

Essay 1 Revision Comments Response

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To the extent that I push a strawman, it may be because I'm trying to dance around an issue without confronting it directly; I think the statues are not just statues! I don't know whether to read James as saying that

1. There are actual deities associated with the statues and that those deities have some power in the physical world
2. The statues are potent spiritual artifacts designed to tap into a deep human spiritual need. No magic here, but you need to believe that humans are irrational since they have these deep wells of spiritual needs. You also need to conclude that modern societies don't satisfy the needs of human beings.

Either way, there is real power associated with those statues. I was trying to argue that the Americans dimly recognize that at some level and that's why they're drawn to the statues. At the same time, as members of a "scientific" rational society, they cannot admit either of the two hypotheses listed above. The notion that gods and goddesses are real would be ludicrous; almost as crazy is the idea that human beings have some powerful deep seated need for spirituality/structured ritual.

Given that there is some kind of power associated with the statues, there are a couple of things you can do:

1. Keep them buried (what Marco initially advocates) because you are unable to fully integrate that spiritual power into your life
2. Dig them up, gawk at them, but don't seriously try to integrate that spiritual power into your life (what the Americans do). This is kind of life Faust, where people meddle with a deeper power without trying to understand
3. Understand consciously that there is great power present, but instead of respecting that power (by either keeping it buried in the ground or by fully integrating it into your life), you use your knowledge of it to make a fast buck. This is the route of the grave robber, the little archaeologist.
4. Dig them up and fully integrate them into your life (what Marco ends up doing).

As an analogy, consider Native American religions. a bunch of people make money today by selling Native American "spirituality" (books, trips, paraphernalia, etc). People buy into this because of some sense that it will make a difference in their lives, that there is some real power in these practices. But for the most part, they only absorb the most shallow level of practices without any real commitment. They are attracted by the benefits they see in the lives of people who have dedicated their lives to these spiritual practices, but they have no intention of working to that extent.

Or perhaps consider the use of martial arts or even the game of Go. Lots of westerners learn these, but almost always outside the ethical, philosophical, and spiritual framework in which they were intended to be learned. As a westerner, you can learn the skill of karate, but you (probably) won't learn the way of life in which karate is only one integral component. Yeah, you can beat the snot out of people (for a while, until you forget), but you probably won't achieve the lifelong sense of balance that a true adherent would.

The final analogy I'll make is the Disney story of the sorcerer's apprentice. The sorcerer takes a trip, and the apprentice, who has only a little knowledge (a very dangerous thing) unleashes powers that he doesn't understand and cannot control, with disastrous consequences.

The fact that Marco ignores his flesh and blood wife is secondary to me: that's just James saying that if you play with fire, without respecting it fully, you are going to get burned. The gas stove in my house is quite powerful; but if I don't respect that power, I can easily blow up my house and die.

The bit at the end about the statue being a roman, not a greek seemed to me to just be Marco trying to disassociate the statue from his own spiritual experience. If the statue is an alien artifact, it can't have any power over him, and he needs to believe that at some level to keep going. That does sound kind of weak though...

As an engineer, this whole idea about people not respecting "magic" and getting burned as a result appeals to me, so maybe I'm seeing a lot more than James actually wrote. Note that "magic" in this sense includes how my computer works, how electricity gets to my house and how aspirin makes headaches go away.