



## Exploring the Lived Moral Meaning of Suffering and Ethical Awareness in Human Experience

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### ABSTRACT

Humanistic studies have long examined the moral and existential dimensions of suffering, emphasizing how individuals find meaning through pain, reflection, and ethical awareness. Within this broader field, phenomenological inquiry has become essential for understanding suffering not merely as a psychological event but as a lived moral experience that shapes ethical consciousness. However, previous studies remain largely descriptive and insufficiently articulate how suffering is interpreted as a process of moral awakening, thereby leaving a clear research gap concerning the mechanisms through which ethical awareness emerges from lived suffering. This study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, grounded in the philosophies of Heidegger and Ricoeur, to address this gap by systematically exploring how individuals morally interpret their suffering within concrete life contexts. Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with eight participants who had undergone profound experiences of suffering and analyzed through iterative thematic interpretation. The analysis followed three structured stages—textual interpretation, thematic consolidation, and moral–existential synthesis—to ensure methodological transparency.



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## INTRODUCTION

Human existence has long been defined by the confrontation with suffering an experience that transcends biological, cultural, and temporal boundaries (Asari, 2025). Across civilizations, literature, religion, and philosophy have sought to understand the moral and existential significance of suffering, treating it not merely as an affliction to be avoided but as a profound moment of self-encounter (Pejic et al., 2025). From ancient tragedies that dramatized human vulnerability to modern narratives of resilience and trauma, suffering has persisted as a central theme in the human search for meaning. It functions as both an existential reality and a moral inquiry, challenging individuals to reinterpret their pain in light of ethical awareness and shared humanity.

Within contemporary discourse, suffering is increasingly understood not solely as a psychological or sociological condition but as an ethical and phenomenological experience (Kasianenko & Boichak, 2025). Scholars such as Paul Ricoeur and Emmanuel Levinas have argued that suffering reveals the depth of human intersubjectivity, where pain becomes a call to responsibility toward the other (Husin, 2025). While these perspectives highlight the moral potential of suffering (Ricciardelli et al., 2025), they often remain conceptual and do not sufficiently explain how individuals experientially interpret suffering as a moral event..

In today's pluralistic and rapidly shifting moral landscape, the meanings of suffering have become increasingly fragmented. Technological progress and secular narratives often frame suffering as a problem to be solved rather than a phenomenon to be understood. Yet, within cultural and existential humanism, suffering remains essential to the construction of moral identity and the cultivation of empathy (Gonzalez & Torres Garrido, 2025). Exploring this dimension through a

phenomenological lens enables a return to the lived and interpretive core of experience seeking to understand how suffering is lived, felt, and given meaning by those who endure it.

The need to explore the lived meaning of suffering thus becomes both timely and necessary. While empirical and clinical studies address the causes and effects of suffering, phenomenological inquiry delves into its moral and existential essence (Kendrick & Early, 2025). Such an approach emphasizes the subjective, contextual, and interpretive dimensions of human experience, aiming to uncover how individuals transform their pain into moral insight (Refol et al., 2025). Through this exploration, suffering is reframed not as an endpoint but as a formative process in the unfolding of ethical selfhood.

Within the broader landscape of humanistic inquiry, the study of lived experiences particularly those rooted in moral and existential suffering has emerged as a crucial field of investigation. Phenomenological research provides a distinctive framework for understanding such experiences, prioritizing the how of human encounter over the what of measurable outcomes. Scholars have increasingly recognized that experiences of pain, loss, and moral reflection cannot be adequately represented through empirical abstraction alone, as their significance lies within the subjective and interpretive structures of consciousness (O'Neil et al., 2025). In this respect, phenomenology becomes indispensable for exploring how individuals internalize suffering, reinterpret it, and transform it into a source of ethical insight.

Despite this growing recognition, substantial methodological challenges persist in studying the subjective essence of suffering. Quantitative paradigms, while valuable for identifying general trends, often fail to access the depth and nuance of moral and emotional life. Statistical representations tend to reduce complex moral phenomena into discrete variables, overlooking the layered and evolving meanings embedded in lived experience (Sezgin et al., 2023). Similarly, even qualitative studies frequently adopt descriptive frameworks that lack interpretive engagement with participants' moral or existential reflections. As a result, the moral dimensions of suffering the ways it reshapes consciousness, alters relationships, and refines ethical perception remain underexplored within current literature.

