

– **Grape varieties**: chardonnay, pinot noir etc.
– **Geography/Terroir**: country, region, local terroir etc.
– **Age/Maturity**
– **Style** (linked with intention): red, white, sparkling, dry, fruity, sweet, full-bodied, “New World”, “Old World” etc.
– **Quality** (linked with intention): grand cru, “fine wine”, “table wine”, simple, sophisticated etc.

Just as in the case of art, there are degrees of specificity and generality to which wine categorisation is subject, many of these categories overlap, and there are many complex variables which affect categorisation\textsuperscript{21}. Nonetheless, where art-category judgements often involve complex, uncertain and shifting “institutional” boundaries and values, and require reference to often vague or unknown artistic intentions, the correct categories within which to assess wine are, in general, subject to relatively rigid institutionalised classification systems, well-established varietal and geographic features, and the intentions of winemakers are often relatively clear and accessible\textsuperscript{22}.

There is no space to detail these complexities here, but a couple of examples will suffice. Relative to the varietal category “Chardonnay”, a drinker familiar only with what might be called old-style Australian chardonnays – big, intense, very alcoholic, fruit-driven wines with strong oaky aromas – may well be likely to describe a white *Meursault* from Burgundy as “austere” or “reserved”. However, when compared to a *Chablis* (also a Chardonnay-based wine) it will be seen that the *Meursault* is not really austere at all; rather, it might be better described

\textsuperscript{20} Walton 2004: 154. We determine the correct categories, Walton contended, by reference to a range of considerations such as, the presence in $W$ of a relatively large number of features standard with respect to $C$; the fact that the artist who produced $W$ intended or expected it to be perceived in $C$; and the fact that $C$ is well established in and recognized by the society in which $W$ was produced. As a result, he argued, the “aesthetic properties [a work] actually possesses are those that are to be found in it when it is perceived correctly”.

\textsuperscript{21} For example, in broader categories many standard and variable properties will be determined primarily by the grape variety(ies), the climate or terroir and the vinification methods typical of some area. At more specific levels, standard properties will be determined in addition by the particular style of wine intended. For an interesting discussion of some of the economic factors involved in wine judgement that I do not have space here to discuss, see Weinberg 2008. For further discussion on issues concerning the production of wine see Jefford and Draper 2007.

\textsuperscript{22} See Origgi 2007.
as “soft”, “gentle”, “buttery” or “subtle” in comparison to the classic flintiness, minerality and high acidity that ground the description “austere” for Chablis. Standard non-aesthetic properties for the relatively specific “Chablis” category will include high acidity on the palate, a certain minerality, and hint of crisp citrus on the nose; variable properties might include, for instance, the specific level of acidity, the type of the citrus detected, and so on.

To take another example, relative to the category grand cru, a particular Château Margaux vintage may seem disappointing, intense but lacking in subtlety, brutal rather than refined, pedestrian rather than expressive. But relative to the generic category “Bordeaux” it may still be judged a great wine, refined and subtle, sophisticated and elegant.

Judgements that a wine is X must thus be understood to include an implicit “relative to this type or category”, and wines can be judged as typical or not relative to the category in which they are being assessed. Thus, in the previous example, both sets of judgements may be seen to be correct, and their relative merits would depend ultimately on what our reasons were for judging the wine against each category. Such reasons in turn might be relative to different interests or different levels of knowledge and experience. In contrast, judging the Margaux relative to, say, the categories “Burgundy” or “Rioja” – or even “Pomerol” or “Chateau Pavie” – would result in misleading and uninformative assessments, and would be straightforwardly wrong.

A real-life, paradigmatic example of the complex operation of category-relative judgements, as I have sketched them, is the ill-tempered and unusually stark debate between the famous wine experts Jancis Robinson and Robert Parker concerning the 2003 Château Pavie. Robinson assessed it thus: «Completely unappetising overripe aromas. Why? Porty sweet. Port is best from the Douro not St. Emilion. Ridiculous wine more reminiscent of a late-harvest Zinfandel than a red Bordeaux with its unappetising green notes». Parker, in contrast, thought it a great wine. How can we reconcile the opposing judgements of expert critics, and reconcile the nature of such a debate with my claims for objectivity?

