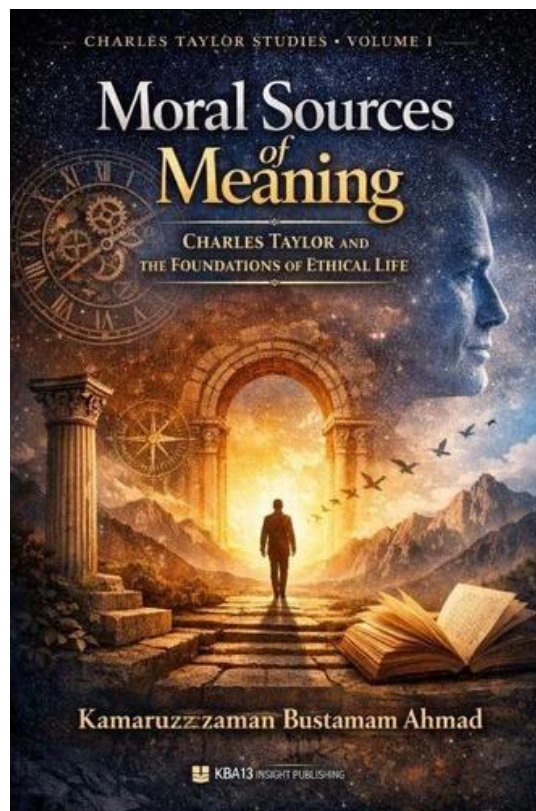


# Moral Sources of Meaning (Preview)

Charles Taylor and the Foundations of Ethical Life

Kamaruzzaman Bustamam Ahmad



January 5, 2026

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# Synopsis

*Moral Sources of Meaning: Charles Taylor and the Foundations of Ethical Life* is a profound philosophical inquiry into why modern moral thought feels increasingly thin, procedural, and disconnected from lived human experience.

Drawing on the moral philosophy of Charles Taylor, this book argues that ethics cannot begin with rules, duties, or obligations alone. Moral life, it insists, is grounded in meaning, orientation, and deep evaluative commitments that shape identity long before formal reasoning begins.

In an age dominated by procedural ethics, moral neutrality, and outcome-based reasoning, this book reclaims a richer moral landscape—one in which strong evaluation, horizons of significance, and moral sources give depth to human agency. Rather than treating morality as rule-compliance or preference calculation, the book shows how ethical life is lived as an ongoing orientation toward goods that define who we are and what makes a life meaningful.

This work offers a sustained critique of:

- procedural ethics and moral minimalism
- emotivism and preference-based moral theories
- utilitarian reductionism and moral naturalism

At the same time, it develops a non-reductive moral ontology, explaining why moral meaning is real without reducing it to empirical facts or subjective preferences. Ethics, in this view, is not a technical system but a structure of moral intelligibility that shapes commitment, responsibility, aspiration, and integrity across an entire life.

Written in a clear yet rigorous style, *Moral Sources of Meaning* is ideal for readers seeking depth without dogmatism. It speaks to scholars, graduate students, and serious readers interested in moral philosophy, ethical theory, philosophy of the self, and post-procedural ethics.

This book is not a manual for moral decision-making. It is a philosophical map—one that helps readers understand why moral life matters, why failure wounds, and why meaning cannot be engineered by rules alone.

This book is an original scholarly work. It offers an interpretive and philosophical analysis inspired by the writings of Charles Taylor, but it does not reproduce, summarize, or substitute for any single work by Charles Taylor or other authors cited herein.

All interpretations, arguments, and conclusions presented in this volume are the responsibility of the author.

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# Introduction

## The Modern Obsession with Rules and Procedures

Modern moral philosophy speaks almost only in the language of rules. (Anscombe, 1958, pp. 1–19) It starts with obligations, duties, permissions, and prohibitions. It presents moral life as a checklist of requirements to apply. This procedural posture claims to be sober, rational, and mature. It says it protects ethics from dogmatism by removing substantive visions of the good. On this view, moral reasoning means correct application, not meaningful orientation. What matters is not why a form of life is worth sustaining, but whether an action conforms to a rule everyone agrees on. As a result, ethics gains technical clarity but loses existential depth. It grows detached from how people actually experience moral demands in their lives.

