“Viper will eat viper”: Dostoevsky, Darwin, and the Possibility of Brotherhood

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As Darwinian thought took root across Europe and Russia in the 1860s after the publication of *On the Origin of Species* (1859), intellectuals wrestled with the troubling implications the “struggle for existence” held for human harmony and love. How could people be expected to “love their neighbors” if that love ran counter to science? Was that love even commendable if it counteracted the perfection of the human race through the process of natural selection? And if Darwinian struggle was supposed to be most intense among those who were closest and had the most shared resources to compete for, what hope did this hold for the family?

Darwin’s Russian contemporaries were particularly averse the idea that members of the same species were in competition. As Daniel Todes, James Rogers, and Alexander Vucinich have argued, Russian thinkers attempted to reject the Malthusian side of Darwin’s theory.¹ Situated in the harsh, vast expanses of Russia, rather than on the crowded, verdant British Isles, they

1 Daniel Todes, *Darwin without Malthus: The Struggle for Existence in Russian Evolutionary Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989); James Allen Rogers, “The Russian Populists’ Response to Darwin,” *Slavic Review* 22, no. 3 (1963): 456–68; Alexander Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

argued that of the three struggles Darwin included under the umbrella of “struggle for existence”—(1) with the environment, (2) with other species, and (3) within a species—climate and other species were the true adversaries.² For example, in “Neskol’ko slov o sovremennoi teorii proiskhozhdeniia vidov,” which Ilya Mechnikov (1845–1916) submitted to Dostoevsky’s journal, *Vremia* in 1863, Mechnikov argued that Darwin’s idea that struggle is most intense between closely related organisms violated common sense: “As everyone knows shared dangers and obstacles do not stimulate struggle between the individuals subject to them, but, on the contrary, impel them to unite together in one society and to resist these obstacles with joint, more reliable forces.”³

Similarly, the botanist Andrei Beketov (1825–1902)—a friend and former roommate of Dostoevsky’s—argued in an 1873 article that if one were to follow the Malthusian logic in Darwin’s theory,

members of a family [would] have incomparably more antagonism between them than members of the community [*obshchina*], village, city, or state . . . It [would] unalterably follow that members of the family consuming part of what they are given, a fixed amount of food and other physical necessities, [would] take away the same part of this necessary material from all the rest. Parents [would] struggle with their children, brothers and sisters [would] struggle among themselves, etc.⁴

Beketov used the image of a starving father and his beloved son in a bloody struggle for a sip of water as proof of the absurdity of this logic. The very idea that father and son would destroy each other for survival seemed so impossible to him that he believed this image alone was enough to prove Darwin’s theory flawed.⁵

2 Todes, *Darwin without Malthus*, 3, 8–9, 21, 33.

3 “Neskol’ko slov o sovremennoi teorii proiskhozhdeniia vidov” (1863), quoted in Todes, *Darwin without Malthus*, 88.

4 A. N. Beketov, “O bor’be za sushchestvovanie v organicheskoi mire,” *Vestnik Evropy* 10 (1873): 588.

5 Instead, he argued the “struggle” was really an interaction of forces that helped bring about balance, not destruction. Beketov went on to argue that the principle of Christian love derived from this “struggle,” evolving over thousands of years (Beketov, “O bor’be za sushchestvovanie,” 592–93). Dostoevsky would not be convinced by this kind of logic. He saw nothing innate in the love of one’s neighbors, but instead a very different kind of struggle that relied on faith.