Part of the difficulty of this case is that the dispute is essentially evaluative in nature. At the heart of Robinson’s criticism was the perception that the Château Pavie was not a “Bordeaux-style” wine, and more specifically, that as a St. Emilion it was an “aberration”. Judged relative to these (correct) categories, in light of her expectations relative to them, and her own personal preferences for certain styles of wine, Robinson’s remarks are perfectly understandable. Judged as a “Zinfandel”, for example, her assessment may have been far more favourable and the “overripeness” and “sweetness” appreciated.

On the other hand, Parker’s personal preferences for big, fruity, “overripe”, intense and alcoholic wines are well documented and account for his favourable

23 Discussions of this dispute can be found in various places. For a good summary see: http://www.jancisrobinson.com/articles/winenews0422; http://www.decanter.com/news/48406.html.
evaluation, even judged against the “Bordeaux” category. One way of understanding his judgement is that his personal preferences overrode any categorial qualms he may have harboured. Furthermore, as in art, certain categorial constraints may be fluid or even at times deliberately flouted. Alternatively, Parker’s taste might be held to be less sensitive to/interested in stylistic variations and category constraints than Robinson’s.24

There are, I suggest, a number of ways of interpreting this dispute. We could take sides and give perfectly comprehensible reasons for the validity of either judgement; alternatively, we could hold that it is simply a case of irreconcilable tastes, two expressions of contrasting personal preferences; or it could even be argued that both critics were guilty of allowing particular personal prejudices to cloud their proper assessment of the wine.

Whichever route we favour in this particularly difficult case, it is clear that personal preferences and prejudices may colour, inappropriately or otherwise, the judgements even of experts. Yet that in itself does not undermine the claims to correctness and objectivity I have advocated, it merely adds a layer of subjectivity to some of our evaluative assessments that can be found throughout the realm of aesthetic judgement, and of which one must be aware.25 As Barry Smith argues, a good strategy for appreciating wine is to seek the judgements of those critics whose tastes most closely match our own, not to abandon the appeal to expertise and criticism altogether.26

Yet a further complexity in this debate is that Robinson’s judgement was based on a blind tasting of the wine, whilst Parker’s was not.27 One might worry, in this light, that my argument conflicts with what many consider the pre-eminent way of understanding and appreciating wine, namely, blind tasting. Fortunately, however, there is no conflict; indeed, the practice is testament to the influence – baleful or benign – that knowledge exerts on perception.

First, it is true that blind tasting allows judgements of wine to be formed without direct knowledge of what the wine is, but discerning the character of a wine through blind tasting necessarily presupposes a great deal of implicit knowledge – of the categorial kind sketched – in order to make sense of one’s otherwise more or less inchoate perceptual experience. Second, the practice of blind tasting implicitly recognises the adverse affect that knowledge (and various personal preferences and prejudices) can have on expectation and perception – it hence guards against the wrong type of categorisation. For example, knowing

24 This could be construed as a criticism or otherwise. Parker has certainly been widely blamed for what many see as the homogenisation of wine styles, with many producers foregoing traditional “stylistic” values of individuality and the expression of terroir in order to suit either Parker’s specific taste preferences, and/or the tastes of a wider market.

25 See the sophisticated discussion of Bender 2008 for further arguments to this effect.


27 It should be noted, however, that there is controversy even about the truth of this claim. See the website references to this dispute listed above.
in advance that a particular wine comes from a famous producer might incline one to misjudge what is actually, say, an overripe, rough, relatively poor-quality wine in an unduly positive light.

So, if the rough picture of category-relative wine judgements I have sketched is broadly right, we can flesh out a notion of understanding and interpretation in relation to the appreciation of wine that bears favourable comparison with those notions used so centrally in our engagement with artworks. It seems clear that a proper appreciation and understanding of wine requires, contra Scruton, knowledge, education, comparison and culture. To this extent, our judgements do possess certain “intellectual intimations”, normative constraints, and amenability to reasoning that properly pertain to the aesthetic. Indeed, it is crucial to note that this is the case even for evaluative judgements concerning the quality of wine, which might otherwise seem to be the preserve of mere personal preference. Demonstrating this allows us to draw an important distinction between pleasure and value that further undermines claims that our evaluative judgements of wine are purely subjective.