This obsession with procedure stems from the traumas of modernity—wars driven by religion, violence fueled by sectarianism, and the fear that strong moral convictions often result in coercion. (Foucault’s *Interpretation of Modernity*, 2012) In reply, modern ethical theory aimed for neutrality, replacing concrete visions of the good with procedural norms. The goal was to govern plural societies without invoking divisive moral commitments. (“Secular Clinical Ethicists Should Not Be Neutral Toward All Religious Beliefs: An Argument for a Moral-Metaphysical Proceduralism” 2020, 533–548) However, this shift changed the nature of moral reasoning: ethics began to focus not on what makes a life good or meaningful, but on which rules could be justified to everyone. As a result, the moral life was reimagined as compliance within a procedural system rather than as the pursuit of purpose in a moral landscape.

As procedures increased, something subtle was lost. Moral language began to flatten. Words like honor, nobility, degradation, and fidelity were excluded from philosophical discourse. The vocabulary of rights, violations, and entitlements replaced them. (“Moral Articulacy: An Essay on Charles Taylor’s Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy” n.d.) This was not only a language shift. It changed moral sensibility’. Ethics now addresses external behavior but ignores inner orientation. It could regulate actions but could not address aspiration, shame, or moral failure (Dang, 2023). As a result, moral reasoning worked well as a form of social arbitration. But it did not guide people in living.

In daily life, moral experience does not start with rules. People face moral demands through attachments that come before reflection. They feel loyalties that are non-negotiable. Betrayals wound the self. Sometimes, one knows an act is unworthy even without a rule against it. Such experiences do not come from procedures, but from

a sense of what matters. People do not keep promises simply because a rule says so. Breaking a promise can fracture a key part of their self-understanding. Procedural ethics can describe the violation, but it cannot explain the full moral weight of the loss. (“Moral Articulatory: An Essay on Charles Taylor’s Critique of Modern Moral Philosophy” n.d.)

By starting with rules, modern ethics reverses how we make sense of morals. It treats obligation as basic and meaning as secondary. In fact, obligation gets its force from earlier orientations to the good. A rule only binds because it connects to a deeper evaluative background. This makes some actions worthy, and others contemptible. When this background is left unsaid, obligation grows brittle. It relies more on enforcement than commitment. It depends more on external sanctions than on internal allegiance. Under these conditions, moral life becomes fragile and easily worn out. (Herstein and Malcai 2024)

This fragility shows in today’s moral discourse. Appeals to duty often fail to persuade. This is not because people reject morality itself. They no longer see themselves in the moral language used. Procedures resolve disputes but leave people morally empty. People comply without conviction, or rebel without direction. Ethical debate swings between legalism and subjectivism. It shifts from strict enforcement to expressive self-assertion. Both share a common problem: they lack a rich account of moral meaning (Taylor 2025).

For Taylor, this lack shows a deeper philosophical error. Refusing to talk about moral sources does not make them disappear. It only pushes them out of sight. Every moral framework assumes a vision—often hidden—of what is worthy of respect, admiration, or sacrifice. Procedural ethics hides its fundamental moral ontology’ behind claims of neutrality. It appears minimal, but actually depends on strong values like autonomy, dignity’, and agency. If it avoids examining these values, modern ethics weakens its own understanding. (“Reclaiming human dignity: a critical review of contemporary theories in light of ontological foundations” 2025)

In this framework, the modern moral subject is seen as a chooser. They stand before options, guided by rules, but shaped by no deep commitments. Identity is made morally incidental, to be set aside instead of examined. This view does not match real moral agency. People do not simply choose. They judge themselves while making choices. They measure actions against standards already woven into their sense of self. (Taylor 1989)

This is why fixation on procedures does not last. Procedures can organize social life, but cannot provide moral depth. They tell us how to avoid wrongdoing, but not how to live well. They offer fences rather than maps, and constraints rather than guidance. In moral crisis—when rules clash, institutions fail, or identities fracture—procedure offers little help (Monaghan 2022). That is when we must return to the question ethics tried to skip: the question of meaning.