Dostoevsky's final novel clearly challenges this assurance. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, brothers and father are locked in a deadly struggle that Dostoevsky linked to the threats of "Darwinism" by labeling the conflict with the Darwinian metaphor "viper will eat viper" (*odin gad s'est druguiu gadinu*).⁶ In his novels, Dostoevsky tested "Darwinian" ideas in his portrayals of family struggle.⁷ In *Crime and Punishment* (1866), Dostoevsky, like Beketov, relied on the family to *disprove* the sinister implications of Social Darwinism. However, by the time of *Brothers Karamazov*, his conception of family had become fully "accidental," and blood ties alone were not enough to stave off the "struggle for existence" or of "sexual selection" within the family. I believe that in *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky used the threat of Darwinian struggle entering the family to prove the need for "active kinship," like his idea of "active love." Familial duty can hold out against instinctive passions of rivalry and hatred only when the characters recognize family as a social construct that must be *created* through their own actions. For Dostoevsky, family bonds must be actively bestowed, not actively earned or passively accepted as birthright.

In *Crime and Punishment*, the ties of family are, if anything, *too* strong and family members *too* ready to make sacrifices for each other.⁸ Dunya and Rodya are one of Dostoevsky's only sibling pairs to have shared a warm childhood

6 For the expression "viper will eat viper," Dostoevsky chose the word *gad*, as opposed to *zmei*, limiting the biblical significance. While the serpent that tempts Eve is a *zmei*, *gad* appears in the synodal translation of the Bible as a more neutral term, referring to reptiles as a category (alongside birds and beasts of the land [*zveri zemnye*]).

7 Dostoevsky never engaged with the details of Darwin's writings, and it is not entirely clear how much of Darwin's work he read himself and how much he simply read about in the Russian press. For the purposes of this chapter, I am using "Darwinism" to denote the popular conception of Darwin's theory held by Dostoevsky and other contemporary Russians, rather than the theories as Darwin himself wrote and understood them.

8 The devotion of Raskolnikov's mother and sister weighs on him like a burden. This is expressed more explicitly in the drafts: "His mother's caresses are a burden" (PSS, 7:136). All references to Dostoevsky are to *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh* [PSS], ed. V. G. Bazanov et al. (Leningrad: Nauka, 1972–90); hereafter cited as PSS by volume and page. For *Crime and Punishment* and *Brothers Karamazov*, I have relied on the English translations of Pevear and Volokhonsky: *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 2004); *Crime and Punishment*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (London: Vintage, 2007). The English page number follows the Russian. All other translations are my own. For a psychoanalytic interpretation of the burdens placed by family love, see W. D. Snodgrass, "Crime for Punishment," *Hudson Review* 13, no. 2 (1960): 217–18.

together in a loving home, and concern for each other is one of their primary motivators. Early in the novel, just after receiving his mother's painful letter about Dunya's impending marriage, Raskolnikov attempts to save a drunken girl on the street from a preying lecher, an action clearly prompted by concerns for saving his own sister. After giving money to a kindly policeman for a cab to take the girl home, Raskolnikov has a sudden change of heart, turns back, and tells the policeman to give the girl to the lecher. He thinks, "Let them gobble each other alive—what is it to me?" (PSS, 6:24; 50).⁹ Diane Thompson has rightly noted the Darwinian note in this phrase.¹⁰ Raskolnikov imagines the girl's inevitable descent and early death and muses, "Every year they say, a certain percentage has to go ... somewhere ... to the devil, it must be, so as to freshen up the rest and not interfere with them. A percentage! Nice little words they have, really, so reassuring, so scientific."

But this "scientific," Social Darwinian outlook comes up against a major stumbling block in Raskolnikov's thought—his sister: "And what if Dunechka somehow gets into the percentage!" (PSS, 6:43; 50). Like Beketov in his later article, Raskolnikov finds the falseness of this scientific thought self-evident when applied to the family.¹¹ Darwin may be acceptable for "them," thinking in the abstract about "percentages," but not for his real and beloved sister. In this, Raskolnikov is aligned with the Russian populists of the 1860s, who rejected the idea of the struggle for existence taking place among people and instead emphasized the "necessity of cooperation among individuals of the same species."¹² Resources are shared among the Raskolnikovs selflessly. In this unhappy, but nonaccidental, family there is an innate, unquestioned feeling of connection. Raskolnikov's moments of loathing for his mother and sister stem precisely from the depth of his love for them, which exacerbates his horrible guilt.