3. Pleasure vs. Value

The hierarchy of evaluative categories, I hold, is founded on types of value that wine can possess qua wine, which delineate the category “fine wine” and so assure, for instance, that a vin de table will generally not be as good (qua wine) as a premier cru. I suggest there is a range of agreed upon intrinsic values that mark out the superior from the inferior both between, and to some extent within, categories. What ultimately grounds the categories of quality is the ability of the best wines to manifest to the highest degree those intrinsic values of which wine qua wine is capable.

Some of these values are expressive, as I will argue below. Other prominent values include balance, intensity, and complexity. As elsewhere, the more complex the object, the more interesting it is, and the more it rewards attention. Moreover, the ability to discriminate brings its own kind of pleasure. It takes effort, knowledge and trained perceptual and linguistic abilities to discern and enjoy the character of complex wines, wine that are aptly described using terms such as “subtle”, “sophisticated”, “refined”. This is an important point because

28 Of course, within a particular evaluative category, it may not be straightforward to say which of a range of grand cru wines will be better than another – such fine-grained and specific judgements may well be partly a matter of taste, as we saw in the case of Chateau Pavie. The decision between a Chateau Latour 1982 and Chateaux Margaux 1983 may be in this respect as personal (indeed as incommensurable) as that between Beethoven’s and Brahms’s second violin sonatas.

29 A good discussion of the objectivity of evaluating wine quality can be found in Charters 2007. For further insights into the crucial notion of “balance”, see Peynaud 1987: Ch. 9.

30 Of course, in certain contexts, relative to certain functions and interests, simplicity, for example, might be the sought-for value, and table wines best suited to deliver it. Yet such wine will not reward
the nature of such attention is itself complex: it involves perceptual awareness, concentration, skill, experience, imagination, and all the cognitive resources necessary to understand and interpret the perceptible properties on offer, relative to all those categories and factors already mentioned. If such features are the hallmarks of aesthetic attention then wine can certainly be a rewarding aesthetic object.

For these reasons, judgements of fine wine not only need not correspond with what one (or the majority) happens to find pleasant (in a gustatory sense); indeed, judgement and gustatory pleasure may well conflict. One may discern the value qualities of a wine without straightforwardly liking them. Of course, ultimately the value that wines have is intrinsically connected to the pleasure they provide. It is to be expected that the pleasures of connoisseurs will thus match the wines they take to be the most valuable. But this does not entail that judgements of value are simply reducible to basic subjective, sensual, gustatory pleasures, for these will be influenced, moulded and modified by the norms and values that come to structure one's understanding and appreciation.

So, just as in other areas of aesthetic appreciation, judgements of the quality and value of wine are not reducible to, and may in principle even conflict with, mere judgements of personal taste. It makes perfect sense to say, for example, that “this Sauternes is well-balanced and complex”, “this Sauternes is a great wine” or “Sauternes is superior to Beaume de Venise” whilst personally disliking these styles of wine, sweet wines in general, and so on. This also accounts for the otherwise peculiar judgements that a wine smelling of something unpleasant, like “barnyard muck”, “cat’s pee”, or “wet dog”, may nevertheless be valued, say, as an excellent wine partly in virtue of this very (distasteful) quality.

4. Against (A)

We are now in a position to refute Scruton’s claims. If what I’ve argued is correct, it is mistaken to hold that tastes and smells cannot – in Scruton’s sense, as presented under the A-type claims listed above – “represent” anything independent of themselves, and that our experience of them cannot be described in conceptual terms. Insofar as wine is an object essentially constituted by tastes and smells, our experience of which is structured by those category-relative features outlined, it’s difficult to conceive that our tastes and smells do not “represent” the wine they constitute. In fact, “represent” strikes me as an odd choice of terms any efforts at sustained attention and discrimination, and nor does one drink such wine in order to experience these kinds of satisfaction. There is a time and place for such wines, but qua wines they will lack, either completely or in terms of degree, those values against which judgements of quality are ultimately measured i.e. those values which fine wines are capable of possessing and which are valued intrinsically. In this light, it should also be noted that certain comparisons of preference are meaningful only amongst commensurable categories.

