

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

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Introduction

Peter is playing a videogame in which he has the task to get an apple from the supermarket. Peter could just walk into the store and buy the apple. He could also try to sneak in and steal the apple. However, Peter decides to enter the store, torture the owner, slaughter all adult customers, and rape every child he can find. After this, he takes the apple. Mission accomplished.

Apparently, there is something morally objectionable in this scenario. In particular, if we presume that Peter had no feelings of guilt or disgust while acting in the virtual world. Thus far, there are basically two approaches to locate the moral wrongness in the example:

1. We could examine the moral content of the videogame itself.¹
2. We could blame Peter for having fun by causing a scene of cruelty and pure wrongness in the virtual world.²

But what about Peter's action itself? Could it also be target of moral evaluation? A typical answer might be: "No way, because the action is not real! It is just a game! How could an action in a fictional world ever be subject to moral analysis?" Indeed, many attempts to locate something morally objectionable in virtual actions by traditional ethics have been unsuccessful.³ Utilitarian ethics, just as the ethics of Aristotle and Kant do not seem to have the ability to locate any wrongness in a player's *virtual action* as opposed to his *reaction* and the game's *representation*. Yet, the initial example seems to suggest that there could be a morally assessable content in Peter's action itself: his decision to achieve the goal in *this* manner – irrespective of the videogame he is playing or the reaction he is showing. In my opinion, the reason traditional ethics are unable to capture the moral content of virtual actions lies in the *type* of action we are dealing with: a virtual action seems to be different from typical actions.

Virtual actions

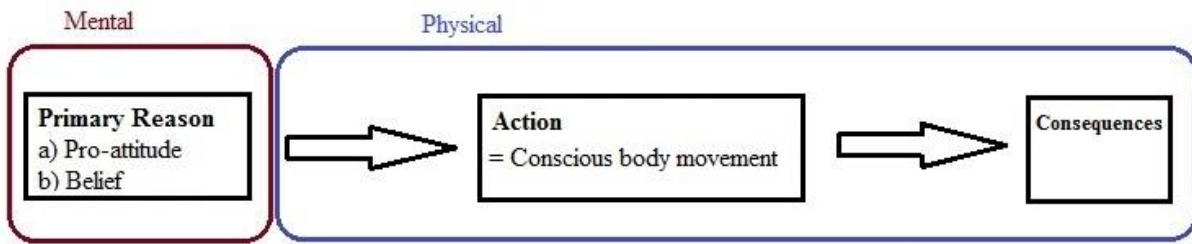
In order to locate the anomaly of virtual actions, it is necessary to make clear what a typical action looks like. For this purpose, I would like to use the model of Donald Davidson that can

¹ Papers dealing with a comparable question are e.g. Tavinor (2009), Patridge (2011), Ostritsch (2017).

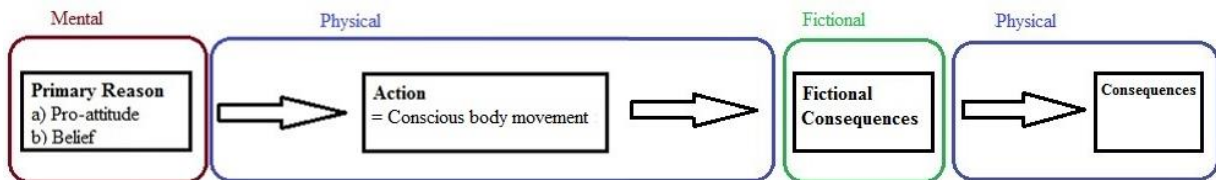
² Papers involving this strategy are e.g. McCormick (2001), Schulzke (2010), Patridge (2011), Ostritsch (2017).

³ Prominent examples are McCormick (2001), Waddington (2007), Schulzke (2010).

be simplified by the following diagram:⁴



This model visualizes what I refer to as a *normal* action. We know it from our daily life. However, a virtual action is different. Let us begin with the similarities of the two kinds of action: Just like a normal action, a virtual action has a causal structure and contains mental and physical parts. In fact, all components of Davidson's theory apply, but with one significant difference: the key distinction between the patterns lies in the ontological state of the consequences which are *fictional* in a virtual action. And in a virtual action the agent's pro-attitude refers to these fictional consequences. A model illustrating a virtual action could look like the following:



As we can see, the general structure of an action hardly changes except for the insertion of fictional consequences. Overall, a virtual action fulfills the following two conditions:

1. A virtual action contains fictional consequences.
2. The pro-attitude of an agent refers to a fictional consequence and he is aware of that.