In *Crime and Punishment*, Dostoevsky leaves Darwinism at the doorstep, never bringing its threatening implications into the home. But fourteen years

9 Pevear and Volokhonsky translate "*pust' ikh pereglotaiut drug druga*" as "let them all gobble each other," but I removed the word "all" for accuracy.

10 Diane Thompson, "Dostoevskii and Science," in *The Cambridge Companion to Dostoevskii*, ed. W. J. Leatherbarrow (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 202.

11 James P. Scanlan argues that Dostoevsky's fictional creations serve as humanistic equivalents of theoretical models in the sciences; see Scanlan, *Dostoevsky the Thinker* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), 4. By this logic, the family is a testing ground for scientific theories in *Crime and Punishment*.

12 Rogers, "Russian Populists' Response to Darwin," 460.

later, in *Brothers Karamazov* (1880), he would do just that. In his final novel, the rivalry for resources—money and women—takes place within the family. Father and son are ready to kill each other for the attentions of Grushenka, brothers compete for the heart of the proud Katerina Ivanovna, and an inheritance lies waiting to be divided among the legitimate offspring of a greedy, hoarding father who would prefer not to share. After Ivan defends his father from a physical attack by their brother Dmitri, he tells Alyosha, "Viper will eat viper and it would serve them both right!" (PSS, 14:129; 141). This Darwinian language (which echoes Raskolnikov's "let them gobble each other alive") becomes a symbol of family rivalry.¹³ Ivan assures Alyosha in this moment that he would never allow Dmitri to kill their father, but later in the courtyard he returns to his words about "two vipers eating each other up," making it clear to Alyosha that he holds this wish, though he will not act upon it (PSS, 14:131; 143).

Two kinds of Darwinian struggle become encoded in Ivan's phrase about the vipers, which appears five times over the course of the novel. The first is the "struggle for existence" of natural selection, made famous—and famously unpopular in Russia—in *On the Origin of Species*. The second is the struggle of sexual selection that Darwin elaborated in 1871 in *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex*.¹⁴ Within a year of its English publication, there were already three Russian translations, and the book was quickly taken up by the press in Russia.¹⁵ Therefore, although Dostoevsky never made a direct reference to *Descent of Man*, he must have been familiar with the key ideas, thereby expanding his conception of "Darwinism" from the time of *Crime and Punishment* to the time of writing *Brothers Karamazov*.

Natural selection is based on survival, but sexual selection is based on reproduction—controlled by both female choice and male combat.¹⁶ The

13 Diane Thompson also links this phrase with Darwin ("Dostoevskii and Science," 202). Darwin never actually made such a statement, but the phrase clearly draws on common conceptions of Darwin's ideas.

14 Darwin described sexual selection briefly in *Origin of Species* and then explained this theory in much greater depth in *Descent of Man*, where he drew out the parallel between animals and humans.

15 For the publication history, see Vucinich, *Darwin in Russian Thought*, 50–51.

16 Darwin believed sexual selection could explain aesthetic phenomena—bright plumage, mating rituals, extravagant nests—not explicable through natural selection alone. The idea of female "choice" was controversial among Darwin's contemporaries because it suggested

rivalry between Dmitri and Fyodor Karamazov embodies Darwin's theory of sexual selection: "Two males fighting for the possession of the female," with Fyodor's envelope of money tied with a ribbon an equivalent to "male birds displaying their gorgeous plumage, and performing strange antics before an assembled body of females."¹⁷ Each man is trying to lure his mate away from the other males.