For further discussion of the difference between mere pleasure and proper evaluation see Gale 2008.
in this context, and I do not think much significance ought to be attached to it. But in any case, in tasting and smelling wine with proper understanding, it seems evident that we are judging the object; to put it again in Scruton’s terms, we are tasting and smelling the object “through” the taste and smell experiences. Tastes and smells here just are (at least partly) a form of judgement, and it makes perfect sense to say that I taste this object as wine and that I experience its smells and the tastes as the tastes and smells of this wine.

Of course, if one were utterly unfamiliar with wine, one might smell and taste it without the experience being of wine, and hence conceptualised as such. But all this demonstrates is the possibility of failing to appreciate the wine as wine, and those tastes and smells as wine tastes and smells. There seems to be no relevant difference between this case and the case of seeing “through” the visual experience to the object.

Nonetheless, one might think that there still remains this difference: visual perception seems to be veridical in a way that olfactory perception is not. Visual perception, that is, has a notion of “correctness” built into it; it tells us about objects in the world independent of our experience of them, and we can distinguish (more or less) between the two in a way that we cannot for tastes and smells. Whatever its intuitive attractions, however, I think that such intuitions ought to be resisted. There simply is no salient difference, for we can get things wrong or right when smelling and tasting objects in the world, particularly in respect of complex artefacts designed with specific intentions to be appreciated by taste and smell, as wine is; and the nature of wine appreciation I have outlined clearly demonstrates this.

Thus, tastes and smells can be “representational”, in the relevant sense, and have conceptual content. As such, “winespeak”, as Scruton puts it, is grounded in the nature of the object, and does describe the way that the wine is — which of course is partly just a matter of how it smells and tastes (construed broadly). Winespeak is not necessarily any more whimsical and far-fetched than aesthetic judgments made in other areas.

32 Thanks to David Davies, Roger Scruton, and Nick Zangwill for pressing me on this point.

33 As Sibley 2001 showed, tastes and smells can provide us with information about the world, and as Barry Smith has recently argued with great persuasiveness, there is a genuine difference between the taste and smell properties a wine really possesses, and our experiences of these: “The fact that tasting sensations are the conscious experiences of individual tasters does not thereby prevent them from providing information about the objective characteristics of wines tasted.” (Smith 2007b: 48) It also worth noting here that there is no one “absolute” way that any particular object looks, any more than there is just one way it smells or tastes. We can adopt indefinite visual perspectives on objects in the world and describe our visual experiences of them in endlessly rich, metaphorical ways. Naturally, some descriptions will strike us as more “apt” than others, depending amongst many other things on the nature of the object, our interests and purposes in so regarding it, and the nature of our various perceptual capacities. Judging wine relative to the categories listed shows one of the main ways (perhaps the primary way) in which we do assess the aptness of our experiences and judgements about the tastes and smells constituting it.
What about the possibility of «smelling as» or «smelling in»? Insofar as our perception is informed by the kinds of background knowledge I’ve discussed, it seems to me possible that, relative to a given category(ies) one may, as it were, switch between different experiences and judgements of wine. For example, it seems that I could choose to smell/taste a red wine as a New World or Old World, a South African pinot noir or a French Burgundy, and my various assessments of the wine will change accordingly. Similarly, is there not something right about saying that I taste the terroir and balance in the wine?

Well, perhaps not. Cases of visual aspect perception seem to involve seeing one type of object as or in another type of object, whereas what I smell or taste as or in are qualities that are – how to say it? – intrinsically wine qualities; rather more like seeing one type of cat as another type of cat, than seeing the cat as, say, a furry handbag. Nonetheless, the phenomenon of aspect perception is notoriously opaque, and it is far from clear that there are any salient differences here between tastes and smells, on the one hand, and sounds on the other. Indeed, I think that some of the things we taste/smell in wine (or wine as), are expressive properties, and properties that relate directly to wine as a product of skill and intention. To see this I turn now to (B).