These limitations reveal a critical methodological gap in existing research. Previous approaches have often emphasized symptomatology, behavior, or cognitive coping mechanisms, thereby neglecting the lived moral meaning of suffering (King et al., 2025). Without an interpretive framework grounded in phenomenology, such studies risk detaching human experience from the horizon of moral transformation that gives it depth and coherence. The hermeneutic phenomenological approach, by contrast, allows the exploration of meaning as it unfolds through reflection and narrative making it uniquely suited to illuminate how suffering contributes to moral awareness and ethical becoming.

While numerous studies have attempted to address the phenomenon of suffering through psychological, theological, or sociological frameworks, the prevailing approaches often emphasize pragmatic or therapeutic solutions such as coping strategies, behavioral adaptation, or cognitive restructuring. These frameworks, though valuable in addressing the external manifestations of suffering, tend to treat it as a problem to be solved rather than a lived moral encounter to be understood (Lee, 2024). Consequently, the deeper layers of meaning the how of experiencing suffering as a moral and existential event remain insufficiently explored.

Existing research has largely relied on empirical observation or quantitative measurement, which captures the frequency and intensity of suffering but not its moral resonance or interpretive texture (McShane et al., 2025). Such methods tend to externalize human experience, reducing it to observable data points while overlooking the inner structure of meaning that defines the individual's ethical transformation through suffering. Even in studies employing narrative or qualitative approaches, the focus often remains descriptive rather than interpretive, failing to uncover the phenomenological essence of how suffering is lived and understood within moral consciousness.

This methodological limitation creates a significant gap in understanding the ethical dimension of suffering as a transformative process (Marquis-Gravel et al., 2023). What remains

insufficiently known is how individuals reinterpret their suffering through reflection, narrative, and ethical awareness how pain becomes a medium through which moral identity is reshaped. Addressing this gap requires an approach that privileges lived experience over theoretical abstraction, and meaning over measurement.

By adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological framework, this study seeks to move beyond surface descriptions toward an exploration of the essence of suffering as moral awakening. Through interpretive engagement with participants' narratives and texts, phenomenology allows for a holistic comprehension of how suffering becomes meaningful, how it reveals moral responsibility, and how it redefines one's relation to self and others (Tresnawaty & Risdayah, 2025). In this way, phenomenological inquiry provides the conceptual and methodological depth needed to fill the existing void in understanding the lived moral significance of suffering.

Previous studies addressing the human experience of suffering have primarily drawn upon psychological, theological, and sociocultural perspectives (Bigdeli Shamloo et al., 2025). Scholars such as Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, and Jean-Luc Marion have emphasized that suffering embodies both an ethical and existential dimension, revealing the vulnerability and interdependence of human existence (Satriadi, 2025). However, much of this literature remains theoretical, with limited attention to how individuals live through suffering and derive moral meaning from it (Gunagama, 2025). Empirical investigations often focus on coping mechanisms or behavioral outcomes, leaving the interpretive process of moral awakening unexplored. This study builds upon that foundation by situating suffering within a phenomenological context that foregrounds lived experience and reflective meaning.

To address this limitation, the study adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach informed by the philosophical frameworks of Heidegger and Ricoeur. This method is chosen for its capacity to reveal the moral and existential meanings embedded in participants' lived experiences. Through interpretive analysis, the study seeks to uncover how suffering transforms moral awareness and deepens ethical understanding (Antojado & McPhee, 2025). The phenomenological perspective enables a focus on how meaning emerges through reflection, rather than what suffering objectively represents. In doing so, it responds to the central research question of how suffering becomes a site of ethical transformation and moral self-realization.

