

## Book Review

### *Philosophy of Nursing: A New Vision for Health Care*

J.M. Brencick and G.A. Webster

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Reviewed by Sally Thorne

Some books are designed to provoke controversy, and this new volume by Brencick and Webster seems no exception. Tantalizingly entitled *Philosophy of Nursing*, it will attract readers who are interested in understanding something of the nature and status of philosophizing within the discipline or who hope to find a particular philosophical perspective clearly articulated. In my opinion, this book accomplishes neither.

The basic premise of the book is that nursing relies upon knowledge of universality in direct application to the singularity of individuals. Because of this, it affords a special context in which the insights of the philosophers can be uniquely applied. The foundation for this volume is that nursing theories are inherently grounded in the knowledge of disciplines other than nursing, and therefore are inadequate to the task of conceptualizing the challenge of this particular discipline. Instead, the authors advocate for a philosophy of nursing, which they attempt to work out in this volume. They intend for their philosophy to deepen our understanding of what is already known in such a manner that it will "illuminate nursing using the lens of universality and singularity" (p. 3). As such, they argue that it will represent a new vision for health care.

The book's structure is creative and intriguing. Following an introductory discussion to set the stage for the subsequent chapters, a rather poetic and reflective "nursing event" is dissected and articulated in rich and colourful detail. This illustrative diversion is intended to reframe the reader's perceptions about what nursing events entail, and immerse the reader in a complex, emotionally charged, and philosophically interesting encounter between a patient and a nurse. It is intended to locate the philosophy to be developed in a genus of nursing encounter that is intensely subjective and captures the essence of human experiences within illness. It places the nurse, as a sensing and thinking person, at the centre of the experience, raising questions, concerns,

thoughts, and feelings that might be inherent in such an encounter. Two subsequent chapters involve a "thought experiment," set up as an imaginary dialogue between one of the co-authors and a series of early and modern philosophers. Following upon this examination of the traditions of philosophical thinking that might be relevant to a philosophy of nursing, the next chapter summarizes the foundations of Jean Watson's "theory of caring." Finally, the concluding chapter presents specific and particular opinions about some of the ideas that might be embedded in a treatment that extends Watson's work into a full-fledged philosophy.

While the structure and form of *Philosophy of Nursing* are unique and highly creative, and while the book advances a great number of ideas that will undoubtedly stimulate debate and dialogue, this philosophy of nursing flounders in its attempt to sort through the available ideas and present a coherent and convincing argument that will guide philosophical reasoning for the discipline. A number of problems contribute to this difficulty. By drawing on examples from the text, I will try to illustrate what they are and why they matter.

An immediate concern that arises for the reader is the surprisingly scant consideration of any literature representing either nursing theory or the philosophy of nursing. Since the foundational claim of the book is that nursing theories are inadequate because they derive so strongly from the ideas of other disciplines, this omission is rather glaring. Beyond very brief references to the work of Martha Rogers and Betty Neuman, there is no mention at all of a rather substantial body of theoretical writing in nursing over the past several decades. In contrast, there is an extensive reliance on the writings of Jean Watson, without any critical examination of the degree to which her work might have been influenced by the very factors that are presumed to render the remainder of the literature irrelevant. Indeed the selection of Jean Watson as a foundational theorist is justified several times throughout the book on the basis of her personal relationship with one of the co-authors and the claim that her conceptualization of the caring occasion might be understood as a basic concept in nursing. Further complicating this gap is the absence of any mention that others in nursing have written about, examined, or theorized about a philosophy of nursing and what that might look like. Thus the rationale for *Philosophy of Nursing* appears to be grounded in a somewhat misrepresentative portrait of how philosophy has informed and intrigued numerous nurse scholars for over a century.

Although I admire risk-taking and creativity in scholarly writing, I must confess that I was troubled by many aspects of the dialogue set up between one of the co-authors and the philosophers of historical time. Where this technique is successful, it engages the reader in an imaginary discussion in which questions that might trouble nurses are posed to the philosophers whose ideas have been most influential in our current ontological and epistemological understandings. However, in a great many instances the creative writing of this section shifts rather heavily into a somewhat disturbing debate in which the philosophers are set up as defending the extreme interpretations of their positions while the nurse tries to help them appreciate the error of their ways. In articulating her own personal responses to the claims as she imagines them, the nurse co-author makes explicit her own questions and confusions as if they represent nursing's inevitable interpretations. While it is somewhat appealing to have these thinkers humanized in this kind of dialogue, the degree to which they crack jokes or doodle on their napkins leans towards absurdity, which may not always serve the intended purpose. When Kierkegaard uses the word "yuck" to express his displeasure at the idea of referring to persons as patients, we get the sense that the author has perhaps taken the imaginative exercise one step too far. Her analysis of the potential relevance of his opinions fulfils little of the promise that such a creative exercise might offer: "I am taken aback by Kierkegaard, and even worry a little bit about his sanity. But I have to admit that he does make some valid and important points" (p. 123). Towards the conclusion of this exercise, when she is able to get Husserl to change his mind about the nature of the body and its ability to influence experience, the reader can be excused for losing patience.

A curiosity of this book, something I found irritating until I developed a theory about it, is the peculiar variation that occurs with the use of the first person and the "voice of the author." Throughout the first five chapters, reference to the authors in the first-person plural is interspersed with specific mentions of the ideas of the "nurse co-author." Over the course of the work, the reader comes to understand that individual as the primary author of all but the final chapter, where the style and tone change dramatically and the masculine first person is sometimes used. Thus the reader who detects this pattern comes away with an impression of some creative experimentation on the part of a nurse author, with a philosopher completing the exercise by weaving some of its threads into a philosophical tapestry that is intended to extend the creative thinking into a coherent set of claims.

Finally, because *Philosophy of Nursing* purports to represent a philosophy of nursing, the essence of the final chapter is one that should be of great interest to many nurse scholars. Clearly, the philosophy articulated here builds upon Jean Watson's work, but in the concluding chapter is somewhat more critical of that work than has been apparent in the earlier chapters. Surprisingly, the focus of this philosophy departs from the embodied and transactional experiences that have been depicted as central to nursing in the early chapters. In this philosophy of nursing, the emphasis is on intuition, contemplation, and spirituality. Persons are understood as "communities of experiencing entities" and much of the discussion revolves around issues associated with defining how caring is different when the body of the patient is dying or dead. It is argued that practising nurses, through caring, make a significant contribution to the "creation of the consequent nature of God" (p. 184), suggesting a theological thrust that has not been explicit in the work to this point. By relying on illustrations of "diseased spirituality" and orienting a vision of nursing practice that depicts acts of caring as "of special interest to God," the concluding chapter is both thought-provoking and disturbing.

Despite the promise of its title, this book will not be the definitive text on philosophy of nursing that so many of us have been seeking. In fact, it may not even make the reading list. But I am confident that it will stimulate passionate responses and heated debate. And in that, it will have made a contribution.

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