Dostoevskii’s Notes from Underground
and Hegel’s “Master and Slave”

In any case, one cannot find in Dostoevskii any appreciable traces of an acquaintance with Hegel.

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It is in Hegel . . . that we discover a direct and obvious source of Raskolnikov’s notion of inferior and superior men. . . .

P. Rahv

The quest to identify the sources of Dostoevskii’s ideas is reflected in the great wealth of secondary literature written since the latter part of the nineteenth century. In these discussions critics frequently raise the question of a possible Hegelian influence upon Dostoevskii; and one can easily find adherents both for and against such influence. Most recently this question has been treated in works by M. V. Jones and Edward Engelberg. Professor Jones’ article is a sober, well-balanced, critical work which, in addition to surveying thoroughly previous considerations of the problem of influence, attempts to examine “thematic echoes of Hegelian ideas in Dostoyevsky’s writing,” and to draw some “tentative conclusions” concerning Hegel’s influence on Dostoevskii (p. 505). In discussing the “echoes” of Hegel in Dostoevskii, Professor Jones makes the point that he is using the term “echo” with “the implication only that there is a coincidence of ideas the source of which is open to investigation: i.e., that the echo is not a historical one so much as an echo in the mind of the cultured reader” (p. 511). It appears that this is a sound approach, for, the question of influence aside, thinking of Dostoevskii in connection with Hegel reveals new possibilities for understanding the complex ideas contained in the Russian author’s novels. None

2. “Dostoevsky in Crime and Punishment,” in The Myth and the Powerhouse (New York, 1966), p. 137. Although Rahv makes a convincing case for his assertion that Raskol’nikov is a reflection of the Hegelian concept of the historic hero, that is, the “world-historical individual,” the basis for his argument rests on a misreading of Dostoevskii’s famous letter to his brother Mikhail. Rahv writes that Dostoevskii requested that his brother send him Hegel’s Philosophy of History; and it is in the Philosophy of History that Hegel develops his idea of “welt-historische” individuals and his theory of two types of men, the concepts so clearly echoed by Raskol’nikov. The problem, however, is that Dostoevskii did not ask for The Philosophy of History but for The History of Philosophy.
the less, after remarking on certain indisputable parallels between many of Dosto-
evskii's major characters and the ideas elaborated by Hegel, Jones states that:

In the final analysis, it is not very profitable to pursue such parallels fur-
ther, for the differences which suggest themselves are more obvious than
the similarities. None of Dostoyevsky's characters conform exactly to any
of Hegel's Gestalten. And unless Dostoyevsky did actually copy Hegel,
there is no reason to suppose that they should. In fact, Dostoyevsky may
be said to have introduced new "types" into world literature, which may
indeed share some of the general psychological problems of Hegel's types,
but are in the event quite distinct manifestations of human consciousness.
(pp. 513-514.)

The present article, however, will attempt to demonstrate that the quest for such p-
allels is, to the contrary, quite profitable. Such parallels are extensive enough for one
to conclude that the "manifestations of human consciousness" in Dostoevskii's charac-
ters are so similar to the development of human consciousness as elaborated by Hegel
that—by considering various aspects of Dostoevskii's work in the light of certain
Hegelian propositions—one may posit a consistent theory about one of Dostoevskii's
most abiding preoccupations: the role of consciousness in spiritual development.

Support for this position can be found in Professor Engleberg's approach to the
problem of Hegel and Dostoevskii. Engleberg believes that "the Underground Man
seems to be almost an uncanny personification of some of the harshest critiques in The
Phenomenology" (p. 88). Whereas Engleberg, however, pursues the parallels between
the Underground Man and Hegel's "unhappy consciousness" and his critique of "the
beautiful soul," the present article is concerned with Hegel's elaboration of the
"master-slave" relationship and its reflection in the Underground Man's mentality.

II

Hegel's Phenomenology of the Mind may, in its entirety, be understood as de-
scribing the dialectical evolution of consciousness to absolute Spirit, that is, to absolute
freedom. Because the relationship between the development of consciousness and free-
dom is central to Dostoevskii as well, it can serve as a common ground upon which he
may be approached from a Hegelian point of view. It is not only the fact that the
fundamental problem in the works of Dostoevskii and in The Phenomenology is the
same which would seem to indicate the fruitfulness of such an approach; there is a
further essential link contained in the thought processes of both men—the dialectic. In
spite of the fact that we are so aware of the importance of dialectical thought for
Dostoevskii, few serious attempts have been made to relate it to Hegel's dialectic. It

4. What seemed to be the final version of this article was completed before I discovered
Professor Engleberg's work. I was both pleased at the support his work afforded mine and dis-
mayed at the fact that he seemed to draw a different conclusion from his parallel reading than I
did. Upon reflection, however, it became obvious that our interpretations did not conflict, rather
they complemented one another and make the case for parallel readings of the Notes and sections
of The Phenomenology even stronger. This is explained in footnote 13, below.