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Raskolnikov, Hegel, and Nietzsche

While he was in college, Raskolnikov studied the German philosopher, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel. As a result, Hegel influenced his thinking.

It is in Hegel rather that we discover a direct and obvious source of Raskolnikov's notion of inferior and superior men, the superior ones having the right to commit breaches of morality while inferiors are obliged to mind their business, which is to stay put in the common rut. Now what Dostoevsky has done in devising Raskolnikov's justification is to convert into a theory of human nature what is in Hegel not a psychological theory at all but a theory of men as subjects and objects of history.⁵

In other words, Hegel suggests that men like Caesar and Napoleon can break the laws since "the history of the world moves on a higher level than that of morality."⁶ The advancement of society is more important than the breaking of a law. These individuals may "treat other great and even sacred interests inconsiderately—a conduct which subjects them to moral reprehension. But so mighty a figure may trample down many an innocent flower, crush to pieces many things in his path."⁷

Accordingly, Raskolnikov sees the pawnbroker as a worthless object who stands in the way of his financial security and the security of many other people in St. Petersburg. Upon overhearing the conversation of the students at the bar, Raskolnikov is even more convinced that the pawnbroker's death would benefit mankind. Instead of her money being used for continual masses to be said in her memory, Raskolnikov could use the money to further his education, free Dounia of the despised marriage to Luzhin, and help the other poor people in St. Petersburg. Thus, he sees a parallel between him killing the pawnbroker and Napoleon or Caesar eliminating a harmful obstacle to progress.

While classifying people as superior or inferior is, in itself, controversial, it is even more ironic to see the pawnbroker as a significant figure whose death would forge society ahead. Furthermore, Raskolnikov is hardly a Napoleon. Even to attempt to put himself into this category is egotistical and delusive. Even Raskolnikov laughs at his own attempt at Napoleonic grandeur. "One sudden irrelevant idea almost made him laugh. Napoleon, the pyramids, Waterloo, and a wretched skinny old woman, a pawnbroker with a red trunk under her bed—it's a nice hash for Porfiry to digest! How can they digest it! It's too inartistic. 'A Napoleon crept under an old woman's bed!' Ugh, how loathsome!"

The real question for mankind has to be, "Is anyone above the law?"

Friedrich Nietzsche also put men into categories. He clearly saw men as leaders and followers. To the leaders, power was the ultimate goal. The "mediocrity" of the majority is the necessary condition for the existence of "exceptions"; together with the "herd animal," there develops also the "leader animal."⁸

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Nietzsche admired strength and abhorred weakness. The extent of Nietzsche's intensity of belief is apparent in the following passage:

What is significant of Nietzsche is his love of fighting for its own sake, in contrast to the modern humanitarian view. To Nietzsche the greatness of a movement is to be measured by the sacrifices it demands. The hygiene which keeps alive millions of weak and useless beings who ought rather to die, is to him no true progress. A dead level of mediocre happiness assured to the largest possible majority of the miserable creatures we nowadays call men, would be to him no true progress. But to him, as to Renan, the rearing of a human species higher and stronger than that which surrounds us (the "Superman"), even if this could only be achieved by the sacrifice of masses of such men as we know, would be a great, a real progress.⁹

Consequently, the Nietzsche Superman exists for the sake of power over others—not for the benefit of mankind. Since Nietzsche believed that God was dead, he believed that there was no superior power to one's own. The Nietzsche Superman must assert his power over others and remain detached from humanity. He does not have to follow the rules and will feel no remorse in breaking them. Hitler read Nietzsche.