5. Against (B)

I think we can deal quickly with Scruton’s claim that tastes and smells lack intrinsic order and clear transitions. Certainly, they intermingle in wine, but if they did thereby lose their character it seems improbable that they could be structured and arranged in the ways they obviously are in order to manifest the sorts of qualities of which wine is capable, and for which it is valued. Some of the qualities intrinsic to wine are qualities of order and temporal transition. Wines evolve through time, in glass and bottle, revealing different values in the process. A good wine, for example, will open up after time in the glass to reveal new layers of properties – the subtle raspberries of the first nosing of a Bonnes-Mares will give way to deeper and earthier flavours “beneath”. A temporal depth of structure will be revealed, and the wine will be assessed as to the harmony and balance achieved amongst the rich and complex interplay of its many tastes and smells, as well as the length and intensity of its finish.

It is important to note that these are not simply incidental features of fine wines, but are in large part the result of skill, intention, and an understanding of values intrinsic to the nature of wine. Indeed, in these ways, wines are clearly capable of generating at least expectation and harmony. A wine can, for instance, fail to live up to the complexity detected on the first nose when eventually circulated around the palate – (or for that matter garnered from prior knowledge of its production); conversely, it can promise such complexity and after some time deliver or exceed it. These are simply straightforward examples of everyday
occurrences when wine tasting, and undermine the idea that tastes and smells are necessarily free-floating and unrelated.

It is, however, not obvious that any of these qualities of wine can be the bearers of meaning and expression in themselves, as Scruton claims that sounds organised as music can be. As already noted, he allows that through the taste of terroir in the perception of fine wine, «where that means not merely the soil, but the customs and ceremonies that had sanctified it […] we are knowing – by acquaintance, as it were – the history, geography and customs of a community».

He holds, however, that this knowledge and value comes from association rather than expression, from context rather than content.

6. Association, expressiveness, expression

There is no doubt that association plays some role in the attribution of certain qualities to wine, but fine wines, I contend, have expressive properties that are not reducible to mere association, and are, contra Scruton, properties of content rather than context – although I am not convinced there is always a sharp distinction here, nor is it clear what the logical relation between the two is. These expressive properties are attributes of the content of wine, in large part in virtue of the role that intention, and its detection in the wine, plays in their attribution and justification. Wine is, after all, an artefact, intentionally created to have many (but obviously not all) of the properties it does as the result of an ensemble of decisions that relate to a range of different considerations.

It is of course contentious just what expressiveness consists in, and it is therefore useful for current purposes to draw on a recent account given by Paul Noordhof that, in addition to its plausibility, offers a general concept of expressiveness that can be extended to encompass wine. Noordhof argues that:

When we perceive expressive properties in a work of art, we imagine a particular kind of creative process which, when the expressive properties are those of emotions, is guided by emotions […] we imagine how an emotion would be manifested through the creative process in non-expressively specified features of the artwork which realise the expressive property.

That is, we imagine how some kind of creative process resulted in an object having just those features that we see as being expressive of that process. Those features might be the specific brush strokes on a canvas, the specific notes in a musical passage, or the specific tastes, smells and textures in a bottle of wine.

The main features of this account to note for our purpose are, first, that these features are experienced as expressive and not as being an expression of,

34 Scruton 2007: 16.
35 Noordhof 2008: 338
and second that expressive perception (i.e. our perception of expressive properties) essentially involves the imagination. It is imaginative in so far as it is less “immediate” than normal perception, in which we simply passively see, for example, the properties of objects as belonging to them. Instead, it requires a certain engagement on our part, an engagement that adds something over and above the perception of the non-expressive features that constitute the expressive properties. That is, in the case of musical expression for example, it is possible (although it may at times be difficult) merely to hear noise, to hear the sounds as non-expressive. Similarly, in the case of wine, we can choose to focus just on the tastes and smells as tastes and smells, and not as bearing expressive or aesthetic properties. We have in principle some control over this, much like the control we have in classic cases of aspect or affordance perception, such as seeing the famous duck-rabbit figure as alternately either a duck, or a rabbit.

