

Moral Relativism

So suppose I believe that fox-hunting is cruel and should be banned. And then I come across someone (Genghis, let us call him) who holds that it is not cruel, and should be allowed. We dispute, and perhaps neither of us can convince the other. Suppose now a relativist (Rosie) comes in, and mocks our conversation. 'You absolutists', she says, 'always banging on as if there is just one truth. What you don't realize is that there is a plurality of truths. It's true for you that fox-hunting should be banned – but don't forget that it's true for Genghis that it should not'

How does Rosie's contribution help? Indeed, what does it mean? 'It's true for me that hunting should be banned' just means that I believe that hunting should be banned. And the opposite thing said about Genghis just means that he believes the opposite. But we already knew that: *that's* why we are in disagreement! Perhaps Rosie is trying to get us to see that there is no real disagreement. But how can that be so? I want people to aim at one outcome, that hunting be banned, and Genghis wants another. At most one of us can succeed, and I want it to be me. Rosie cannot stop us from seeing each other as opponents.

Perhaps Rosie is trying to get us to respect and tolerate each other's point of view. But why should I respect and tolerate another point of view *simply* on the grounds that someone else holds it? I already have my suspicions of Genghis: in my book he is already looking cruel and insensitive, so why should his point of view be 'tolerated'? And in any case, I should be suspicious of any encouragement to toleration here. The whole point of my position is that hunting should not be tolerated – it should be banned. Tolerating Genghis's point of view is too near to tolerating Genghis's hunting, which I am not going to do.

Suppose Rosie gets ruffled by what I have just written: 'Look', she says, 'you must learn that Genghis is a human being like you; respect and toleration of his views and his activities are essential. If you did not fetishize absolute truth you would see that'. I on the other hand say that 'toleration of Genghis is just soggy; it is time to take a stand'. If Rosie thumps the table and says that tolerating Genghis is *really* good, then isn't she sounding just like the fetishists she mocked? She has taken the fact that there are no absolute values to justify elevating toleration into an absolute value.

Rosie has to avoid that contradiction... So perhaps she needs to say that she has her truth (tolerating Genghis is good) and I have mine (tolerating Genghis is bad) and that's the end of it. But that amounts to bowing out of the conversation, leaving Genghis and me to go on arguing exactly as before. In practice, Rosie's intervention hasn't helped at all. She hasn't made foxes, or those who hunt them, look one jot more or less likeable. Her intervention seems just to have been a distraction.