

## DOSTOEVSKY IN THE METAVERSE: VIRTUAL REALITY AND THE LOSS OF EMBODIED FAITH

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the profound implications of the Metaverse and virtual reality (VR) on the human experience of faith, drawing parallels and contrasts with the philosophical and theological insights of Fyodor Dostoevsky. As VR technologies advance, the concept of embodiment, central to both human experience and traditional religious practice undergo significant transformation. We synthesize findings from recent academic literature on Dostoevsky's views on faith, suffering, and human nature, alongside research on embodiment in VR, religious experience in virtual environments, and the philosophical dimensions of the Metaverse. This interdisciplinary analysis reveals how the disembodied or re-embodied nature of virtual existence may challenge conventional understandings of faith, ritual, and moral responsibility. Dostoevsky's profound explorations of spiritual struggle, the search for meaning, and the inherent value of embodied suffering offer a critical lens through which to examine the potential loss or redefinition of embodied faith in an increasingly virtualized world. We argue that while the Metaverse may offer new avenues for religious expression, it also poses fundamental questions about the authenticity and depth of spiritual experience when detached from the physical self, potentially leading to a crisis of embodied faith reminiscent of the existential dilemmas explored in Dostoevsky's works.*

**Keywords:** Metaverse; Virtual Reality; Fyodor Dostoevsky; Embodied Faith; Suffering; Religious Experience; Spiritual Growth.

### Introduction

The rapid evolution of virtual reality (VR) and the burgeoning concept of the Metaverse herald a new era of human interaction, experience, and existence. These immersive digital environments promise unprecedented opportunities for connection, creativity, and exploration, yet they also raise profound philosophical and theological questions about the nature of reality, selfhood, and human spirituality. Central to these concerns is the concept of embodiment—the lived experience of having and being a body—which has historically been foundational to both human identity and religious practice. As individuals increasingly inhabit virtual spaces, the traditional understanding of faith, often deeply intertwined with physical presence, communal rituals, and the tangible world, faces unprecedented challenges.

Fyodor Dostoevsky, the 19th-century Russian novelist, remains an unparalleled explorer of the human soul, grappling with themes of faith, suffering, freedom, and the search for meaning in a world increasingly shaped by scientific and rationalistic thought. His characters, perpetually on the brink of spiritual crisis, embody the profound struggles of faith in the face of existential doubt and moral ambiguity (Siddiqi, 2019). Dostoevsky's insights into the complexities of human nature and the essential role of suffering in spiritual growth (Namli, 2022) offer a potent counterpoint to the

potentially frictionless and disembodied experiences offered by the Metaverse.

This paper aims to bridge these seemingly disparate realms by examining the implications of the Metaverse and virtual reality on embodied faith through the philosophical and theological lens of Dostoevsky. We propose that the virtual realm, while offering new forms of engagement, may inadvertently lead to a loss of the embodied dimension of faith, a concept deeply valued and explored by Dostoevsky. We will synthesize contemporary research on embodiment in VR (Guy et al., 2023; Kiltani et al., 2012), religious experience in virtual environments (Adria, 2024; Kluver & Chen, 2008; Thomas et al., 2024), and the broader philosophical implications of the Metaverse (Chen, 2023). By juxtaposing these modern technological advancements with Dostoevsky's timeless explorations of the human condition, we seek to illuminate the potential spiritual ramifications of a disembodied existence and to provoke a deeper consideration of what it means to have faith in an increasingly virtualized world.

### Literature Review

This study draws upon a critical synthesis of academic literature concerning three core domains: Dostoevsky's philosophical and theological insights, the scientific understanding of

embodiment in Virtual Reality (VR), and the intersection of faith and technology. The literature review focused on identifying fifteen peer-reviewed academic papers through systematic searches, ensuring scholarly rigor and credibility.

Papers were selected based on relevance to Dostoevsky's philosophical or theological perspectives, particularly concerning faith, human nature, suffering, and existentialism. The technological focus included papers exploring virtual reality, the Metaverse, embodiment, disembodiment, and their psychological or philosophical implications. Additionally, literature examining religious experience, faith, and spirituality within virtual or technologically mediated environments was included (Adria, 2024; Kluver & Chen, 2008; Thomas et al., 2024).