Now one advantage of this kind of account is that it is not limited to cases of emotional expression, but can explain the expressivity of ideas, attitudes or values. For example, we can see Mondrian’s *Broadway Boogie Woogie* as expressive of jazz (or the feeling of listening to jazz) and can hear Debussy’s *La Mer* as expressive of swirling movements of sea (or the experience of this).

Perceiving the expressive character of artworks may require certain background knowledge concerning artistic intentions, art-historical styles, categories and genres and so on. As such, our experiences of expressive properties are cognitively penetrable. *La Mer* is expressive of the sea in virtue of the title of the piece and the intentions behind it; we perceive *Broadway Boogie Woogie* to be expressive of jazz given its relation to Mondrian’s oeuvre specifically and the abstract expressionist style more generally. As noted above, much aesthetic experience – at least of artworks – is like this. What aesthetic properties a work seems to possess depends on the various categories against which the work is perceived, as we have seen.

Given that a creative process implies agency, expressive perception requires some kind of background “acceptance” or “awareness” – which might be more or less unconscious – of agency. When confronted with a known artefact, therefore, we approach it and appreciate and experience it with an implicit background belief in agency that allows us to see the features of the works as products of a creative process.

So, the thought is this. We perceive wine as expressive (through tasting it) partly in virtue of the fact that we are aware, even minimally, that it is an artefact created and designed to give rise to certain experiences in us, experiences that may involve the perception of expressive properties (if these are there to be perceived). Tastes and smells (and textures) can be skilfully combined and structured in wine to constitute, via interaction with us, certain expressive properties. These properties are response-dependent and not fully captured in non-expressive terms. Attributions of expressive properties to wine are thus the result of an imaginative awareness of agency guiding a process resulting in the specific non-expressive features (its tastes, smells, textures) partly constituting the expressive properties. What expressive properties a wine appears to us to have will depend on the
range of factors that we have already examined, such as terroir and grape, the intentions of the winemaker, the knowledge and experience of the taster, and the category of appreciation against which it is judged, where these categories include those discussed earlier.

The expression of terroir, for instance, is the result of the intentional act of the winemaker, and it takes great skill to marry the environment to the particular grape varieties used, to create a unique whole from an array of different parts. Indeed, given the winemaker’s intention to succeed in this task, another of the central evaluations of wine, paralleling that of art, concerns the achievement the wine represents. To the extent that a wine-maker’s intentions are successfully realised they are identifiable in the wine, and the more complex, expressive, original, true to terroir the wine is, the greater the achievement it represents.

Partly connected with the expression of terroir, the most complex and sophisticated wines are held to express individuality and uniqueness, and they are often described as having “personality”, and being expressive of, amongst other things, certain human-like character traits. For example, wines can be “joyful”, “refined”, “friendly”, “attractive”. Wines that do not bow to the pressures of commercialisation are described as “authentic”, or “sincère”, and wines that “try” and “fail” to be something that they are not can be “pretentious”, “dishonest” or “commercial”. In contrast, very complex wines that change a great deal, that do not settle, that defy easy analysis, might be called “capricious” or “seductive”. In light of these values we can make good sense of expressions that, in the words of Peynaud, «define a wine’s place in an elite and hierarchical vinous “society” — noble, rich, uncouth, vulgar, plebeian, poor, everyday, pedestrian, unpretentious, sophisticated, understated, refined, elegant, rustic, pastoral, domestic».

So, wines are made in certain ways, embodying certain decisions, and these can be detected as expressive properties in the wine itself. Furthermore, I suggest, very fine wines can possess expressive properties that are not merely internal to the nature of wine, so to speak, but concern more general “life-values”. This is difficult to spell out precisely, but I think that wines can be expressive of certain attitudes and views concerning, for example, civilised life, sophistication, simplicity, the rural vs the urban, elegance, authenticity, variety, subtlety, and so on. That is, calling a wine “elegant” or “rustic” may refer not just to the intrinsic properties of the wine that it exemplifies, but to an array of attitudes to life and the world that have allowed it to come to be made in just this way. Choosing between, for instance, Old World and New World wines, or between

36 “Terroir” refers roughly to all the aspects of the local environment in which the wine is made. For an interesting account of terroir see Kramer 2008.

