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Dear Colleague:

The Greeks want their marbles (the Elgin Marbles) back. The American Indians want their ancestral bones back. The Smithsonian Institution has already returned some of the bones, and the British may eventually return the marbles. This is all to the good. The British Museum and the Smithsonian got their respective treasures by means we don't regard as fair, and so they should be returned to their rightful owners. And yet, for reasons I will explain, I find it hard to stand up and cheer.

"This is mine and I want it back" is not in itself an inspiring cry. The Greeks want to repossess what they consider to be their heritage. The Marbles are not just marbles but works of supreme art with a value that is spiritual as well as aesthetic. But what if the Greeks were to go on and insist that other spiritual heritages of theirs be returned to them--for example, freedom and democracy? Should Americans repatriate their democratic institutions, or, at least, pay a hefty royalty to the Greeks for unauthorized adaptation and use? American Indians want their bones back because they are sacred objects--infinitely precious. OK! But what about the other Indian spiritual values appropriated by young white Americans without permission, such as reverence for nature? I don't see American Indians demanding those heritages back, yet surely a religious worldview is as precious as bones?

Repatriation enriches the motherland. Yes, in a literal and material sense. But I doubt it has much spiritual payoff. Indeed, wanting things back is a sign of inadequacy or lack. If the Greeks are as creative now as they were in the time of Pericles, they probably won't mind leaving their marbles in Britain, where millions will view and admire them. By the way, while the Greeks crate back their marbles, their Great Books, etc., they should keep a nervous eye on the Egyptians next door, who in turn might want their spiritual and material possessions back--those that somehow found their way to Greek soil so long ago.

Best wishes,

*E. F.*