

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

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Moral Intuition

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.

Has Peter done something morally wrong?

Moral Intuition

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.

Which aspect of the example could be morally wrong?

- a) The videogame itself.
- b) The developers.
- c) Peter's psychological reaction.
- d) Peter's action itself.

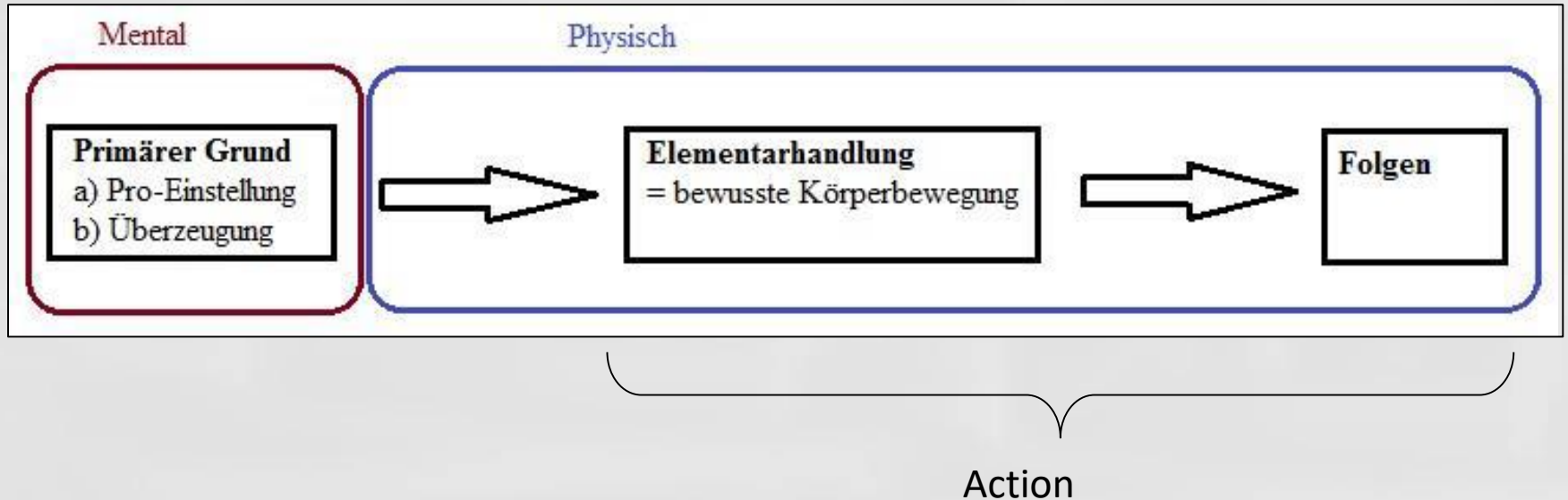
Moral Intuition

Wouldn't we say that Peter not only

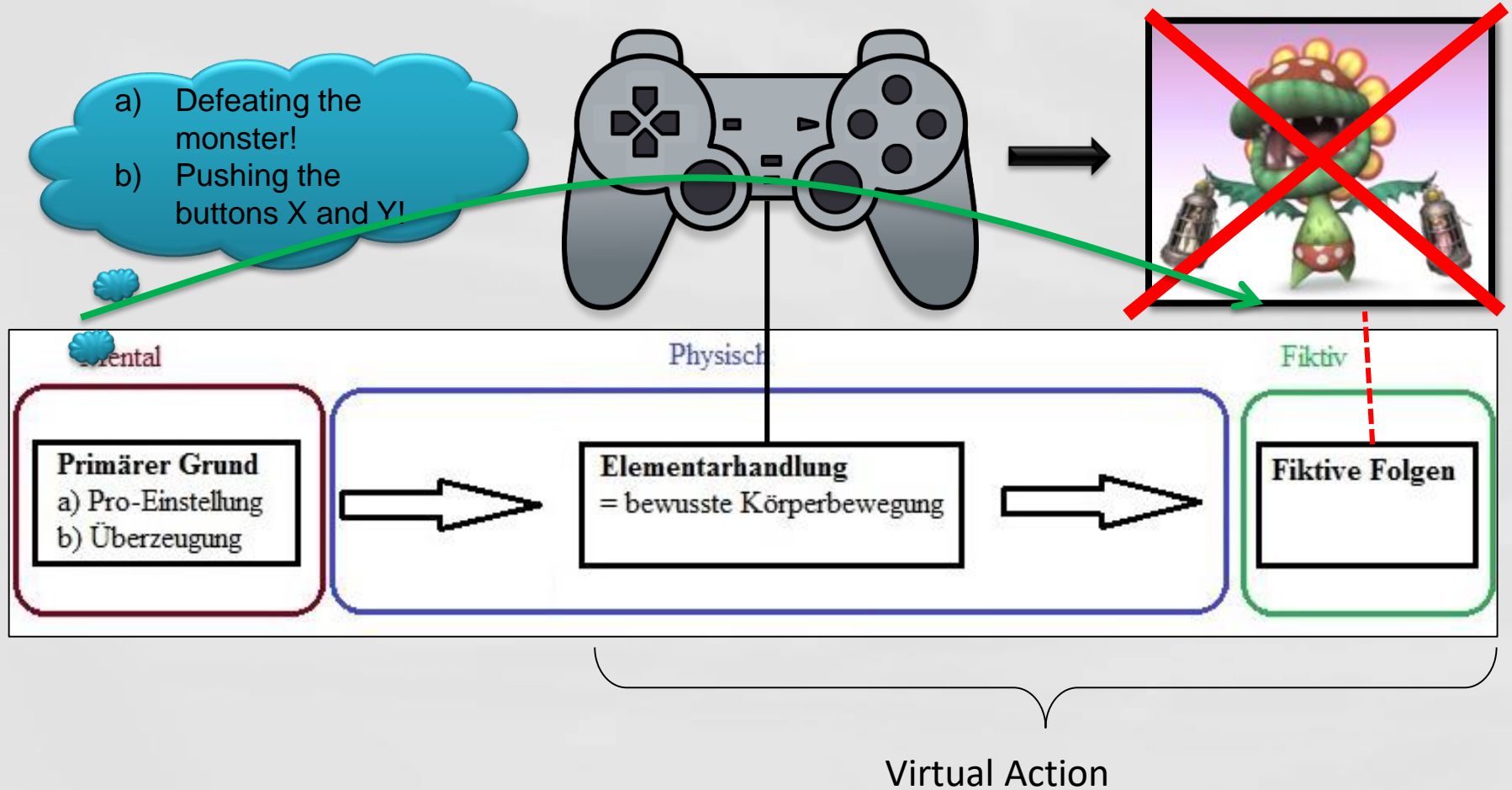
- a) was playing an immoral videogame
- b) that never should have been developed
- c) and that he showed an inappropriate reaction,
- d) **but also that he *acted* morally wrong?**

What is a virtual action?

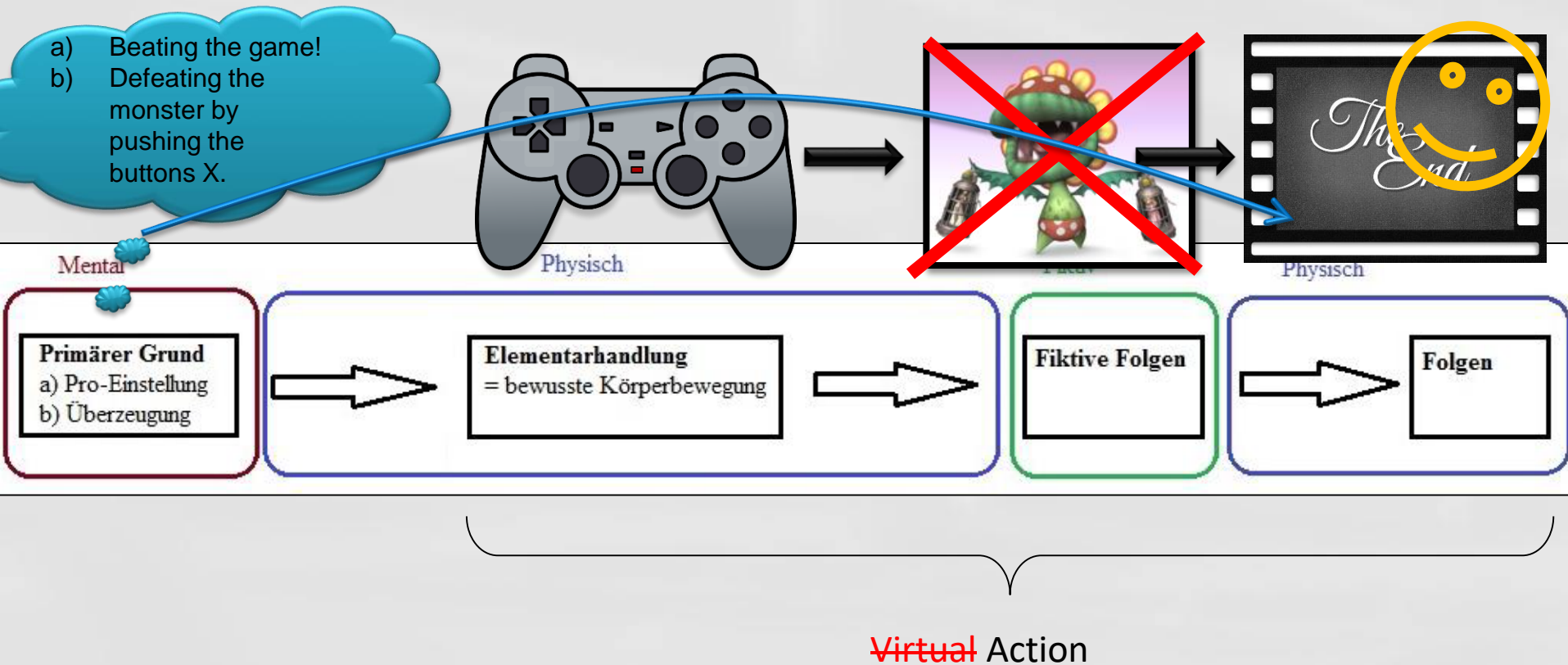
Donald Davidson's model of a typical action:



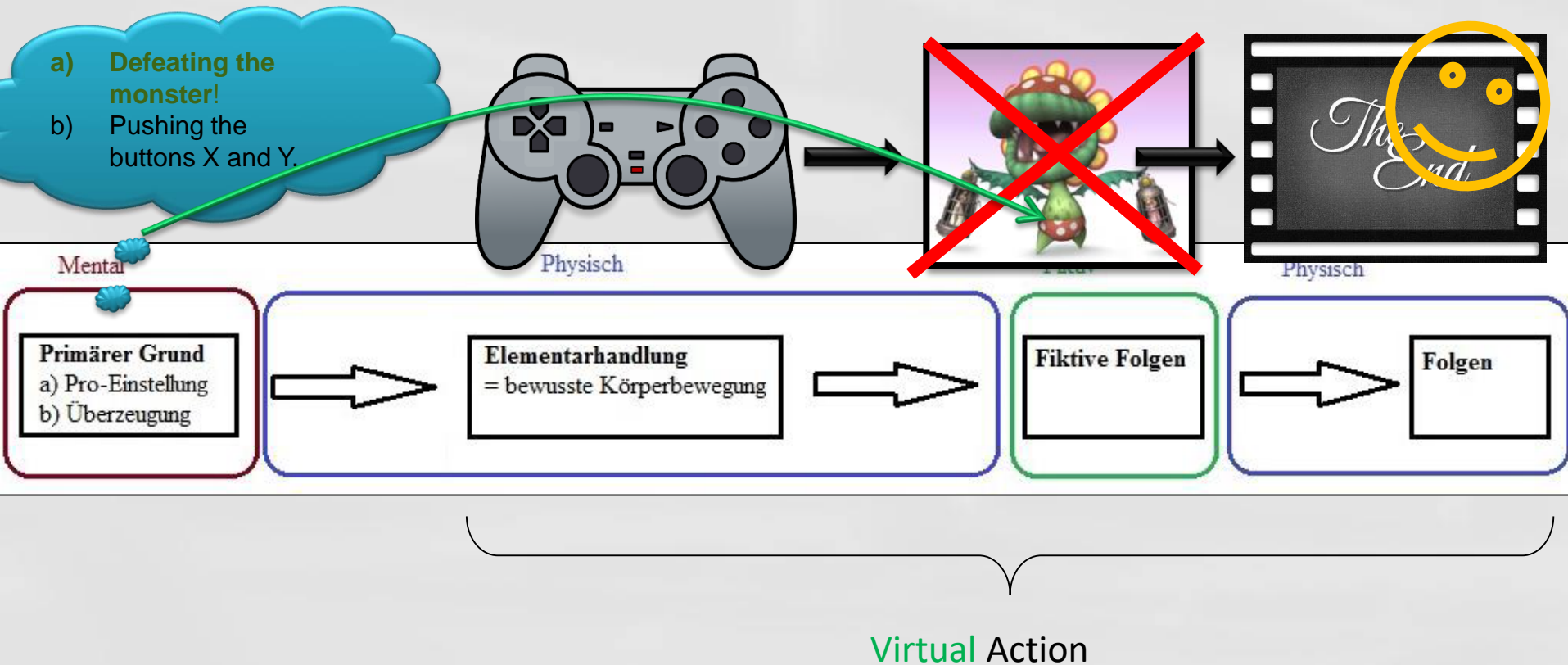
What is a virtual action?