Alyosha realizes that Ivan's view of Dmitri as a "viper" is related to the struggle of sexual selection between the brothers and to Dmitri's struggle with their father. Entering Katerina Ivanovna's drawing room the day after Dmitri's attack, Alyosha thinks of the rivalry between his brothers and remembers Ivan's phrase: "'Viper will eat viper,' his brother Ivan had said yesterday, speaking with irritation about their father and Dmitri. So in his eyes their brother Dmitri was a viper, and perhaps had long been a viper? Perhaps since Ivan had first met Katerina Ivanovna?" (PSS, 14:170; 187). Alyosha realizes that Dmitri became a "viper" to Ivan when he became a rival for the female (Katerina) and part of this second Darwinian struggle. Recognizing these "new pretexts for hatred and enmity in their family," Alyosha does not know what to do with his "active love." *This* is the struggle that interested Dostoevsky: how "Darwinian" antagonism could be overcome.

Linking the struggles within the Karamazov family to Darwinism served an ideological function for Dostoevsky, raising the stakes of the conflicts from individual rivalries to a question about the roots of human actions. "Viper will eat viper" relegates human behavior to instinct, taking away free will and abnegating moral responsibility. The idea that science could explain and "justify" human actions was troubling to many thinkers in the nineteenth century, not just to Dostoevsky.¹⁸ One of the most controversial and upsetting features of Darwin's theory for his contemporaries was the idea that man was

animals had greater rational powers than people were ready to concede. For a concise overview of the reception of Darwin's theory of sexual selection in the nineteenth century, see Erika Lorraine Milam, *Looking for a Few Good Males: Female Choice in Evolutionary Biology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 1–28.

17 Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (New York and London: D. Appleton and Company, 1922), 214.

18 For example, in a series of articles in the late 1880s and 1890s, Tolstoy argued that people were using science to justify the existing social order and the exploitation of the lower class; see Lev Tolstoy, "O naznachanii nauki i iskusstva" (1887), "Nauka i iskusstvo" (1890–91), and "O nauke i iskusstve" (1891–93).

just another animal, descended from the same ancestor as the apes, an idea that threatened the sense of man as a moral and rational actor governed by conscience and will. While Darwin's theory emphasized the animal side of man's nature, Dostoevsky's vision of man included the earthly but gave priority to man's spiritual side.¹⁹

Dostoevsky explained this vision in an 1876 letter to Vasily Alekseev. After analyzing the first temptation of Christ (turning stones into bread), Dostoevsky turned to Darwin: "By the way, recall the current theories of Darwin and others about the descent of man from monkeys. Not going into any theories, Christ declares directly that besides the animal world, man has the spiritual" (PSS, 29[2]:85). Dostoevsky went on to explain that it did not matter where man came from (the Bible did not explain how he was molded from clay): "But God blew life into him (but it is bad that through sins, man can return again to beast [*skota*])." From this comment it is evident that what mattered to Dostoevsky was not man's descent (looking back) but the presence of a spiritual life that divided him from animals (how he moves forward). For Dostoevsky, only man had heard Christ's teachings and could chose to act against the animal side of his nature and to heed this moral calling. As James Scanlan has argued, "For Dostoevsky there is no altruism in man's purely material makeup; love of others is a spiritual ability that enters human nature only through its participation in the divine."²⁰

Darwin actually held a similar belief, though this nuance to his views did not receive great attention in Russia. And the Russians may be forgiven for this lapse, because Darwin literally relegated it to a footnote. According to Darwin's theory, the social instincts were bred into man through the process of natural selection, just as they were in all other social animals. As he explained in *Descent of Man*,

As man is a social animal, it is almost certain that he would inherit a tendency to be faithful to his comrades, and obedient to the leader of his tribe; for these qualities are common to most social animals. He would consequently possess some capacity for self-command. He would from an inherited tendency be willing to defend, in concert with others, his fellow-men; and

¹⁹ James Scanlan has illustrated this beautifully in the first chapter, "Matter and Spirit," of *Dostoevsky the Thinker*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

would be ready to aid them in any way, which did not too greatly interfere with his own welfare or his own strong desires.²¹

And when this aid *did* interfere with his strong desires, Darwin argued that some instinctive desires were stronger than others and that the social instincts could become stronger than any other instinct.²² Darwin defined a moral being as “one who is capable of comparing his past and future actions or motives, and of approving or disapproving of them,” and he acknowledged that man alone can be “ranked as a moral being.”²³ In his discussion, he focused mainly on instances when people risk their lives for strangers, but he added an intriguing note: “The wish for another man’s property is perhaps as persistent a desire as any that can be named; but even in this case the satisfaction of actual possession is generally a weaker feeling than the desire: many a thief, if not a habitual one, after success has wondered why he stole some article.”²⁴ Raskolnikov—of course a much more complicated case—would be forced to agree.