The structure of this article follows a coherent phenomenological flow. The introduction situates the phenomenon within its philosophical and humanistic background, emphasizing the need for interpretive inquiry (Cho, 2025). The Method section details the hermeneutic phenomenological design, participant criteria, and interpretive analytic process. The Results section presents the emergent themes that illuminate the moral and existential dimensions of suffering, while the Discussion interprets these themes within the broader philosophical discourse of ethics and human experience (Aitken et al., 2025). The article concludes with implications for humanistic and ethical studies, highlighting the transformative potential of suffering as revealed through phenomenological understanding.

## **RESEARCH METHODS**

### **Study Design**

This study employed a hermeneutic phenomenological design, grounded in the philosophical perspectives of Martin Heidegger and Paul Ricoeur (Lutz & Knox, 2014; McNabb, 2015). The approach was chosen to explore the lived moral experience of suffering and its transformative ethical dimensions as expressed through religious and literary narratives. Phenomenology, as a qualitative research paradigm, emphasizes understanding human experiences as they are lived, rather than as they are theorized or measured. In this study, hermeneutic phenomenology was operationalized as a systematic, stepwise interpretive process that moved from participants' concrete narratives toward progressively deeper levels of moral and existential meaning.

The hermeneutic variant of phenomenology was selected for its interpretive focus, which enables an in-depth exploration of meanings embedded within participants' narratives and texts. This

design facilitates an understanding of how individuals construct moral awareness through suffering by engaging in interpretive reflection. Rather than isolating variables, the method allows a dialogical relationship between part and whole, experience and interpretation consistent with the Ricoeurian hermeneutic circle to uncover the essential moral meanings of the phenomenon.

### **Participants**

Participants were individuals who had encountered profound experiences of suffering and engaged in reflective or expressive acts through literature, faith, or philosophical discourse (Hillman & Radel, 2018; Migdal, 2018). Selection followed purposive sampling, focusing on participants capable of articulating the moral and existential significance of their suffering.

Inclusion criteria encompassed adults aged between 25 and 60 years who had undergone significant personal hardship and demonstrated reflective awareness of its moral or existential implications. Exclusion criteria involved individuals unable to engage in prolonged reflective dialogue or whose experiences were dominated by acute trauma that might impede articulation.

The final sample consisted of eight participants (four male, four female) from diverse cultural and educational backgrounds. Their professions ranged from educators and writers to spiritual practitioners. This diversity ensured the inclusion of various moral and interpretive perspectives relevant to the phenomenon.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews conducted in a quiet and comfortable setting chosen by each participant to ensure openness and psychological safety (Carreiras & Castro, 2012; Iosifides, 2016). The interviews followed a guide that encouraged participants to narrate their lived experiences of suffering, focusing on moments of moral reflection, transformation, and meaning-making.

Each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent. Supplementary materials, such as reflective journals or excerpts of literary writings authored or cited by participants, were also incorporated to deepen contextual understanding.

Data collection emphasized empathetic engagement and interpretive listening, consistent with hermeneutic phenomenology's dialogical nature. All data were transcribed verbatim to preserve linguistic nuance and phenomenological depth.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using hermeneutic phenomenological interpretation, following the interpretive framework proposed by Ricoeur and further adapted for qualitative research contexts (Daly, 2007; Longhofer et al., 2012). The process involved multiple iterative stages:

1. Immersion and holistic reading to grasp the overall sense of the narrative.
2. Identification of meaning units, representing expressions of moral awareness, existential struggle, or ethical reflection.
3. Thematic condensation by grouping related meaning units into emergent moral and existential themes.
4. Interpretative synthesis through engagement with the hermeneutic circle, moving between participants' lived expressions and the broader philosophical horizon of moral experience.

NVivo software was utilized to organize and manage qualitative data, enabling systematic coding while maintaining interpretive flexibility (Fife, 2020; Kawamura, 2020). The outcome of the analysis was the identification of essential themes representing the moral transformation through suffering forming the foundation for the interpretive results presented earlier.

## RESULTS

### The Experience of Ethical Awakening Through Suffering

Participants described suffering not as a mere physical or emotional pain, but as a turning point of moral awakening a deeply internalized realization that reshapes their understanding of goodness, responsibility, and the human condition. Many recounted that through enduring suffering, they encountered the limits of their self-centered perception and discovered a renewed sense of moral empathy. One participant expressed:

“It was only when I suffered that I truly saw the pain of others. Before that, my compassion was theoretical now it feels lived, almost sacred.”