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What is a virtual action?



What is a virtual action?

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.

What is a virtual action?

Every fictional consequence naturally has a physical basis. In this case: Represented by binary codes translating inputs on the controller into pixels on the 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.

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

1. 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!).
 2. Virtual actions seem to have another moral state than equivalent actions would have in reality.
- Which kind of moral status does Peter's virtual action contain?

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

Kendall L. Walton:

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.

(see Walton 1978)

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

Waltons theory of „make-believe“:

1. When we interact with fictions, we somehow move *into the fiction* and *act-as-if* the fiction was true.
2. Therefore, every felt emotion in a game of make-believe is merely a *quasi-emotion*. Charles is not really but only *quasi-terrified*.

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

What are Quasi-Emotions?

Quasi-emotions have the same physical / psychological base like ,normal' emotions.

But quasi-emotions relate to fictions and those affected are aware of this.

Hence, quasi-emotions are different from 'normal' emotions, even if they share the same physical base.

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

When interacting with fictions we play a game of make-believe 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.

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

What are Quasi-Actions?

Quasi-actions have a causal structure and a 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.

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

An important difference between the introduced forms of action lies in our moral treatment of quasi-actions compared to normal actions.

Quasi-actions are a type of make-believe and therefore must be treated morally different than normal actions.

It seems consequential to introduce a new and different type of ethics which I want to call *quasi-ethics*.

The Moral Status of Virtual Actions

What are Quasi-Ethics?

Quasi-ethics include a normative power comparable to 'normal' ethics.

But quasi-ethics refer to actions as make-believe, i.e. to actions on a fictional level.

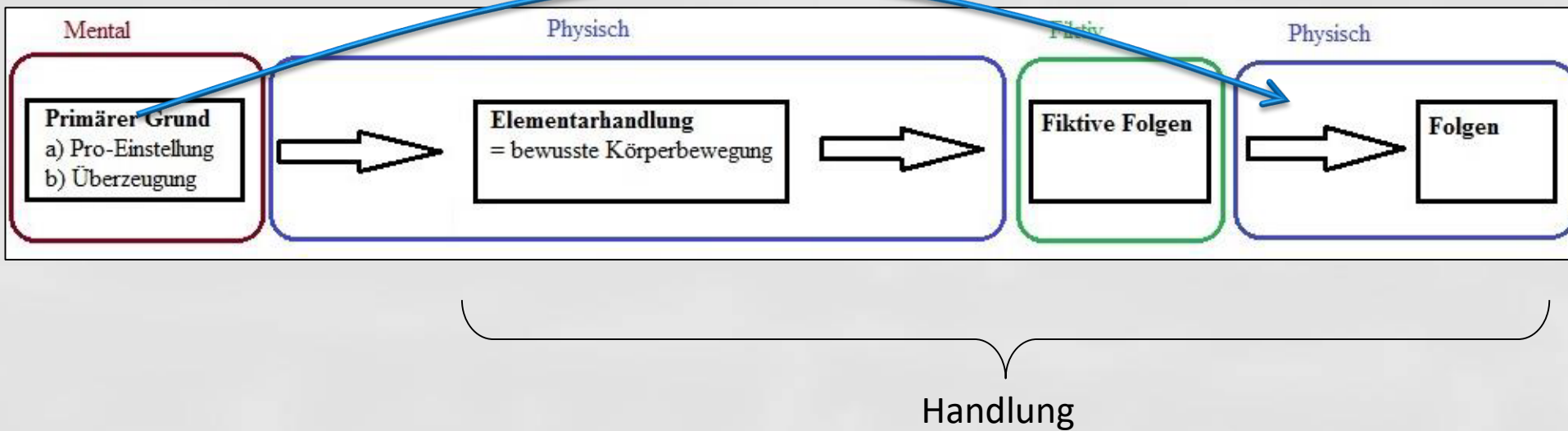
Hence, quasi-ethics are different from traditional ethics, even if they share the same normative function.