Tucked into this section about the social instincts, Darwin included the following footnote that Dostoevsky would have whole-heartedly endorsed:

Enmity or hatred seems also to be a highly persistent feeling, perhaps more so than any other than can be named ... Dogs are very apt to hate both strange men and strange dogs, especially if they live near at hand, but do not belong to the same family, tribe, or clan; this feeling would thus seem to be innate, and is certainly a most persistent one. It seems to be the complement and converse of the true social instinct. From what we hear of savages, it would appear that something of the same kind holds good with them. If this be so, it would be a small step in any one to transfer such feelings to any member of the same tribe if he had done him an injury and had become his

21 Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 110. Dostoevsky made similar points about people’s instincts to help others in his response to part 8 of *Anna Karenina* in his *Diary of a Writer* (PSS, 25:218–23). He believed taking action is natural when an unknown innocent is in danger. But this is a question of saving a life, not *loving* the person. Dostoevsky did not think we can love without the soul getting involved.

22 Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 112.

23 *Ibid.*, 113.

24 *Ibid.*, 114. For the influence of Kant and Hume on Darwin’s moral thought, see Michael Ruse, *Charles Darwin* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 215–19.

enemy. Nor is it probable that the primitive conscience would reproach a man for injuring his enemy; rather it would reproach him, if he had not revenged himself. To do good in return for evil, to love your enemy, is a height of morality to which it may be doubted whether the social instincts would, by themselves, have ever led us. It is necessary that these instincts, together with sympathy, should have been highly cultivated and extended by the aid of reason, instruction, and the love or fear of God, before any such golden rule would ever be thought of and obeyed.²⁵

So for Darwin, like Dostoevsky, enmity and hatred were persistent feelings that must be overcome, and it would take more than the "social instincts" to achieve this. Darwin's final point—the need for "the love or fear of God" to arrive at "love thy enemy"—was almost exactly the argument Dostoevsky made (though for Darwin one could question whether God Himself need exist, or only the "love or fear" in humans who believe in Him). However, this spiritual side of Darwin was absent from the way Dostoevsky invoked him.

In *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky placed the Darwinian, animal view of human behavior in opposition to the Christian idea of man as a moral being with a duty to honor his family. In the tavern meeting before Ivan's "rebellion," Alyosha asks Ivan if he is really about to leave town and then asks: "What about Dmitri and father? How will it end between them?" (PSS, 14:211; 231). This question refers back to their first "viper" conversation, but here Ivan answers not with Darwin, but with an inverted biblical reference: "Am I my brother Dmitri's keeper or something? ... Cain's answer to God about his murdered brother, eh? Maybe that's what you're thinking at the moment? But, devil take it, I can't really stay on here as their keeper!" (PSS, 14:211; 231–32). In the biblical formulation, defending Fyodor Pavlovich would be a moral duty, while in the Darwinian formulation (as construed by Ivan), it means interfering in the natural order of things. Dostoevsky pits these two opposing stances on familial duty and love against each other in Ivan's psyche, making the tension between the two the moral heart of the novel.

Ivan's attitude toward his family's struggle is directly related to his feelings about God. Early in the novel, Zosima tells Ivan that the question of his faith has not yet been decided and that "even if it cannot be resolved in a

25 Darwin, *Descent of Man*, 114n27.

positive way, it will never be resolved in the negative way either" (PSS, 14:65; 70). Even though Ivan may *wish* for his father's death, he will never *act* against God in that way. When Ivan decides to "return his ticket" to God's world (PSS, 15:223; 245), he is not rejecting God (he is explicit about this). Instead he rejects "Euclidean gibberish," as he puts it: the scientific view of the world as necessarily what it is. Science—the side Darwin would be on (though Ivan does not mention Darwin here)—reinforces and justifies the existing order. When Ivan focuses on the suffering of innocent children, he cannot accept this order. When he focuses on his vile father and shameful brother and "viper eating viper," he seems ready to accept the existing order . . . almost.