37 Tim Crane 2007 offers an insightful discussion of some of these points.

38 Peynaud 1987: 238-239 ff. Of course, these terms might themselves at times be used relative to qualitative categories – “X is noble for a table wine”; “Y is pedestrian for a fine wine” etc.
Burgundy and Bordeaux, will in turn reflect some of these values expressed in the wines chosen.

Wine can, as such, embody certain kinds of meaning in virtue of possessing expressive properties that – through the role of intention and the categorial considerations sketched – are genuinely part of the content of the wine and not just garnered through contingent associations and extraneous contextual considerations. As such, wine’s aesthetic value satisfies at least one important notion of artistic expression, and if there are any salient differences here between wine and the expressive potential of other supposedly more genuine aesthetic non-representational art forms, they elude me.

Ought we be worried that we have now succeeded merely in opening dangerous floodgates, which would allow anything, in principal, to become an object of aesthetic interest, or indeed an expressive object? I think not, for there seems no obvious reason why we should impose any limit on the types of objects that can be appreciated as expressive. There are, after all, food critics, expert chocolatiers, people who appreciate trains, whiskey, clouds, and no doubt a whole raft of other things that people can and do spend a great deal of effort in discriminating and evaluating. Such activities do not strike me as inherently ludicrous or illegitimate. Nonetheless, there may be some sorts of limit on expressivity, and I shall merely gesture at two potential candidates here.

First, expressive potential has much to do with the role of, and recognition of, intention and skill, so while it is no doubt possible to provide an appreciative framework within which any number of different types of object (from piles of gravel to perfumes) can become expressive vehicles, I think a lack of direct human intention restricts the range and perhaps intensity of expressive properties. For example, “wild” nature – as opposed to, say, gardens, and perhaps certain types of cultural/agricultural landscapes – may be expressive of certain moods and feelings (e.g. the “eeriness” of an empty moor; the “solitude” of the sea) but only within a relatively limited range.

Second, I suspect that some objects may simply possess certain properties that, in interaction with particular physical and/or cultural characteristics of human beings, provide more expressive potential than others, and which might allow wine, for example, to be a more expressive object than, say, beer. However, it is an extremely difficult matter to determine the truth of such claims, and all I would stress here is that expressiveness involves such a heady combination of physical properties and their interaction with perceptual, psychological, and cultural capacities and characteristics, institutions, norms, conventions, practices,

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39 For more on the notion of meaning in relation to wine see Grahm 2008.

40 For an important account of how food can be expressive that also utilises the notion of metaphorical exemplification, see Korsmeyer 2002. Korsmeyer, however, appeals rather more to the role of association in meaning than I do here.

41 Thanks to Peter Lamarque for raising this issue.
and so on, that the notion is, I think, far more opaque than philosophers have recognised. This brings us to the final point.

One might well insist – as Scruton no doubt would against Goodman – that expressiveness falls short of expression in the aesthetic stakes, and object that, even granted the expressive powers I have advocated for it, wine cannot, as Scruton insists music can, express “all the meaning that human beings are able to communicate”. Can wine express sadness, love, anger, or other human emotions? I do not know, perhaps not; but nor is it uncontroversial either that absolute music can, or if it can, whether it does so via anything more than an analogous kind of metaphorical exemplification and trains of association. Indeed, I think that whatever theory of musical expression one adopts, it remains an open question whether there could not be – as a matter of (physical?) necessity? – a culture that drank wine as expressing emotion, and failed to hear music as doing so.\footnote{Acknowledgements: I would like to thank the Swiss National Science Foundation for funding part of the research for this paper which was carried out under the nccr project “Affective Dynamics” at the University of Geneva, and the project “Imagination, Emotion, and Value” at the University of Fribourg. I would also like to thank audiences in both these places, and at conferences in Durham, Lancaster, Rennes and London. In particular, I would like to thank Roger Scruton, John Bender, and Barry Smith for their feedback and encouragements.}
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