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

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.

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming



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.

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming



Is it morally decent to enjoy creating fictional depictions of immoral cruelty?

Is it morally decent to create fictional depictions of immoral cruelty in order to write a reflecting article about it?

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

Quasi-ethics only evaluate quasi-actions.

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.

First attempt for a suitable rule: *As soon as the primary reason (referring to a fictional consequence) of an agent is immoral, the performed virtual action is quasi-immoral.*

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

Murdering dozens of cops

Peter brutally murders dozens of police officers while trying to get as many 'stars' as possible in *Grand Theft Auto V*.

(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.)

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

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Murdering a prostitute

Peter brutally murders a prostitute in *Grand Theft Auto V* after making use of her services and gains the spent money back. Afterwards, he takes pictures of her dead body with an in-game cellphone while hitting her with a knife and shooting her with guns. Finally he burns her corpse to the ground.

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

Murdering dozens of cops	Murdering a prostitute
- Brutal presentation that refers to reality	- Brutal presentation that refers to reality

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

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- Immoral action within the fictional world	- Immoral action within the fictional world

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

Murdering dozens of cops	Murdering a prostitute
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- Immoral action within the fictional world	- Immoral action within the fictional world
- Primary reason refers to a real consequence?	- Primary reason refers to a fictional consequence?

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

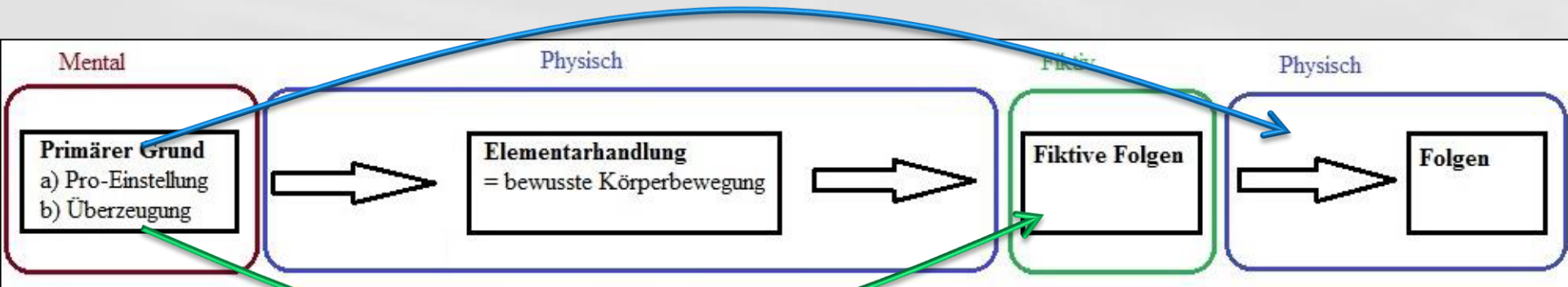
Grand Theft Auto V: Murdering dozens of cops



1. Peter followed a detailed plan and wanted to (fictionally) murder dozens of cops.
2. Peter wanted to check out the gameplay mechanics.
3. Peter wanted to enjoy the brutality.
4. Peter wanted to enjoy the challenge by hunting ‚stars‘.

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

Grand Theft Auto V: Murdering a prostitute



1. Peter followed a detailed plan and wanted to (fictionally) murder the prostitute, desecrate her corpse and get the spent money back.
2. Peter wanted to check out the gameplay mechanics.
3. Peter wanted to enjoy the brutality.
4. Peter wanted to ,enjoy‘ the sexual violence.

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

Murdering dozens of cops	Murdering a prostitute
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- Primary reason refers to a real consequence	- Primary reason refers to a fictional consequence

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

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- Fictional consequence as means to an end	- Fictional consequence as an end to itself

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

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- Primary reason refers to a real consequence	- Primary reason refers to a fictional consequence
- Fictional consequence as means to an end	- Fictional consequence as an end to itself
→ Amoral? Immoral?	→ Quasi-immoral!

Quasi-Ethics for videogaming

Unsolved question:

Why should quasi-actions as games of make-believe be morally wrong? Where does the normative wrongness of quasi-immoral quasi-actions lie?

Thank you for your attention!