The second condition is necessary to exclude a scenario where e.g. an agent believes to commit murder in real life with a computerized gun, but, as it turns out, it only happened in a fictional world. I think that such an action cannot be considered a virtual action, even if it contained fictional consequences. Another example would be a player who deliberately shoots his human controlled teammate in the back during a (virtual) multiplayer match. Let us assume that the action's purpose was to humiliate the teammate for bad shooting skills. Likewise, I would classify this action as a normal action, because the goal maintains a real effect on a human being and only takes a detour through fictional consequences. Even the action of a player whose primary goal is to "just have fun" is considered a normal action, as long as this real-world-consequence remains the primary reason.

With the introduction of fictional consequences, a discrepancy seems to emerge: normally we assume that we cannot have a physical influence on something fictional, i.e. something that does not exist. However, in a virtual action this seems to happen when an agent manipulates a fictional consequence through his action. To avoid the dilemma, I have to bring to mind that every fictional consequence naturally has a physical basis. In the case of videogames, this would be represented by binary codes translating inputs on the controller into pixels on the

⁴ The following passages refer primarily to Davidson (1963) and Davidson (1968). However, it is not necessary to support Davidson's theory for my following work.

screen. Therefore, we accurately must talk about *representations* of fictional consequences in the context of causal impacts. However, it would be inappropriate to reduce fictional consequences to their physical substance. All the aesthetic, narrative, psychological and as we will see, moral facets of video gaming would be lost. In fact, this does not only refer to the analysis of videogames: we do not examine and interpret paintings based on the canvas material and used colors, either. We do not define a movie as a chain of physical independent frames. We do not value pieces of music by their acoustic waves but rather based on something not suitably describable with a physical vocabulary. Playing videogames is not only pushing buttons and manipulating binary codes. There is more to this activity that cannot be captured by a structural analysis of the type of action.

The moral status of virtual actions

A conclusion that can be drawn from the last section is that virtual actions are closely related to their fictional consequences and therefore insufficiently described by a purely physical depiction (i.e., Peter is *not* only pushing buttons!). Therefore, moral classification seems to depend on the nature of fictional consequences which, in turn, depends on the agent's primary reason. Accordingly, as the example from the beginning clearly illustrates, we seem to need a particular form of moral analysis to clarify our intuition. At the same time, we cannot evaluate virtual actions like we evaluate normal actions. Even if Peter's virtual crimes would be wrong, we would morally classify them very differently than analog actions in the real world. Therefore, virtual actions seem to have another moral state than equivalent actions would have in reality. To define this special state, I want to employ the theory of Kendall Walton.⁵

Walton assumes that every time we interact with fictions we actually play a game of *make-believe*. When watching a movie, we *act as if* the fiction was true and therefore every felt emotion is merely a *quasi-emotion*. Walton makes this clear with the following example: Charles is watching a creepy movie featuring a terrible monster. The monster aims for Charles, whereupon he is terrified. However, he neither flees his flat nor calls the police but rather watches the movie until the end. Walton concludes from this scenario that in this case it is not about 'real' fear but about *quasi-fear*. This gives reason for opposition: one could argue that you do not *feel* any difference between fearing a fictional monster and fearing a real murderer. The fear *feels* the same! The same applies to other emotions: when I am sad because of the death of a beloved fictional character, it *feels* like real sadness – probably I could imagine a case where I am even *more* sad than when a real person dies. A solution can be found by making clear what exactly Walton means with quasi-emotions. I think, Walton does not claim that Charles' fear in the example is not 'real' in a sense of its physical base – otherwise a quasi-emotion would not exist. The physical base of 'real' fear and quasi-fear may even be identical. In this regard, every quasi-emotion is as 'real' as a 'normal' emotion. But that still does not mean that we are dealing with the same type of emotion. Just as virtual actions cannot be reduced to their physical base ("pushing buttons"), quasi-emotions cannot be reduced to their physical base (neuronal processes in a specific area of the brain) either. So, what is the defining difference between emotions and quasi-emotions? Quasi-emotions relate to fictions, and those affected are aware of this. If Charles was not aware of being frightened about fiction, he would call the police or hide under his bed. Thus, he would be really (not

⁵ The following section is mainly based on ideas formulated in Walton (1978) and Walton (1990). It is not necessary to completely support Walton's theory for accepting mine.

quasi-) terrified. Hence, quasi-emotions are different from ‘normal’ emotions, even if they share the same physical base.