This book begins by claiming that moral philosophy must recover this question, or it will lose credibility. Moral rules do not create moral life. They assume it already

exists. Before obligation, there must be significance. Before the procedure, there must be an orientation. To grasp ethics, we must start not with rules, but with the sources from which moral meaning comes.

## Why Moral Reasoning Cannot Begin with Obligation

Moral obligation is often seen as ethics' firmest starting point because it is clear and actionable. Duties can be listed, violations pointed out, and responsibilities assigned without much ambiguity. Modern ethical theory values this clarity, especially in morally diverse societies. Thus, obligation promises a moral language that requires only agreed-upon rules, not shared visions of the good life (Zimmerman n.d.). Yet this promise hides a shortcut. Obligation feels solid because it relies on sources it does not name. Without those sources, duty is formally clear but lacks real weight.

To experience something as an obligation is to treat it as significant. One does not feel bound by duty just because a rule exists, but because breaking it would betray something important. However, understanding this force of obligation reveals a crucial point: its force is not self-generating. This leads to the next concern: obligation assumes a background in which some actions matter more than others, and where the self feels accountable to standards that go beyond instant preference. Modern moral theory' often reverses this, treating obligation as basic and meaning as optional (Alvarez and Ridley 2007, 543–552). This is a mistake; it confuses the outcome for the cause.

When moral reasoning begins with obligation, it silently assumes a subject already capable of recognizing moral demand. But such recognition is not automatic. It depends on a prior formation of the self—a sense of what counts as worthy, admirable, or shameful. A rule can command compliance, but it cannot explain why compliance should matter beyond fear of sanction. Without an articulated account of why obligations bind, ethical theory relies on motivations it does not fully grasp. This difficulty is apparent when obligations conflict or when their authority is weakened. Moral reasons are those reasons for action that people should observe and for which they should incur blame if ignored (Skorupski, 2007).

In such moments, appeal to duty alone offers little guidance. When two obligations pull in opposite directions, or when institutional rules appear unjust, the agent must turn to deeper considerations to judge which demand has greater weight. These considerations are not moral obligations themselves. They function as evaluations of significance, shaping the kinds of approval or disapproval one experiences. They reflect the sort of person one aspires to be and the type of life one finds worth affirming (Sylvan and Chang 2018). Obligation cannot adjudicate itself without recourse to meaning.

To manage these underlying difficulties, modern ethical systems often address them by creating formal hierarchies of rules or procedural decision methods. Yet these strate-

gies postpone the problem. They explain how to choose between duties, but not why one should care about duty at all. The moral agent then follows procedures whose justification remains opaque. This opacity erodes moral motivation, especially where social enforcement is weak. Duty without orientation can foster resentment, cynicism, or moral fatigue (Bagnoli, 2021).

These challenges highlight the reality that, in real life, obligation is not just an abstract command. It is felt through relationships, practices, and identities that matter to us. One cares for a parent not because of a rule, but because the relationship has weight. Betraying that duty would harm one's sense of self, not just break a norm. Ethical life is not rule-following with added feeling. It is a value lived out through action.

Building on this lived experience, when moral reasoning starts with obligation, it skew's our sense of moral failure. Failure then looks like non-compliance, not a fractured identity. But guilt, remorse, and shame signal more than broken rules. They show that one has failed what one values, and failed oneself and others. Such feelings are not fully captured by obligation alone. They belong to the realm of meaning, not just correctness.

This misrepresentation also shapes how modern societies teach morality. If ethics is just about learning rules, moral development becomes mechanical (Burch-Brown 2021) The deeper task—learning what deserves admiration, calls for resistance, or merits mourning—is left aside as mere opinion (“Moral Reasoning” 2016). This approach makes people competent but shallow, literate but not truly oriented.

For Charles Taylor, this situation reflects a misunderstanding of the moral self. Human beings are not neutral agents to whom obligations are externally attached. They are formed through strong evaluations and through distinctions between higher and lower goods. These give shape to their identity. Obligation gets its authority from these evaluative structures. To ignore them is to hollow out what ethics seeks to explain. (Taylor 1989).