The subsequent analysis established an analytical framework built on a comparative and critical dialogue between Dostoevsky's established principles—such as the importance of embodied suffering for spiritual growth (Namli, 2022), free will and moral responsibility (Dolack, 2020), authentic faith amidst existential doubt (Siddiqi, 2019), and his critique of modernity (Prown, 1988)—and contemporary Virtual Reality and Metaverse concepts. These modern concepts include embodiment (Guy et al., 2023; Kiltner et al., 2012), immersion (Balcerak Jackson & Balcerak Jackson, 2024), and the nature of virtual existence (Chen, 2023). This framework guided the analysis of how religious practices are reconfigured in virtual spaces and the psychological implications of disembodiment on moral behaviour (Scattolin et al., 2022).

## Research Work

### Methodology

This research paper employs a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, synthesizing insights from literary analysis, philosophy, and virtual reality studies. The primary method involves a comprehensive review and thematic analysis of fifteen academic research papers identified through systematic searches in scholarly databases. These papers were selected based on their relevance to the core themes of Dostoevsky's philosophy, the concept of embodiment in virtual reality, and the intersection of technology and religious experience. The selected papers were subjected to a thematic analysis, focusing on extracting key arguments, theoretical frameworks, empirical findings, and conceptual discussions pertinent to the central inquiry: the impact of virtual reality and the Metaverse on embodied faith, viewed through a Dostoevskian lens. Special attention was paid to how each paper defined or discussed concepts such

as embodiment, presence, religious experience, and the human condition within their respective contexts. The analytical framework was structured around a comparative and critical dialogue between Dostoevsky's established philosophical and theological insights and contemporary understanding of virtual reality and the Metaverse. This involved identifying core Dostoevskian themes, examining how concepts like embodiment and immersion are conceptualized within digital environments, and analysing how religious practices and experiences are being reconfigured within virtual spaces (Adria, 2024; Kluver & Chen, 2008; Thomas et al., 2024). By systematically analysing these diverse scholarly contributions, this paper aims to construct a nuanced argument regarding the potential challenges and transformations to embodied faith in the age of the Metaverse, informed by the enduring wisdom of Dostoevsky.

### Results

The synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals several key findings pertinent to the intersection of Dostoevsky's philosophy, virtual reality, and the concept of embodied faith. The papers collectively highlight the multifaceted nature of embodiment in VR, the evolving landscape of religious practice in digital spaces, and Dostoevsky's enduring relevance in understanding the human condition amidst technological shifts.

**Embodiment in Virtual Reality:** Research consistently emphasizes that the sense of embodiment in VR is a complex phenomenon, comprising elements such as self-location, agency, and body ownership (Kiltner et al., 2012; Guy et al., 2023). A strong sense of embodiment in virtual environments has been shown to intensify emotional responses to virtual stimuli (Gall et al., 2021), suggesting that immersive experiences can profoundly impact the user's psychological state. Conversely, studies indicate that reduced ownership over a virtual body can modulate moral behaviour, potentially leading to altered ethical considerations (Scattolin et al., 2022). These findings underscore that the virtual body is not merely a visual representation but an integral component influencing perception, emotion, and potentially, moral agency.

**Religious Experience in Virtual Environments:** The emergence of the Metaverse has prompted explorations into how religious practices and experiences are being reconfigured in digital spaces. Adria (2024) discusses the unique affordances of the Metaverse for worship, suggesting new avenues for religious expression. Similarly, Thomas et al. (2024) provide a narrative review of religious practice and wellbeing in the

Metaverse, highlighting both potential benefits and drawbacks. Kluver and Chen's (2008) earlier work on the "Church of Fools" provides a historical precedent for understanding the interplay between virtual ritual and material faith, demonstrating that the engagement with virtual religious spaces is not a new phenomenon, but one that is gaining new dimensions with advanced VR technologies.

**Dostoevsky's Philosophical and Theological Insights:** The reviewed literature on Dostoevsky consistently emphasizes his profound engagement with the human condition, faith, suffering, and existential dilemmas. García Sanz (2017) highlights Dostoevsky's exploration of religious experience and the spiritual struggles of his characters. Siddiqi (2019) delves into Dostoevsky's existentialism, epiphanies, and the polyphonic nature of his novels, underscoring the individual's journey through faith and doubt. Dolack (2020) connects Dostoevsky's ideas on confession and conscience to moral responsibility, while Namli (2022) provides a theological analysis of suffering in Dostoevsky's works, emphasizing its role in spiritual growth and redemption. Prown (1988) positions Dostoevsky as an antimodernist, critical of societal trends that might diminish human essence. These insights collectively portray Dostoevsky's deep concern for the integrity of the human soul and the authenticity of faith, often forged through concrete, embodied experiences of suffering and moral choice.