Now what does Walton’s theory of fiction and emotion has to offer for my moral theory of virtual actions? It tells us that when we interact with fictions, we somehow move *into the fiction* and *act as if* the fiction was true. Thus, all executed actions in fictions are a type of make-believe and therefore we can call virtual actions *quasi-actions*. And we can define quasi-actions as we defined quasi-emotions: quasi-actions have a causal structure and physical base like normal actions. But quasi-actions occur within fictions and the agent is aware of that. Therefore, a quasi-action is different from a normal action, even if they share the same physical base (e.g. pushing buttons on a plugged controller is different from pushing buttons on an alarm clock). An important difference between the introduced forms of action lies in our moral treatment of quasi-actions compared to normal actions. Transferred to the real world, Peters action would clearly be immoral. However, this judgement does not hold in the context of quasi-actions that always, in some way, seem to be “just a game”. But referring to Peters virtual action from the beginning, I think that quasi-actions have a moral content anyway. Furthermore, quasi-actions are a type of make-believe and therefore must be treated morally different than normal actions. I am confident that this is the reason traditional ethics are not able to evaluate virtual actions in a satisfying way: they can only capture normal actions and no type of make-believe. Because quasi-actions are a different type of normal actions (i.e. actions as make-believe), it seems consequential to introduce a new and different type of ethics which I want to call *quasi-ethics*. Quasi-ethics seem to include a normative power comparable to ‘normal’ ethics: Seemingly, you should not do anything quasi-immoral just as you should not do anything immoral. In both cases, wrong actions are described. But quasi-ethics refer to actions as make-believe, i.e. to actions on a fictional level. Hence, something quasi-immoral is different from something immoral, even if both are morally wrong in some way.

Up to now, I have clarified the line between virtual actions and normal actions. Furthermore, I defined virtual actions as a form of make-believe that can be described as quasi-actions.⁶ Because of this change of state it seemed necessary to adopt a new type of ethics that can capture the moral content of quasi-actions: quasi-ethics. Quasi-ethics possess a normative power comparable to traditional ethics – even though we *treat* something quasi-immoral differently than something of ‘normal’ immorality.⁷ Of course, there are still many unsolved questions that need to be answered:

1. *Empirical*: How do you determine the type of action?
2. *Moral*: How do you determine the moral content of quasi-actions? When does something become quasi-immoral?
3. *Normative*: Where does the wrongness of quasi-immoral quasi-actions lie? What kind of normative consequences do quasi-ethics have for the players? Of which nature are the arising responsibilities?

⁶ Of course, the concept of quasi-actions can be transferred to other fictions beside videogames. I think that also a (freely made) decision of an actor on stage or playing a board game can be a quasi-action and therefore can be evaluated as such, employing quasi-ethics.

⁷ Just compare once more Peter’s action in a real and in a fictional scenario.

Even though I do not have the answer for all these questions yet, I can provide propositions for some of them. This especially concerns the *moral* question which I am going to discuss in the following section.

Quasi-ethics for videogaming

In the last section, it became clear that traditional ethics are unable to evaluate the moral content of virtual actions properly, because virtual actions are a form of make-believe and therefore not a normal action. Nevertheless, traditional ethics are capable of morally classifying actions that contain fictional consequences as long as the agent's intention refers to the real world: Peter wanted to beat the game. Peter wanted to enjoy the game. Peter wanted to check out the gameplay mechanics. Peter wanted to write an article about the morality of virtual actions. All these descriptions refer to normal actions. And regarding the example from the beginning, they raise 'normal' ethical questions: Is it morally decent to enjoy creating fictional depictions of immoral cruelty? Or: Is it morally decent to create fictional depictions of immoral cruelty in order to write a reflecting article about it? These questions can be answered by a moral analysis through traditional ethics.⁸ But how can we examine quasi-actions that need a moral evaluation by quasi-ethics? Quasi-ethics concern fictional consequences which depend on the agent's primary reason. Therefore, the moral content of quasi-actions is closely linked to the agent's primary reason. Let us make a first attempt to formulate a suitable rule for quasi-ethics based on these considerations: *As soon as the primary reason (referring to a fictional consequence) of an agent is immoral, the performed virtual action is quasi-immoral.*

