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## Discourse, Distinctions, and Congeniality

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**Abstract:** This paper attempts to express how important the relationship between discourse and making distinctions is in attaining congeniality. The author wishes to show that congeniality is an ideal that is to be pursued in this diverse world. The interpretation of facts, the opposing opinions or judgments, and differing belief systems are perceived as sufficient reasons why congeniality among people belonging to different orientations cannot be attained. Among other reasons, the author zeroes in on one observation as to why he thinks it is possible to solicit sympathy, understanding, and tolerance from people despite their differences. He observes that the meanings of three claims, namely, "I know," "I think," and "I believe" are unclear or vague and are often used interchangeably, thus, the information conveyed or intended messages are ambiguous for the listener or reader. He thinks that teaching students make the proper distinctions between one claim and the others can probably change how things are—meaning, congeniality can be attained despite obvious differences in opinions and beliefs if the meanings of "I know," "I think," and "I believe" are clear.

Clear or good and vague or bad distinctions happen while people participate in discourse. When distinctions are clear then congeniality and the likes of kindness, sympathy, and tolerance result; while, anger, hatred, and persecution develop with vague distinctions. The author recognizes the difficulty of making good distinctions: Some are easy to make, including some made implicitly; while, others are difficult, tricky, and take more effort. If I say, for example, that "hell is where souls of bad people go" then this can be taken in many different ways. For me, that is a fact or knowledge but is a meaningless utterance for one listener (perhaps, an atheist). For another listener that is a claim that is either true or false, thus, an opinion. And, for another still that is false for hell is not a place but a state of mind.

As the paper progresses it shares some ways to distinguish between a fact that corresponds to the "I know," "factual matter" or "matter of fact" that corresponds to the "I think," and "matter of pure opinion" that corresponds to the "I believe." The conclusion reveals that in matters of belief or faith, the call for good listening and tolerating "stories" of others is basic for realizing congeniality.

**Key Words:** Discourse; Distinctions; Congeniality; Tolerance; Belief



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The paper begins by examining the three terms found in the title: “Discourse,” “distinctions,” and “congeniality by way of definition or description. Among these terms, “distinctions” is considered the most crucial insofar as the paper’s intent is concerned. Its intent is to portray that distinguishing between the realms of the “I know,” “I think,” and “I believe” correctly is necessary for discourses to be considered congenial and pursued with cordiality and respect.

The paper proceeds by treating claims (either true or false statements), their official function, and possible responses towards them. The discussion proceeds to a concern on the use of the term “Truth” instead of “truth/s.” For clarity’s sake, Bertrand Russell’s observation regarding the matter is cited. Furthermore, it is said that we always tend to evaluate claims in terms of their truth or falsity when there are other criteria, such as sincerity and appropriateness that may be used for evaluating them. To explain this point, the thoughts of both Sir Karl Raimund Popper and Jurgen Habermas are cited.

Since truth is only one criterion among others, the concepts of “fact,” “matter of fact” or “factual matter,” and “matter of pure opinion” are discussed with a few examples from the authors Moore and Parker. In addition, objective and subjective claims are distinguished utilizing the concepts of “matters of fact” and “pure opinion.” These serve as the springboard to discuss the realms of the “I know,” “I think,” and “I believe” and the confusion involved in distinguishing one from the others. Finally, the paper points out that matters of belief are different since these are more private; and , more difficult to deal with due to the absence of confirmation and denial.

## 2. DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

“Discourse” is both an activity and a process. It is an activity that one does along with another or others. It is a process since it starts somewhere and ends somewhere else. Discourse, thus, evolves due to the participation of those involved. Ordinarily, discourse suggests that communication, conversation, discussion, and other words of similar import, occurs. Communication or conversation is realized by using the spoken and written words or by means of sign language. “Distinctions,” on the other hand, are made. Making distinctions suggests differentiating concepts and involves the act of establishing or recognizing differences while discourse develops. Making distinctions is crucial for the clear understanding of concepts used in conversations. One capable of making distinctions is not easily swayed by spoken or written opinions and utterances of others. Finally, for this paper’s intent and purpose, “congeniality” simply means “being nice.” It is an attitude or a behaviour—an aura, character, or form—portraying qualities worth having—or, values—such as, sympathy, understanding, and tolerance all taken together. In that sense, we take it to mean “sympathetic understanding” or “sympathetic tolerance.” For brevity’s sake, we may choose to say: Congeniality means “being with” another or others while in the process of discourse and helping each other in making the proper distinctions.