This perspective suggests that reversing the order- putting meaning first—does not eliminate normativity. Instead, it grounds it in what people care about in fundamental, non-arbitrary ways. This shows why some demands feel absolute, while others do not move us, even if justified by rules. Moral reasoning then becomes a search for orientation, not just the imposition of regulations.

This book, therefore, insists that obligation cannot be the starting point of ethics. It must be understood as a derivative phenomenon. Obligation emerges from deeper moral sources that structure our sense of the good. To recover moral depth, ethical philosophy must again speak openly about those sources, without embarrassment or dogma. Only then can obligation regain it's binding force as meaningful moral life, not just as an abstract command.

#### Meaning, Orientation, and the Question of the Good

Moral meaning names the condition that makes ethical life intelligible. Before rules can command or duties can bind, people already live in a world where some things

matter more than others. This world is not merely a theory; it is a lived reality. We encounter it in admiration, resentment, shame, pride, and aspiration. When moral philosophy ignores this reality, it mistakes the surface for the foundation (Taylor, 1989). Meaning is not an optional extra; rather, it is the medium in which ethical judgment occurs.

Orientation is how agents find themselves in this space of significance. To be morally oriented is to have direction, to possess a sense of where one stands in relation to what is higher or lower, worthy or base. Orientation consists not only in explicit beliefs or stated principles; it often operates tacitly, shaping perception before thought occurs. Before we consider consequences or consult rules, we recognize cruelty as repellent and integrity as admirable. On this background, and not apart from it, moral life unfolds.

The question of the good, therefore, precedes the question of the right in a structural sense (Taylor, n.d.). This does not mean that individuals consciously ask themselves metaphysical questions before acting. Instead, it means that every judgment about what ought to be done presupposes a prior sense of what is worth doing. When ethical theory begins with rules, it treats this presupposition as invisible. When it starts with meaning, it seeks to make explicit the evaluative background that renders moral judgment possible in the first place.

Modern moral thought often treats the good with suspicion. Many link it to authoritarian moralities or doctrines that threaten pluralism (Schoenberg, 2016, pp. 9-24). As a result, the good is redefined as a matter of personal preference. The right is reserved for public reasons. Yet this divide misrepresents moral experience. Goods are not merely chosen; they are recognized. They pull us, answering to more than mere desire. Reducing the good to preference misses the depth of moral evaluation (Taylor, 1989).

Orientation toward the good cannot be separated from identity. Who one is depends on what one finds significant, but a person's sense of self also forms around goods seen as worthy of devotion, resistance, or sacrifice. As these goods shape life stories, some choices appear transformative while others become trivial. Instead of being an add-on to a neutral self, moral identity shows how commitments shape a coherent life over time.

When orientation is stable, moral life has continuity: one can endure hardship, make sacrifices, and accept loss because one knows what one is living for. In contrast, when orientation collapses, moral life fragments, actions lose their narrative coherence, and obligations appear arbitrary or oppressive. Moral disorientation is experienced not as mere uncertainty about what to do, but as a loss of footing in one's own life (Charles Taylor's *Moral Ontology*, 2020). A theory that lacks a language for this phenomenon cannot adequately address a moral crisis.

This is why conflicts of obligation often reveal more than disagreements about rules. They expose tensions between competing goods that structure the agent's identity. Choosing between them is not a matter of calculation. It is a matter of reorientation, often accompanied by regret or moral remainder. Something valuable is lost regardless

of the choice made. Such experiences show that the ethical life is not governed solely by rule-consistency. It also has a tragic dimension rooted in the plurality of goods.

Plurality does not mean relativism. Multiple goods exist, but evaluation is not arbitrary. Agents still make quality judgments, seeing some goods as higher or more demanding. These are not baseless. They grow from shared practices, histories, and ways of living (Taylor, 1989). Moral disagreement often shows different orientations in shared moral worlds, not a lack of standards.

To foreground meaning and orientation is therefore not to abandon rigor but to relocate it. Rigor does not lie in formal deduction alone. It lies in faithful articulation of the structures that actually govern moral experience. This requires attention to language, narrative, practice, and philosophical argument. It also requires resisting the temptation to reduce moral life to what can be publicly codified without remainder.