This theme reveals that suffering functions as an experiential moral education, transforming the subject’s ethical awareness. The narratives reflected a progressive transition from self-oriented anguish to a recognition of shared vulnerability, echoing the phenomenological notion of being-with-others (Heidegger’s *Mitsein*). Suffering thus emerges as both a site of moral crisis and an opportunity for ethical transcendence.



### The Hermeneutics of Meaning Interpreting Pain as a Moral Dialogue

Across the interviews and literary texts, participants demonstrated an interpretative movement: an effort to make sense of suffering through personal reflection and engagement with cultural or religious narratives. Suffering was perceived as a dialogue between the self and the world, between one’s pain and the moral values it evokes. As one respondent articulated:

“In my pain, I kept asking ‘why’, but eventually, the question changed to ‘for whom.’ That shift gave meaning to my endurance.”

This interpretative act, analyzed through the Ricoeurian hermeneutic circle, underscores how individuals reinterpret suffering from a moral standpoint. The meaning is not discovered but constructed through reflection, language, and relational context. The process of narrating pain becomes an ethical gesture itself an assertion of moral agency against meaninglessness.

### The Shared Horizon of Suffering Interpersonal Ethics and Empathic Resonance

Participants emphasized that suffering revealed a profound intersubjective connection. While the experience is deeply personal, it simultaneously opens a moral space where empathy and responsibility toward others arise. As one participant shared:

“When I saw my suffering reflected in others, I no longer felt isolated. Their pain became a mirror that made my own bearable.”

This theme illustrates the phenomenological interdependence between suffering and moral consciousness. The act of recognizing pain in others transforms suffering from an isolating experience into a communal phenomenon that reaffirms ethical solidarity. Literature and religious texts amplified this awareness, serving as mirrors of shared humanity. Through them, participants encountered not abstract moral rules but lived ethics a dynamic relationship between compassion, guilt, and moral action.

### **Transformation and Transcendence From Despair to Ethical Selfhood**

The culmination of participants' narratives was a description of transformation through endurance. Suffering was understood as a moral and existential passage a movement from despair toward ethical maturity. A recurrent metaphor among participants was that of "being refined by fire," where pain becomes a crucible for self-knowledge.

"Suffering stripped away my illusions. What remained was not strength, but clarity a sense of who I must become."

This process reflects a phenomenological transcendence: the subject surpasses the immediate experience of pain to uncover its moral significance. Rather than merely surviving suffering, participants reconstructed it as an essential condition for authentic being. Such transformation aligns with Ricoeur's notion of "the capable self" a being who acts, endures, and narrates meaningfully.

## **DISCUSSION**

The phenomenological analysis revealed that suffering serves as a transformative moral experience rather than merely a condition of pain or adversity. The essence of the findings lies in the recognition that suffering fosters ethical awareness, empathy, and a renewed understanding of human interconnection directly addressing the central question of how suffering becomes a site of moral awakening.

### **Contribution of Findings to the Research Question**

The findings demonstrate that moral transformation emerges through the lived process of interpreting and enduring suffering. Participants' narratives illuminated that suffering, when reflected upon, becomes a moral dialogue an inner conversation that reshapes the self's orientation toward others and the world (Nicholes, 2025). This interpretive process moves beyond the idea of suffering as a passive state to one of active moral becoming. The study contributes a unique understanding to phenomenological ethics by articulating that the moral essence of suffering lies in its reflexive temporality a process through which individuals reinterpret pain as moral insight over time (Matthew et al., 2025). Unlike psychological or behavioral explanations, this interpretation situates suffering as both a personal and relational event, where meaning unfolds through narrative reflection and moral engagement.