An important manifestation of congeniality is open—mindedness. An open—minded individual welcomes and understands the views of others even if those do not necessarily agree with his or her own. Congeniality is shown too when the parties involved in the discourse all portray the attitude of a good listener—attentive, curious, and respect for the ideas and opinions of others. That means one who manifests an aura of interestedness is congenial. Aside from that, congeniality is also portrayed when one shows sensitivity and sympathy towards the views of others and recognize the context where “the other is coming from” as others wish to put it. One favourite example is the case of mothers who cannot believe their children are capable of committing crimes. No amount of accounts from victims and witnesses can convince them that their kids are the culprits indeed.

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Among the terms, the most crucial is “distinctions” since it is assumed, although implicitly most of the time, when discourse occurs. Take this as an example: Discourse itself can either be verbal or non-verbal—uttering sentences or crossing one’s arms. The distinction here is clear. Also, when sentences of different types—declaratives or narratives, imperatives, interrogatives, exclamations or wishes (also called optatives or options in some instances)—are expressed, both the speaker and listener can distinguish one from the other without much effort. Making distinctions is important since it encourages the ability of thinking for oneself. Both of these, taken together and pursued carefully, result to clear thought. Most important, the intent of this paper has to do with making us more aware and attentive about the distinctions between the “I know,” “I think,” and “I believe” so that discourses can be congenial and pursued with cordiality and respect.

In the case of the more delightful and engaging discourses, the declarative or narrative sentence takes the center stage. This is not surprising. We are told that this sentence type is called “claim,” “proposition,” or “statement.” Among the sentences, it is only the declarative sentence that has truth value—meaning, it is only this type that can be either true or false. The truth value of a true statement is true and that of a false one is false (Cf. Moore & Parker 2000: 3; Ceniza 1994: 65). There are more to be said about claims:

The official job of claims is to communicate information. But we use claims to accomplish a variety of goals. Oftentimes we communicate a fact to others when our main interest is not simply to make them aware of the fact but rather to persuade them, warn them, amuse them, comfort them, or annoy them. [There are many times] when a person’s motivation for making a claim is more important than the information contained in the claim itself.

[We respond in many ways when confronted by a claim.] We can ignore the claim, or we can consider it. We can question or challenge it. We can criticize, defend, or make fun of it. Usually, though, what we want to do is determine whether to accept it (that is, to believe it), reject it (believe that it is false), or suspend judgment about it (possibly because we don’t have enough information at the time to accept or reject it). When we accept or reject claims, we do so with varying degrees of confidence. We may have full confidence in the truth (or falsity) of one claim but only modest confidence in the truth or falsity of another. The degree of confidence in our acceptance or rejection of a claim should depend on the amount of evidence we have for or against the claim. [Emphasis supplied] (Cf. Moore & Parker 2000: 5)

Many among us, or most of us, are trained to be obsessed with “truth” or, worse, with “the Truth.” William Hare (1999) tells us that

Bertrand Russell disparages the tendency to use ‘truth’ with a big T in the grand sense. People persecute each other because they believe they know the ‘Truth.’ Although Russell thinks that there is a danger in passionate belief (in general he holds that the passionateness of a belief is inversely proportional to the evidence in its favour!), he does not advocate an attitude of complete detachment because he believes that detachment will lead to inaction. The kind of detachment he favours is from those emotions (hatred, envy, anger and so on) which interfere with intellectual honesty and which prevent the emergence of kindly feeling.

Whenever we hear, read, or express a claim we try to determine whether it is true or false. Our bias for the truth should not be taken against us. However, there is a need to realize that truth is not a criterion that applies to all realms. In an interesting introductory article called “Hermeneutics: The philosophy of interpretation,” author Demeterio (Cf. Leni DLR Garcia, ed. 2013: 133) clarifies the point we wish to make. In his article, Demeterio explains Jurgen Habermas’ belief that the criterion of truth, though very useful, is simply not enough, for the reason that there are types of communications that cannot be evaluated as true or false. To elaborate, he says:

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Habermas borrowed from the thoughts of the German—born British philosopher Sir Karl Raimund Popper (1902-1994), who theorized that a person simultaneously exists in three distinct worlds, namely, 1) the physical world of nature, 2) the internal world of ideas, thoughts, and emotions, and 3) the social world of inter—subjectivity. Habermas, deduced the insight that if there are substantial distinctions between these three worlds, then there are substantial distinctions between the communications used with reference to, or within the context of, each of these worlds. Since there are three Popperian worlds, and three different modes of communication, there must also be three different criteria used in evaluating communications. Thus, aside from truth, Habermas proposed that the two other criteria must be sincerity and appropriateness. For each and every communication we must ask the following questions: 1) Is it true? (the truth criterion); 2) Is the person speaking sincere? (the sincerity criterion); and, 3) Is the communication process appropriate? Or does the communication process build social relationships or inter—subjectivities? (the appropriateness criterion).