Recovering the question of the good does not mean returning to moral unanimity. It means seeing that ethical life cannot survive on procedures alone. Moral philosophy must take goods seriously, even if they are fragile or contested. Only by doing so can it explain why moral demands matter, why failure wounds, and why integrity still holds power.

This book begins with the belief that ethics is about orientation as much as it is about rules. By tracing the roots of moral meaning, it aims to reveal how moral life coheres beyond regulatory frameworks. The result is a deeper view of moral agency—one that offers depth without dogmatism, plurality without relativism, and obligation without emptiness.

## **Taylor's Place in Contemporary Moral Philosophy**

Charles Taylor has an unusual place in contemporary moral philosophy. While he refuses the usual starting points, he keeps their ambitions. Rather than begin from rules or reduce ethics to preference or feeling, he steers moral inquiry to what makes moral judgment possible. In doing so, he sets himself apart from deontological and consequentialist frameworks. Though he accepts their insights, he finds them inadequate foundations. For Taylor, [...]

[...] When talk of the good is dismissed as projection, public moral conversation retreats into proceduralism or technocracy. Ethical debate avoids substantive claims and confines itself to managing preferences. This retreat reinforces the very thinness of procedural ethics, leaving the moral life unarticulated and morally mute.

The irony is that emotivism depends on what it denies. It presupposes agents who care deeply and who experience specific values as central to who they are. Without such orientation, emotive expression would lack urgency. The force of moral feeling arises precisely because agents already inhabit a moral space structured by significance. Emotivism mistakes the surface phenomenon of feeling for the underlying structure that gives feeling its moral weight.

As a result, emotivism does not eliminate moral meaning; it renders it inexpressible. Meaning continues to operate tacitly, shaping action and judgment, but without conceptual acknowledgment. This creates a dissonance between lived moral experience and available moral language. Agents feel the pull of obligation and the sting of failure, yet lack the terms to explain why these experiences matter.

The collapse of thin moral theories accelerates at this point. When ethics loses the ability to speak about meaning, it cannot recover depth through refinement of procedure or analysis of preference. What is required is a [...]

[...] judgment to outcome comparison, utilitarianism quietly erases distinctions that matter deeply in lived moral experience. Not all goods are commensurable, and not all losses can be balanced by gains elsewhere without remainder.

This reduction becomes evident when moral integrity is introduced. In utilitarian reasoning, integrity has no intrinsic weight. It matters only insofar as it contributes to overall utility'. Commitments, loyalties, and personal boundaries are treated as variables that can be overridden when the calculus demands it. Yet for moral agents, integrity is not merely one good among others. It is constitutive of who they are. To violate it is not simply to choose a less optimal outcome, but to damage the self that acts.

The problem here is not that utilitarianism sometimes permits actions we find troubling, but that it cannot explain why they are alarming. When an action maximizes utility but requires betrayal or coercion, utilitarianism can acknowledge discomfort but cannot articulate its moral significance. The unease is treated as a psychological residue rather than as a moral signal. Moral conflict is reframed as inefficiency in preference satisfaction, rather than as a clash between incommensurable goods.

This reframing has consequences for moral motivation. Utilitarianism assumes that agents are motivated by [...]

[...] framework that treats all desires as commensurable units of preference.

The limitation appears when agents confront temptation. A person may strongly want to act in a way they judge wrong. The conflict is not just between two preferences of different strengths. It is between a desire and an evaluation of that desire. The agent does more than calculate; they take a stance on their own wanting. Preference-based models cannot describe this stance. They blend evaluation into desire, missing the distinction.

In moral reflection, agents separate what they want from what they ought to want. This distinction is not simply imposed by society. It is internal to the very idea of agency. One can feel particular desires as alien, degrading, or unworthy, even if they arise without prompting. To judge a desire this way means living in a moral world where quality matters. Preference-based models flatten this world into a single field of satisfactions (Millière, 2025).

This flattening distorts how we understand moral responsibility. If action is explained solely by the satisfaction of preferences, then moral failure appears as miscalculation or ignorance (O'Neill, 2000). Yet agents do not experience failure this way.

