It's all right to be wrong, sometimes

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RACIST comments made by some youths have spurred many reactions from Singaporeans. This presents another interesting issue — do those who recycle themselves retroactively, to the kind of mannerism of a diversity of opinions which they are attacking? When and how can we differ without being insolent and disrespectful?

This was a point raised by Mr Goh Wei Zong in his column on Monday's Youthlink page in this newspaper. Of the attack with derogatory language and a lack of respect for the opinions of the writer of certain racist comments, he wrote: "There must be a difference between 'I do not agree with you' and 'You are wrong'. I study in Britain, where freedom of speech and expression prevail, and there is a corresponding manner in the way lines are delivered. The true mark of a developed society is the ability of its citizens to keep an open mind and respect each other's views."

If Mr Goh means to question the use of derogatory language, he misses an important point about the edifice of democracy.

Al, however, in suggesting that the language of right and wrong is in itself the hallmark of intolerance and is always inappropriate in debate, there appears to be a prefabricated assumption. Instead of writing the columnist to persuade us, he elevates some of our reactions. He cannot mean to say to us: "You are wrong to say you are wrong." As you may be correct, but not necessarily right, he cannot mean to put down to the writer the responsibility to persuade us that we are mistaken or wrong.

What the writer means is to say: "Your opinion, Your right, Your wrong.

I do not agree with you, and I think You are wrong."

In truth, in reality, one cannot avoid a truth claim in all areas of discourse, though one can be in the process of discovering the truth and hence prefer to put forth a tentative conclusion.

Mephisto is the classic example of one such area. Legal philosopher Ronald Dworkin helpfully distinguishes "for-conclusion opinions" (as in whether chocolate ice cream is the best-tasting) from moral judgment. For example, in relating to the moral question of whether slavery is unjust, one might borrow Dworkin's stance about the groups of people who might deny that slavery is unjust to help us understand what is at stake.

The first group comprises the facilitators who believe there is nothing wrong with slavery and that some people deserve to be slaves. They do not deny that moral opinions may be objectively right or wrong. We immediately think fascism and Savonarola for holding such a view, but hardly do we deny they are characterizing with us — who hold the diametrically opposed view.

The second group is the "opponents of slavery" who at least believe that slavery is an evil. Yet our opinion is the more correct one by reference to an objective standard which we may be failing to figure out.

We may show them that they are mistaken, for example, when we invoke the golden rule of Kant on categorical imperative against them and require them to put themselves in the shoes of someone being made a slave.

The second are the sceptical philosophers who deny that slavery is a moral evil because they believe all moral judgments are a matter of one's subjective opinion and deny that such judgments can be objectively right or wrong. With such a person, it is not possible to discern whose judgment better approximates truth. He does not believe that either his judgment or ours can be correct, because he does not believe any standard of correctness exists.

OPINION OR JUDGMENT?

At first blush, it seems that when someone says something is his personal opinion, discourse is "safe" because his opinion ranks no higher than ours, whereas if he puts forth an opinion without such qualification and uses the language of right and wrong, he is being intolerant. Is this the case?

This interpretation helps us understand several points.

First, it seems more acceptable to a sceptical philosopher than to a fundamentalist if one holds fundamentalist views. It is easier to accept the racist attitude of a young person, for example, by saying that it is just his personal opinion, which he is entitled to hold, especially since rhetoric is more in vogue, and each person must be allowed to have a view, however absurd.

On the other hand, one realizes that the view is held with a truth claim (as in the first case), this view becomes more troubling.

However, what is the practical difference between a young person being a racist in his personal subjective opinion (second category) and believing that racism is all right as a matter of truth (first category)? Either way, say, it's a fact, he is open to his beliefs. To any mind, if he were to understand the subjectivity of values and his own truth claims, he would be presented with the need to justify his views and become more circumspect about them.

Second, those who claim to be sceptical philosophers of the second category rarely live up to their claim. More often than not, they try to persuade us that their view is better.

While "better" is in fact a fact different from an approximation of correctness or truth, it confuses the implicit acknowledgement of a standard — a guide by which we know one view is better than another. What is this standard if it is not a reference to values? Do sceptics simply refer to them as "subjective values"?

Administratively that some views may be better and others right is not a mark of insensitivity, opposition, disrespect or ill-will. It only compels us to take discourse and freedom of speech more seriously.

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