To figure out the morality of the primary reason, you can examine it by any of the traditional ethics. Therefore, the primary reason is immoral when, transferred to reality,⁹ (i) it offends Kant's moral law, (ii) it is not an expression of Aristotelean virtue or (iii) it causes more harm than joy. But would these considerations not make us conclude that every virtual action involving immoral fictional consequences is quasi-immoral – indicating that players should not act this way? It does not, because a player's primary reason is not automatically immoral upon causing an immoral fictional consequence. Throwing a fireball at an enemy while driving carts on a dangerous track is hardly a morally reasonable fictional consequence. But no one would blame a player by doing so in *Mario Kart 8*, because the player's primary reason usually refers to the morally acceptable (and real-world) consequence of having fun and being challenged by winning the race. The quasi-action would be quasi-immoral if the agent's primary reason contained a specific immoral fictional consequence like setting the opponent on fire. Hence, ethical examination of quasi-actions is always an examination of the type of action we are dealing with. If the fictional consequence only served as a means to an end, then the end may actually justify the means when containing no immoral content. In this case, the fictional consequence is only part of a normal action that is not immoral. However, if fictional consequences were an end in themselves, then we are dealing with a quasi-action.

⁸ I am not claiming that this is an easy task.

⁹ This might seem to cause problems in context of the agent's primary reason referring to a fictional consequence. But actually, it does not: When evaluating a quasi-action, we evaluate a form of make-believe and therefore a form of action that distinguishes itself by being transferred to reality. As Walton explains, a game of make-believe contains acting *as if* the fictional elements were real. Therefore, we evaluate the agent's primary reason *as if* it referred to the real world because in a game of make-believe the agent equally acts *as if* his action was real.

Thus, the moral status is defined by the agent's primary reason concerning this fictional consequence. Murdering dozens of police officers while trying to get as many 'stars'¹⁰ as possible in *Grand Theft Auto V* is not necessarily immoral if e.g. the agent's primary reason referred to the morally decent goal of challenging himself. Because of the player's real-world objective, we treat his action like a normal action (involving fictional consequences) and therefore evaluate it by 'normal' i.e. traditional ethics. On the other hand, we can morally blame a player of the same game if he e.g. brutally murders a prostitute after making use of her services in order to regain the money he spent or to just create these specific fictional consequences. In that case, the primary reason is part of an immoral plan within the fictional world and we would classify the player's action as a quasi-action and consequently evaluate it as quasi-immoral: in some sense, players should not act in *this* way with *this* primary reason.

Conclusion

In this paper at hand I developed a suitable theory for morally dealing with virtual actions. It can be summarized in five steps:

1. There are two types of action that involve fictional consequences. It is only about a *virtual action* if the agent's primary reason refers to fictional consequence plus he is aware of that.
2. A *virtual action* is a form of make-believe, therefore a *quasi-action*. Hence, it cannot be morally evaluated by traditional ethics.
3. A *quasi-action* is evaluated by *quasi-ethics* in the context of the agent's primary reason referring to a fictional consequence.
4. When the agent's primary reason (referring to a fictional consequence) is immoral, the performed *quasi-action* is *quasi-immoral*.
5. When the player's primary reason refers to a real consequence, the action must be evaluated by traditional ethics.

Still, it's unclear where the normative wrongness of quasi-immoral quasi-actions exactly lies. In the further development, quasi-ethics must be able to offer a satisfying answer to the question: In which way are you doing something morally wrong when you *act as if* you are doing something morally wrong?

Games

MARIO KART 8. Nintendo EAD, Wii U, 2014.

GRAND THEFT AUTO V. Rockstar North, PS3, 2013.

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¹⁰ The more chaos and crimes you cause in the fictional world of *Grand Theft Auto V*, the more 'stars' you get which show number and quality of the policemen hunting you. Consequently, increasing the stars means increasing the challenge.

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All illustrations have been created by me.