They see it as giving in to what they judge as lower. This experience requires a self that can distance itself from its own desires and hold them to standards beyond mere preference.

The reduction of desire to preference also obscures the formation of character. Moral life is not simply a sequence of isolated choices, but a process through which specific desires are cultivated and others disciplined. Over time, agents become the kinds of people who are moved by particular considerations rather than others. This process cannot be explained by preference aggregation alone, because it involves transforming the evaluative framework itself.

Treating desire as morally neutral means seeing the self as neutral too. In this model, the self is just an empty container for desires. But human beings do not see themselves this way. They link their identity with what they admire, are loyal to, and would sacrifice for. Desire is part of this identity, not something separate or before it.

This mischaracterization of the self has broader ethical consequences. When moral agency is understood as preference satisfaction under constraints, ethics becomes a matter of external regulation. The task of moral theory is to design systems that channel preferences toward acceptable outcomes (Broome, 1999). What drops out is the question of who the agent is becoming through their actions. The moral life is reduced to behavior management rather than to self-formation.

According to Taylor, this reduction misunderstands human agency. People are not just driven by desire—they [...]

[...] a situation calls for, based on who you are and what matters most to you. For instance, if a friend asks you to lie to cover up a work mistake, you must weigh loyalty to your friend against honesty and integrity at work. This means deciding what matters most to you and who you are.

This discernment is qualitative rather than quantitative. It does not ask how much value an action produces, but what kind of value is at stake. In many moral situations, agents are not choosing between more or less of the same good, but between goods of different kinds. Courage, loyalty, honesty, and care do not fit into a single metric without distortion (Aristotle, n.d.). Moral judgment involves recognizing which good has a rightful claim in a given context, even when that recognition cannot be justified through formal calculation.

Because judgment is interpretive, it is tied to perception. Moral agents learn to see situations in clear moral ways. They spot vulnerability, see betrayal, sense dignity, or notice injustice before forming reasons. This moral perception is learned, not irrational. It grows by taking part in practices that train attention and shape sensitivity. (McRae, 2011, pp. 587–608) Calculation depends on perception, but cannot replace it. Without perception, moral reasoning has nothing to address.

This explains why moral judgment resists algorithms. Rules can guide but not create judgment. Relying only on rules risks moral blindness and missing what does not fit categories. (Kontos, 2013) Judgment requires openness to context and details that

rules miss. Rule-based theorists may say rules give fairness, but such systems can miss moral subtleties. Thin theories especially struggle with these nuances.

Choice, too, is not enough for moral judgment. It suggests a set of equal options, waiting to be picked. But moral situations are rarely like that. Often, people feel pulled or compelled by a course of action rather than choosing freely. The idea of choice hides the demand at the heart of moral experience, as if moral action were just an option, not required by the situation. (Tomasello, 2019)

Moreover, moral judgment is reflexive. In judging a situation, the agent also judges themselves. They ask not only what ought to be done, but what it would mean for them to do it. This self-referential dimension sets moral judgment apart from technical decision-making. A correct calculation does not alter who one is. But a moral judgment often does. It affirms or revises the agent's self-understanding, sometimes irreversibly (Greene et al., 2014, pp. 159–171).

This reflexivity also explains why moral judgment elicits feelings such as confidence, doubt, remorse, or resolve. These feelings are not distractions; they are part of judgment itself. They show whether a person feels right or wrong about their decision. We can calculate without emotion, but moral judgment almost always leaves feelings behind. This leftover emotion shows that there is more involved than just making a choice.

Moral disagreement highlights the limits of calculation. When people disagree morally, they often differ not on facts or probabilities but on what matters most. They see the same situation differently because they value different things. In such cases, the argument is not about correcting a mistake but about inviting others to see from a new perspective. Moral judgment has a dialogical quality that calculation does not. This dialogical nature has practical effects, especially in education and ethical debates. In moral education, encouraging students to discuss different moral perspectives helps them learn to understand and appreciate other views. This builds empathy and critical thinking, which are key to handling ethical challenges. In real-world debates, recognizing the dialogical aspect of moral judgment can lead to more fruitful conversations by shifting the goal from winning to understanding and integrating various perspectives, ultimately enriching the discussion.