As Ivan wrestles with his moral culpability after the murder, he returns again and again to the vipers. Two weeks after his first postmurder visit to Smerdyakov, he encounters Alyosha in the street and suddenly brings up their conversation when he had "reserved the right to wish" for his father's death. "But didn't you also think then that I was precisely wishing for 'viper to eat viper'—that is, precisely for Dmitri to kill father, and the sooner the better . . . that I myself would not even mind helping him along?" he asks Alyosha (PSS, 15:49; 611). Alyosha is pained to admit this is true, and Ivan, even more troubled, returns to Smerdyakov for a second visit. He again comes away convinced of Dmitri's guilt, and returns to viewing Dmitri as a viper, even instilling this idea in Katerina Ivanovna. On the night before the trial, after a series of talks with Ivan, Katerina Ivanovna tells Alyosha and Ivan: "Just an hour ago I was thinking how afraid I am to touch that monster . . . like a viper . . . but no, he's still a human being for me!" (PSS, 15:37; 599). The opposition she draws between viper and human is linked to the opposition between man following animal instincts (Darwin) versus man as a moral, spiritual being (Christianity). She then turns to Ivan and tells him she has been to see Smerdyakov, adding: "It was you [*ty*], you who convinced me that he is a parricide" (PSS, 15:37; 599).²⁶ Clearly Katerina Ivanovna's formulation has been shaped by Ivan's inner struggle. Ivan's use of Darwinian ideas

26 Alyosha is startled that she is using *ty*. Drawing attention to this intimacy again brings back the struggle between the two men for Katerina's affections.

causes her to question the very humanity of a man she had considered to be her fiancé.

Ivan, in turn, realizes he has come to "hate" Dmitri "not because of Katya's 'reversions' to him, but precisely *because he had killed their father!*" (PSS, 15:56; 619).²⁷ It is not Darwinian rivalry of sexual selection, then, but revulsion at the idea of parricide that divides Ivan from Dmitri. In other words, Ivan's *respect* for the family is what threatens his brotherly love. And indeed, he ultimately discovers Dmitri *is* worthy of this love because he did *not* kill their father. This truth comes to Ivan in the third and final meeting with Smerdyakov. After Smerdyakov echoes Alyosha's prophetic words, "*it was not you that killed him,*" Ivan furiously seizes Smerdyakov by the shoulders and commands: "Tell all, viper! Tell all!" (PSS, 15:59; 623). This is the first time the word "viper" (*gad*) appears in the novel not in reference to Dmitri. Ivan is beginning to understand where the true guilt lies.

This link between Smerdyakov and the viper is reinforced moments later when Smerdyakov asks Ivan to open the bundle he has pulled out of his stocking, and Ivan recoils "as if he had touched some loathsome, horrible viper" (PSS, 15:60; 624). With Smerdyakov, not Dmitri, as viper, struggle has not fully penetrated the family, as Smerdyakov is not an acknowledged relation. However, Ivan recoils from the evidence because he sees himself as a viper, too, by association. He wished for his father's death and left town, renouncing his family duty.

Ivan does not want to allow this failing twice. On the stand in the trial the next day, succumbing to brain fever, he hands over Smerdyakov's money and announces: "It was he who killed father, not my brother. He killed him, and killed him on my instructions . . . Who doesn't wish for his father's death?" This is supposed to be a noble act of self-sacrifice to save his brother. Increasingly, incoherently lost in his inner dialogue, Ivan exclaims: "Everyone wants his

27 As I have discussed elsewhere, the narrator skews our impression of Ivan and Dmitri's relationship, never showing any of the conversations between them and emphasizing Ivan's repugnance for his brother; see Anna A. Berman, "Siblings in *The Brothers Karamazov*," *The Russian Review* 68 (2009): 275. Consequently, I do not take the "hatred" the narrator refers to as a given.

father dead. Viper devours viper.” He now uses this Darwinian logic as an abnegation of moral or familial duty (PSS, 15:117; 686).