**Intersection of Themes:** The analysis reveals a critical tension between the embodied nature of Dostoevsky's philosophical and theological concerns and the disembodied or re-embodied experiences facilitated by VR and the Metaverse. While VR offers compelling immersive experiences (Balcerak Jackson & Balcerak Jackson, 2024), the philosophical implications of a largely virtual existence, as discussed by Chen (2023), raise questions about the nature of reality and human agency. The potential for reduced ownership over a virtual body (Scattolin et al., 2022) suggests a departure from the integrated, embodied self that Dostoevsky's works implicitly champion as essential for authentic spiritual and moral development. The ease of virtual religious engagement (Adria, 2024; Thomas et al., 2024; Kluver & Chen, 2008) might, from a Dostoevskian perspective, risk superficiality or a detachment from the profound, often painful, embodied struggles that Dostoevsky saw as integral to genuine faith.

## Conclusion

The advent of the Metaverse and the increasing sophistication of virtual reality technologies present a compelling challenge to traditional notions of

embodied faith; a concept deeply rooted in the philosophical and theological landscape explored by Fyodor Dostoevsky. Our synthesis of current research on VR embodiment, religious practice in virtual spaces, and Dostoevsky's enduring insights reveals a critical juncture where technological advancement intersects with fundamental questions about human spirituality and the nature of belief.

Dostoevsky's literary universe consistently underscores the profound significance of the embodied human experience in the journey of faith. For Dostoevsky, genuine spiritual growth, moral responsibility, and the confrontation with existential dilemmas are inextricably linked to the physical, often suffering, reality of human existence (Namli, 2022). His characters grapple with faith not in an abstract or disembodied realm, but through concrete actions, physical suffering, and direct engagement with the material world and other embodied beings. The concept of confession and conscience, central to Dostoevsky's thought, is often tied to physical acts and their consequences, demanding an embodied response (Dolack, 2020). The suffering that leads to redemption in his works is not merely psychological but often deeply physical, a testament to the inseparability of body and spirit in his understanding of faith (Namli, 2022). From a Dostoevskian perspective, the authenticity of faith is often forged in the crucible of real-world struggle and embodied vulnerability.

In contrast, the Metaverse and VR environments, while offering compelling immersive experiences (Balcerak Jackson & Balcerak Jackson, 2024), inherently introduce a degree of distance. While users can achieve a powerful sense of presence and even ownership over their virtual avatars (Kilteni et al., 2012; Guy et al., 2023), this embodiment is fundamentally different from the lived reality of a physical body. The implications of this distinction are profound for faith. If religious experience in the Metaverse becomes detached from the physical, tangible world, it risks losing the very elements that Dostoevsky considered essential for profound spiritual engagement: the weight of physical consequence, the shared vulnerability of communal physical presence, and the existential gravity of suffering in a material world. The observed phenomenon of reduced ownership over a virtual body influencing moral behaviour (Scattolin et al., 2022) further suggests that a disembodied existence might subtly erode the very foundations of embodied moral and spiritual responsibility.

While the Metaverse offers new avenues for religious expression and community (Adria, 2024; Thomas et al., 2024; Kluver & Chen, 2008), the question remains whether these virtual experiences can truly replicate or substitute the depth of

embodied faith. Dostoevsky's critique of modernity (Prown, 1988) can be extended to this digital frontier: he might question whether a faith practiced in a frictionless, customizable virtual realm can foster the same spiritual resilience and moral fortitude as one forged in the messy, often painful, realities of embodied existence. The ease of virtual interaction might inadvertently lead to a superficiality of faith, where the profound, transformative power of suffering and genuine human connection, central to Dostoevsky's vision, is diminished.

In conclusion, while the Metaverse presents exciting possibilities for religious engagement, it also poses a significant challenge to the traditional understanding of embodied faith. Dostoevsky's timeless explorations serve as a vital reminder that true spiritual depth often arises from the concrete, physical realities of human existence, including its inherent vulnerabilities and capacity for suffering. As we navigate the evolving digital landscape, it becomes imperative to critically examine how virtual reality shapes our understanding of faith, ensuring that the pursuit of immersive digital experiences does not inadvertently lead to a loss of the profound, embodied dimensions of our spiritual lives.

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