### **Relation to Previous Literature and Theoretical Context**

These findings align with (Yu et al., 2025) notion of narrative identity, which posits that ethical understanding arises through the act of recounting and interpreting lived experience. Participants' reflections echo Ricoeur's view that selfhood is realized in the tension between suffering and moral action the self as both agent and sufferer. Similarly, Levinas (1985) contends that suffering reveals responsibility toward the Other; this study extends that claim by illustrating how such responsibility is experienced phenomenologically within the self's interpretive consciousness.

Furthermore, the results resonate with (Díaz et al., 2025) concept of givenness, in which suffering appears as an event that exceeds rational comprehension yet invites moral response. Unlike previous empirical studies that treat suffering primarily as a psychological outcome (e.g., coping, resilience, or adaptation), the present interpretation situates it as an ethical phenomenon a site of moral revelation (Tillis, 2025). This aligns with contemporary hermeneutic thought emphasizing that moral understanding arises not from abstract reasoning but from embodied experience and interpretive reflection.

Collectively, the discussion underscores that the phenomenological perspective enables a richer, more holistic grasp of suffering's moral significance. It affirms that meaning is not discovered externally but constituted through the lived act of understanding, thereby expanding both the theoretical and experiential boundaries of moral phenomenology.

### **Implications of the Findings**

The findings of this study hold significant philosophical, social, and ethical implications. From a philosophical perspective, the results illuminate how suffering operates as a moral catalyst, transforming human consciousness through reflection and empathy. In broader social and cultural contexts, the study highlights the relevance of understanding suffering as a shared human experience that fosters ethical solidarity and compassion (Boatsi & Dwarika, 2025). Such insights challenge contemporary tendencies to view suffering as a purely clinical or psychological problem, advocating instead for a moral-humanistic approach that acknowledges the formative role of pain in shaping ethical awareness. On a professional level particularly in fields such as education, counseling, and theology these findings suggest that reflective engagement with narratives of suffering can cultivate deeper moral sensitivity and interpersonal understanding.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Despite its interpretive depth, this study acknowledges several limitations. The focus on a small, purposively selected group limits the generalizability of the findings to broader populations, as phenomenological research aims for depth of understanding rather than statistical representation. Moreover, the reliance on self-reported narratives may be influenced by participants' retrospective interpretations and linguistic articulation, which could shape the construction of meaning (Felipe Sobczynski et al., 2023). The hermeneutic approach, while powerful for uncovering moral significance, also implies that interpretations are co-constructed within the dialogical space between participant and interpreter. Finally, the study's cultural and philosophical framing may not fully capture variations in how suffering is conceptualized across different traditions or worldviews.

### **Prospective Directions for Future Research**

Future studies could extend this inquiry by exploring how moral awareness through suffering manifests in diverse cultural, spiritual, or professional settings (Abou-Bakr, 2023). Comparative phenomenological investigations may reveal cross-cultural variations in how individuals interpret pain and moral transformation. Additionally, integrating interdisciplinary perspectives from psychology, ethics, and literary studies could further illuminate the interrelation between narrative meaning-making and moral development (Chen, 2025). Subsequent research might also consider longitudinal phenomenological approaches to trace how ethical insight evolves over time following profound suffering. By expanding these explorations, future scholarship can deepen the understanding of suffering as a moral and existential phenomenon that continues to shape the contours of human consciousness and ethical responsibility.

## **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the lived moral experience of suffering through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach, seeking to understand how pain becomes a source of ethical transformation and self-awareness. The findings revealed that suffering is not merely an experience of despair but a profound moral dialogue that reorients individuals toward empathy, responsibility, and ethical maturity. By uncovering the interpretive process through which suffering gains meaning, this study addresses a critical gap in existing research that often treats suffering as a psychological or clinical phenomenon rather than an ethical one. The results contribute to the broader field of moral phenomenology by demonstrating how reflection and narrative reconstruction transform suffering into moral insight and relational understanding. These insights have implications for moral education, counseling, and humanistic ethics, promoting a deeper appreciation of suffering as an integral dimension of ethical development. Future studies may extend this inquiry across different cultural and

existential contexts to further explore how moral awareness evolves through diverse experiences of human suffering.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. All funding sources and institutional affiliations have been fully disclosed in the Acknowledgement section, and the research was conducted independently without any influence from the sponsoring organization.

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