Ivan believes he is guilty because he wished for his father’s death, but this is not where his guilt lies.²⁸ True, he maintained the “right to wish,” but he, like Dmitri, did not act on this wish. Dostoevsky does not go so far as to allow acknowledged kin to shed each other’s blood in Darwinian struggle. Instead, Ivan and the other legitimate Karamazov brothers are guilty of rejecting Smerdyakov’s brotherhood. They never allowed him into the socially constructed bonds of family that could have bound him to moral action, despite the fact that Fyodor Pavlovich’s paternity is acknowledged during the trial. Ivan’s claim—“it was he who killed father, not my brother”—denies the fact that Smerdyakov is as much a brother to him as Dmitri (both share a father but are of different mothers).²⁹ And this claim is echoed by Alyosha: “The lackey killed him, my brother is innocent” (PSS, 15:189; 768).

By the time of *Brothers Karamazov*, Dostoevsky had embraced his idea of the “accidental family.” Dmitri, Ivan, and Alyosha are not united by warm childhood memories in a shared home (or even by two shared parents), as are Raskolnikov and Dunya. Their initial emotional and social connection scarcely differs from that of a random group of people. Consequently, for these brothers the thought of a sibling is no longer enough to topple the impulse to “let them gobble each other alive.” “Accidental family” for Dostoevsky is more than blood ties—it is the *construction* of family through “active kinship,” through the acknowledgment of familial bonds that may have no shared associations and memories to support them.

Smerdyakov is omitted from even this basic acknowledgment. Like the tortured children Ivan describes in his rebellion, Smerdyakov has been left out in the cold, but he is no longer five years old, so it is little wonder he has given up begging “dear God” (*bozhen’ka*) to protect him and has turned from God

28 Freud, building on Darwin’s ideas in *Descent of Man*, argues in *Totem and Taboo* that we all have these murderous wishes about our father; see Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1958), 13:146.

29 Olga Meerson also points out this denial; see Meerson, *Dostoevsky’s Taboos* (Dresden: Dresden University Press, 1998), 197.

altogether. Although no custom or nineteenth-century law mandated his legitimation in the eyes of his brothers, his exclusion and crime in *Brothers Karamazov* highlight the need for a stronger, more inclusive understanding of the family bond.³⁰ In Dostoevsky's world, people cannot rely on their pasts to foster these bonds—they must be actively bestowed.³¹ Only this "active kinship," and the faith underlying it, has any chance of turning vipers into men who do not kill their fathers, but only "retain the right to wish."

30 Here I am in agreement with Liza Knapp's interpretation of "accidental family" in her study of *The Adolescent*: "In a state of 'chaos' and 'decomposition,' but ripe for rebirth in a more loving form"; see Liza Knapp, "Dostoevsky and the Novel of Adultery: *The Adolescent*," *Dostoevsky Studies* 17 (2013): 43–44. In *Brothers Karamazov*, the family is not reborn in this "more loving form," but Dostoevsky continues to express the need for such rebirth.

31 The counterview is expressed by Dmitri's defense attorney, who suggests that to be a real father one must not only beget a child but *care* for that child. This "adulterer of thought" (as Dostoevsky labels him) argues that "love for a father that is not justified by the father is an absurdity, an impossibility. Love cannot be created out of nothing: only God creates out of nothing" (PSS, 15:169; 744). Rakitin, another discredited character, makes a similar claim/demand to Alyosha and Grushenka: "What's there to love you for? ... One loves for some reason, and what has either of you done for me?" (PSS, 14:319–20; 353).