So we learn that the truth criterion is simply one part of the picture; and, this leads us to the point we wish to make. Moore and Parker (2000: 11-13) distinguish between fact, matters of fact or factual matters, and matters of pure opinion. They claim that “fact” is “often used to indicate or emphasize that a claim is true.”

Their example is: “It’s a fact that Mars is smaller than Earth.” That means exactly the same as: “It is true that Mars is smaller than Earth.” They add that the term “opinion” indicates “that a claim is *believed* [emphasis supplied] or judged to be true, by someone, often after a certain amount of thought.” The example they give is: “It’s Moore’s opinion that Mars is smaller than Earth.” For them that means the same as “Moore *believes* [italics mine] that Mars is smaller than Earth.” Parker’s opinion or *belief* [italics mine]/states that “Mars is made of mozzarella cheese.” Moore’s claim is not only his opinion but it is likewise a fact, it is true; however, Parker’s opinion is not a fact for it is false. From these examples, it is clear that some opinions or judgements convey the truth for they convey facts while others are false. It is worth noticing that the terms “believes” and “belief” were italicized. This is significant for it shows a common practice—that these terms are conceived to be the same as “opinion.” Ordinarily, this is an accepted practice; however, appropriateness dictates that there is a distinction between those concepts. Opinions or judgments are either true or false; but, beliefs are neither true nor false. In other words, opinions or judgments are claims for they are either true or false. Beliefs, on the other hand, are not claims—strictly speaking—for their truth or falsity can never be known. For example, I believe that there is life after death, heaven or hell, etc. and another does not believe so. Honestly, we can never settle the issues whether there is life after death and whether there is heaven or hell. Not to mention that nowadays, there are studies and works on life after death in the form of reincarnation. In this case, declarations on the matter made in the context of those studies and works may be considered as claims by some; for others, this may be an occasion to express their opinions or judgments; and, for the rest those declarations may not be claims at all. In the case of heaven and hell, some of us seem to know and certain that these are places souls may proceed after the body’s death. But others may take these concepts figuratively—that is, these are not places but considered as states of mind. In either case, these conceptions may be considered “knowledge,” “opinions,” or “beliefs” depending on the attitude or disposition of the person concerned.

In the case of Moore and Parker, we get the impression that there is no issue at hand when the term “fact” is used. The word fact itself suggests truth. Issues about facts may arise not because of the fact itself but due to the consequences of the fact. For example, it is a fact that a crime was committed—that is true. However, when others give their interpretations as to why the crime was committed, who is at fault, etc. then issues arise. There are issues, however, in the realms of factual matters or matters of fact and matters of pure opinion. They (2000: 13) say: “Claims about factual matters are also known as objective claims; claims about matters of pure opinion are known as subjective claims.” They explain the respective notions of objective and subjective claims by way of truth and falsity together with the exclusion or inclusion of personal tastes and preferences. “Objective

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claims are statements that are true or false regardless of our personal preferences, tastes, biases, and so on. Subjective claims are expressions of those preferences, tastes, biases, and so on..." One typical example is the preference for taste. Do oranges taste better than apples or vice-versa? Those opposing preferences can both be correct since those simply express preferences. In summary, "an issue is about factual matters when there are established methods for settling it—that is, when there are generally accepted criteria or standards on which the issue can be judged—or when we can at least describe what kinds of methods and criteria would apply even though it may be impractical or impossible to actually apply them." In the case of an issue about matters of pure opinion "there is no set of facts we could determine and no generally accepted method or standard we might employ that would enable us to decide the issue definitively one way or the other." Lastly, Moore and Parker give a test for determining whether an issue is about a factual matter or a matter of pure opinion: "When two people disagree about a factual matter, it is certain that at least one of them is wrong; that is, two conflicting opinions about a matter of fact cannot both be correct. But we allow two people to hold conflicting opinions about matters of pure opinion and we don't say that either of them is wrong."

The discussions of Moore and Parker above pertaining to facts, matters of fact, and matters of pure opinion serve as a perfect springboard for establishing the point of this paper. Facts are commonly associated or correspond to the "I know;" factual matters to the "I think;" and, matters of pure opinion to the "I believe." The "I know" suggests certainty and truth; the "I think," an opinion or judgement, thus, can be either true or false; and, the "I believe," a strongly engrained bias (or, prejudice) of the heart that can never be known if it is true or false. Thus, there is no such thing as a true or false belief. We remember Blaise Pascal's wager here, clearly discussed in his work *Pensees*. He recognizes that belief in God along with the afterlife is a matter of belief and so he asks: If we were to bet whether or not there is a God, what will be the better choice for us to increase our chance of winning? He gives the options: If I bet there is no God and I die and I find out that there really is no God, I win the bet but I win nothing since there is no afterlife. If there is a God, then I have everything to lose. If I bet there is a God and I find out after I die that there is none, then I lose nothing; but, if there is one, then I have everything to gain. So, he prefers to bet there is a God for obvious reasons. He adds, "The heart has reasons that Reason itself cannot understand!" Thus, there are grounds why we choose some beliefs rather than others; and, these grounds may go beyond the faculty of Reason itself or the realm of logical thinking.