This dialogical character shows why moral reasoning is not just a private choice. Judgments take form within shared languages and practices that others can understand. Even when acting alone, people rely on standards they expect others to recognize. Moral judgment is both personal and social, resting on ways of life that give meaning to values.

Understanding moral judgment reframes ethical failure. Failure is not just picking the wrong tiling; it means misreading a situation or betraying yourself. This hurts because it reveals a gap between judgment and identity. We can correct calculations, but judgment involves who we are. This is what makes moral life serious.

By moving beyond calculation and choice, moral philosophy recovers contact with the lived reality of judgment. It acknowledges that moral agency involves discernment,

perception, and self-interpretation, not merely optimization. This recovery prepares the way for the final question of this chapter: why the self, as an evaluative being, cannot be morally neutral. To grasp the essence of moral agency, one must consider how the self inevitably carries its values and convictions. Personal and cultural narratives shape these values. These embedded values guide actions and judgments, making true neutrality an illusion. This understanding leads us to explore why complete detachment from moral commitments is unattainable.

## Why the Self Cannot Be Morally Neutral

The aspiration to moral neutrality rests on the image of a self that can stand back from all evaluative commitments and deliberate from an impartial standpoint. This image is deeply embedded in modern moral and political thought, where neutrality is often equated with fairness and respect for diversity. (Taylor, 1989) Yet, when examined from the standpoint of lived moral experience, this aspiration proves incoherent. A self without evaluative orientation would not be an impartial agent; it would be no agent at all. Moral neutrality presupposes precisely what it claims to suspend. (Taylor, 1989) However, defenders of neutrality might argue that procedural neutrality offers a framework that respects individual differences by providing a common ground for deliberation without prescribing substantive values. They could argue that neutrality is a vital tool for ensuring justice by enabling equitable participation and diverse perspectives in democratic processes.

Human selves are always already situated within a moral space. They encounter the world through distinctions that matter to them. These distinctions shape perception before deliberation begins. One notices injustice, cruelty, or dignity not as neutral data but as morally salient features. This salience is not chosen. It is learned, inhabited, and carried as part of one's identity'. (AbdelRahim, 2013) To imagine a self stripped of such orientation is to imagine a self incapable of recognition.

The claim to neutrality often masks a selective refusal to name one's own evaluative commitments. When a theory declares itself neutral, it typically elevates certain values: autonomy, choice, non-interference, while relegating others to the private sphere. These elevated values function as higher-order goods, organizing moral reasoning while denying their status as such. Neutrality thus operates not as the absence of evaluation, but as the dominance of a thin evaluative framework that refuses self-examination. A 'thin' evaluative framework in this context refers to a minimalist approach to moral reasoning that emphasizes abstract, universal principles at the expense of rich, contextual moral insights. In contrast, 'thick' moral concepts involve a nuanced understanding that considers the complexity of human experiences and the deep interconnections between values, identities, and social contexts (MacIntyre, 1981).

This refusal affects moral agency. When agents are encouraged to see themselves as neutral choosers, they may disown the sources of their moral judgment. Commitments

are treated as optional, not as part of identity'. Moral reasoning becomes detached from self-understanding. Responsibility is thinned. One acts correctly by following procedures, not authentically by conviction. The self is shielded from moral risk, but loses moral depth.

[...]

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Kamaruzzaman Bustamam Ahmad  
Moral Sources of Meaning (Preview)  
Charles Taylor and the Foundations of Ethical Life  
January 5, 2026

<[www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com)>

This self-published book marks a departure for an author whose previous work focused on the influence of various strains of Islamic religious philosophy on Southeast Asian politics. Here, he moves into modern moral philosophy, drawing on major figures like G. E. M. Anscombe and Alasdair MacIntyre alongside more obscure sources such as AbdelRahim's *Wild Children, Domesticated Dreams*. The position he ends up advocating resembles a kind of virtue-existentialism, similar to the one Benjamin Franks outlines in *Postanarchism and Meta-Ethics*.

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