

# In vino veritas. Or is there?

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In wine, there may indeed be truth, but what is the truth in wine? Where is it to be found in wine? And how does one get to it?

One needn't be a connoisseur or heavily invested in wine to be familiar with Roman author, naturalist, and natural philosopher Pliny the Elder's most famous statement, *in vino veritas*. Though various cultures have different ways of alluding to the same thing, it was first written in Pliny's *Naturalis Historia* in the 1st century AD. It refers to wine's—or more specifically, alcohol's—ability to rid one's inhibitions and loosen the tongue to reveal the truth not revealed with the discipline that comes from sobriety.

This looseness was not always discouraged. Wine's very same effect was called upon in Plato's *Symposium*, which is a tribute not to wine but to Eros, and which, as Roger Scruton writes in *I Drink Therefore I Am*, “illustrates the ability of wine, when properly used, to set love and desire at a distance that makes them discussable.” That there was truth in wine was an offering as much as a warning.

## Philosophy

Many say the only way to find the truth is through philosophy, even though philosophy has its skeptics and has done for ages. In Plato's *Republic*, Thrasymachus challenged Plato's use of philosophy as being nothing but word games. Others criticize the philosophical process as merely a roundabout way of justifying the positions we have already taken. But when such accusations are leveled at philosophy, one can always remain committed to following philosophy's lodestar, which is to seek the truth.

This, and the resultant growth of self that comes from exploring such questions, is, according to Bertrand Russell, the real value of philosophy. In *The Problems of Philosophy*, he writes,

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“Philosophy is to be studied, not for the sake of any definite answers to its questions, since no definite answers can, as a rule, be known to be true, but rather for the sake of the questions themselves.”

## Philosophy and wine

As philosophy has had its skeptics, so, too, has wine as an object of serious philosophical inquiry. Despite its ongoing cultural significance since it was first discovered in the cradle of civilization 8,000 years ago, wine has lingered on the margins of serious philosophical inquiry—an accompaniment to it, rather than the object of it. There was Plato's *Symposium*, of course. And wine was a constant presence throughout ancient Middle Eastern poetry, while David Hume thought wine a good way to cure the ills of philosophy. Wine enabled, enhanced, and—in Hume's case—consoled philosophical inquiry but was not the object of it.

The reasons for this started with the ancients' skepticism that smell was a lesser sense, therefore anything that came through it could not be relied upon as a true representation of knowledge. Whether the senses are

a reliable source of knowledge is still being debated today.

Other doubts have emerged and continue to pester us. They include whether we can taste objective properties in a wine or just note our subjective response to it; whether there are standards of quality in a wine or if it is all just “a matter of taste” (*de gustibus non est disputandum*); and whether tasting wine is a true aesthetic experience like art or music, or less important.

Over the past two decades, as questions about the questions emerged, wine critics have become more influential, the wine industry has burgeoned, and philosophers have focused on wine as a legitimate object of philosophical inquiry. Or is it? This, too, is still being questioned.

But I also wonder whether, in efforts to find the truth about what we are tasting, wine has been broken into component pieces that give explanations about a part of wine but no longer represent all that wine is; the industry has unpacked wine but lost its meaning. Critics have reduced wine to scores and tasting notes, and the highest tasting achievement is to do so without emotion (even if the wine elicits one). Scientists have identified molecules (and areas in the brain that perceive them) that explain elements of taste but not the human experience of wine, let alone the meaning of it—if indeed there is one.

None of this explains why, for more than 8,000 years, in every culture that had one, wine has been elevated to a status to accompany god, life, love, death, and the afterlife, and it also often accompanies the most important artistic and intellectual rituals of a culture.

But I think that, of all the reasons to engage in philosophy, it is, as Scruton writes in *Philosophy: Principles and Problems*, for philosophy's ancient promise “to help us, however indirectly, to live wisely and well.” ■