As pointed out earlier, confusion emerges as a result of interchanging the way these claims—"I know," "I think," and "I believe" are used. In the case of Parker or Moore, there are several instances where we observed that they take the "I think" the same way as the "I believe." For example, should we say I think it will rain today or I believe it will? The issue here is: whether it will rain today or not. In this case, we are to utter an objective claim since the issue is about a factual matter or a matter of fact. When we take one side of the issue, we declare an opinion that is either right or wrong. If it rains before midnight then our opinion is right; but, if it does not by midnight then our opinion is wrong. Some people, for example, use the "I know" instead of "I think" or, worse even, instead of "I believe." For example, when I claim that I know it will rain on May 1<sup>st</sup> only because it always rained on that day ever since I could remember, I can be considered rather careless. For our intents, the more appropriate way is to say "I think." Worse, if I am talking to a stranger and claim that I know only members of my church or cult will be saved on judgment day then I can be considered self-righteous or presumptuous. That is not a fact, neither is it an opinion. It is a belief uttered by an arrogant, insensitive, and irresponsible believer.

If we are taught and trained to distinguish these claims from each other and their respective realms then sympathy, understanding, and tolerance can be cultivated and developed. Discourse and treating each other, despite all differences, can probably—and hopefully—be more congenial. Firstly, we have to determine in which realm should our discourse be—is it in the realm of facts where truths are declared; factual matters where opinions, either true or false, are pronounced; or beliefs where no one can know the answer? However, we have to accept that the appropriate realm for a discussion is rather difficult to determine on many occasions. Sometimes, the realm of opinion can be very similar to that of belief. Worse, there are times when it is very difficult (or impossible even!) to determine the appropriate realm. For example, if were asked if aliens or extraterrestrials

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exist, how are we going to treat our response—as an opinion or a belief? If we hold the position that there are methods and procedures to find out—not now but in the far future perhaps—such as research, more distant space explorations, and gadgets to determine presence of other beings without necessarily perceiving them then we hold an opinion. On the other hand, if we hold the position that no such methods or procedures can ever be developed to determine their existence but give an answer anyway and justify it by claiming we do not hold the right to think we are the only rational beings then we probably hold a belief. Needless to say, there are many who treat the answer to the question as a fact and say there really is such type of beings. They give evidences such as the pyramids constructed with exactness and cite the absence of any tool or machine that can possibly lift and set the heavy building materials with impeccable precision; or, the existence of stone henge in several locations using the same reasons used for the pyramids; or, the existence of video clips showing unidentified flying objects even. In this case, there are three different answers that fit three different realms. How are we supposed to deal with this? The suggestion is to continue with the conversation in a congenial manner, process the information shared, and learn from each other.

### 3. CONCLUSION

After so many claims stated, countless opinions made, and beliefs changed while growing up, we realize that each one of us is really a gift to each other. There are certain claims—facts—communicated by others that we never knew beforehand. Some have made it appear that they were sharing facts with us before we find out later on and rather too late that all that were false. We have observed how others arrive at correct opinions so we try to follow their example; and, how others made wrong ones with serious consequences so we try our best not to do as they did. The case of beliefs is quite different though since beliefs are more private. It is very seldom that we meet others who hold different beliefs from those that we hold; and more than willing to share them with us. Surely, there is no way for us to confirm their beliefs and no way for them to confirm ours, just as there is no way for us to confirm our own beliefs and no way for them to confirm theirs. Being the case, is there any reason at all why conflicts, misunderstandings, prejudices, bombings, and wars should even occur? Considering one's beliefs as one's "stories" and the other's beliefs as the other's "stories" should be reason sufficient enough for each of us to listen to each other. The "degree of confidence" Moore and Parker speak about when teaching us about accepting (or rejecting) the truth (or falsity) based on the amount of evidence and information we hold can very well apply to the realm of beliefs as well; albeit, the absence of evidence and information. Usually, the "evidence" and "information" considered in the realm of belief is interpretative and, most of the time, persuasion (for examples, through ministry and missionary endeavours) plays an important role. But most important, it is worth hearing the echoes of one lesson learned from Bertrand Russell about people persecuting each other only because they believe they know the "Truth". If the echoes of this lesson are unheard then kindly feeling, congeniality, sympathy, and tolerance will never be realized.

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