Virtue Ethics: A Defense of Practicality

First brought about by the Greek philosopher, Socrates, Virtue Ethics is an ethical theory based mainly around developing yourself as a good moral agent rather than making good decisions on a case by case basis. Whereas many other schools of ethics will bring up dilemmas like The Trolley Problem, Virtue Ethics essentially rejects this and opts for a more practical way of thinking since situations like The Trolley Problem almost never happen. Virtue Ethics says that each person lives by a set of virtues which determine their moral character. As one would logically think, having a deficiency of one of these virtues is problematic. For instance, if one of my virtues is “Generosity”, and I never give to others, then that makes me a bad moral agent because I am deficient. Most theories of ethics would agree, but there is one key part where Virtue Ethics branches off that causes it to stand out from the crowd. Virtue Ethics also tells us that having excess of a virtue will make us an immoral actor, too! So, returning to our example of “generosity”, if I were to give away all my things to others and live as a hermit, I would be in excess. Some would argue that you should give away all your things and live as a hermit, and that this would be a moral way to live, but there are a few problems with this. First of all, you are essentially “wasting” yourself, or in other words, you won’t be able to give and do good later because you’ve given everything and live in poverty. Additionally, you may go too far in your giving and instead create an adverse effect which encourages laziness or a lack of experience in the needy you give to. For example, as it turns out, the “TOMS” shoe brand actually hurts the African economy in small communities, since the shoes that they provide would normally be produced by local artisans, and thus they put those artisans out of a
job. Thus, Socrates came up with the idea of “The Golden Mean”, which is a “sweet spot” between excess and deficiency which we should all strive to maintain in our lives. The other main pillar of Virtue Ethics is the role of moral exemplars, or in other words, role models.

Socrates believed one should find a person who they believe is a good moral actor and emulate their morals in an effort to improve one’s self. So, in a difficult moral situation, instead of relying entirely on my own judgement, I would ask myself, “What would Mr. Schult do?” if Mr. Schult were my moral exemplar. So, this all seems rather straightforward- be a good person, and you’ll know the right thing to do intuitively in a tough situation, but what makes this theory stronger than the others? Well, as you may be able to tell from the title, the answer lies in practicality. A major flaw in other theories of ethics such as Utilitarianism and Kantian ethics is that making the (in their eyes) moral decision requires a lot of deliberation and thought-resources which are very scarce in a stressful situation. They also lack the human element of emotion and ask the agent to act almost entirely on cold logic- which can devalue human life and have dire consequences in an actual situation. Virtue Ethics overcomes these pitfalls by relying on an agent’s judgement during a situation, which means that one can not only make a decision more quickly (since it is intuitive), but also that the decision will take human elements like emotions into account. The character, Chidi, from “The Good Place” is a good example of why this is important. He spends so much time deliberating and trying to logically work out an issue that he nearly always ends up making the wrong decision and hurting others through his indecision. An agent of Virtue Ethics, however, would know exactly what to do in these situations because they simply know the right thing to do through past experience and their moral exemplars!

1 https://www.racked.com/2015/7/27/9046207/toms-shoes-charity-poverty
Here is a small article on the matter
There are a few very valid objections towards Virtue Ethics, however each has an answer. First of all, many critics of the theory say that it is a self-centered one which is only concerned with the agent and not others\(^2\). In other words, the judgement of whether or not a certain action is immoral towards another individual is mostly down to whether or not the agent feels guilty about that action (since it is left up to their personal judgement). This argument, although seemingly very good, has a massive hole. The issue is that the feeling of guilt, for an actor of Virtue Ethics, stems from the repetition of past good deeds and the development of character. In other words, where Egoists would say, “You’re just doing it for the good feeling of doing something good, which is in your self-interest”, a Virtue Ethicist would say, “No! I get the good feeling from it because I’ve repetitiously done good things, almost like an addiction to being moral. Indeed, it is in my self-interest to do good things, but only because I have essentially trained myself to enjoy it!”. A good parallel is working out. In the start, it feels inconvenient and tiresome to go out of your way to work out, just as it does to go out of your way to do the right thing, but eventually, your brain becomes accustomed to the habit and learns to enjoy it, delivering positive stimuli with every time you hit the gym, or every time you do a good thing. Another criticism against Virtue Ethics is that the rigidity of other theories is actually a strength since it offers a clear path, and that Virtue Ethics only clouds the waters by making “the right thing” ambiguous instead of providing a clear, logical code. The major downfall with this argument is that it assumes that the decision is unclear, when having a clear decision is one of the main ideas of Virtue Ethics! Undoubtedly, you, me, and the rest of the world has had times throughout their life when they decided to take a path which would bring no benefit to them whatsoever, but which they decided to take because, “It’s the right thing to do”. For

\(^2\) http://www.iep.utm.edu/virtue/#H4
This is where I got some well-structured objections towards the theory. You’ll notice they also have answers to these objections, but I did not use these in my own answers (although they sometimes correspond)
example, perhaps your friend is one step away from getting a suspension from the principal, but you are a straight A student. Then, perhaps that friend tries to help someone else in the class who struggles with a test by passing them a note with answers. The teacher discovers the note, and immediately suspects your friend. Even though it is dishonest, will stain your spotless reputation, and bring no benefit to you whatsoever, you confess even though you did not pass the note. Why? Because you know, deep down, that your friend is a good person and that it is the right thing to do to stop them from getting a suspension. Thus, in Virtue Ethics the right thing to do is clear, just not in a tangible, logical sense.

Finally, and perhaps most strongly, we have the argument against Virtue Ethics which says that it relies too much on luck in terms of birth and upbringing. In other words, some people may not be so fortunate to have good parents or a good moral exemplar, and yet if they do the wrong thing, they are judged the same as someone who grew up with excellent moral influences. This argument is much more difficult to counter than the other two, however it does indeed have an answer. The main problem is that the argument assumes there are some people who are raised and live lives completely devoid of any good moral influences, and that they are essentially brainwashed to only like to do evil things. Much like The Trolley Problem, I have a very hard time stomaching the claim that these people actually exist, and that they are so far gone that they cannot tell right from wrong. Deep down in our instincts, we feel bad about hurting others- we feel guilt, and this is not a learned response from moral exemplars or set virtues. Those who rob gas stations know that it is wrong, but justify it to themselves because they are typically in a bad financial situation (ignoring those with psychological disorders and the clinically insane). These people absolutely should be held up to the standards of the rest of society because even though their moral character may not be as strong as others, they still absolutely know better than to act that way and have always had the chance to do the right
thing. In closing, this is why Virtue Ethics is the strongest of the theories we’ve studied so far. It takes all the factors into account, and allows the actor to strive to become a better person and enrich those around them by being a moral exemplar.