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## From the editor

In keeping with the theme, "Ethical Issues," I have invited Beverly McElmurry and Roland Yarling to share their current thinking since reading and hearing of the many responses to their article in *ANS* 8:2 entitled "The Moral Foundation of Nursing." As they note here, the discourse that has arisen in nursing around

these issues is significant and necessary for our collective development. I am pleased to provide this avenue for all of us to participate in this continuing discourse.

—Peggy L. Chinn, PhD, FAAN  
Editor

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## Guest editorial

Our article, "The Moral Foundation of Nursing" (*ANS* 8:2, January 1986), has sparked a discourse in nursing ethics that is both gratifying and unusual. In that article we argued that the foundation of nursing ethics was the moral agency of the nurse. And, to have moral agency, the nurse must have freedom of choice.

In response, *ANS* readers have written two letters to the Editor (A. T. Ferran, *ANS* 8:4, July 1986, and J. Brody and S. Greenfield, *ANS* 9:1, October 1986). Ferran's comments stressed the importance of nursing administrators in fostering the development of work environments in which nurses are free to be moral. The second letter, by Brody and Greenfield, reiterated a definition of an ethical dilemma that most nurses understand, such as choosing between limited and difficult options. However, they advanced the idea that nurses know where their moral responsibilities lie and thus do not experience an ethical dilemma in the situation of being forced to choose between the well-being of the patient and the well-being of the nurse. Obviously, we disagree with these authors; our thesis was that the crux of moral agency or the foundation of a nursing ethic was freedom of choice.

Following the letters, there have been three articles in *ANS* in reference to our article:

"Nursing Ethics in an Age of Controversy," by A. Bishop and J. Scudder (*ANS* 9:3, April 1987); "In Search of the Moral Foundation of Nursing," by J. S. Packard and M. Ferrara (*ANS* 10:4, July 1988); and "Covenantal Relationships: Grounding for the Nursing Ethic," by M. Cooper (*ANS* 10:4, July 1988). We have had mixed reactions to these articles. On some points, we wonder if the authors of the above articles really read our article. On other points, we have found the authors developing related and important ideas that expand the general discussion about nursing ethics, but that are not a critique (or even a take-off) of our positions.

Following publication of the Bishop and Scudder article, we had the privilege of debating these authors, and the other authors at a symposium at McGill University (Dawson Schultz, Coordinator, May 1988). We remain unconvinced of their argument for an "in-between situation" for nurses. It does not make sense to us that we should encourage a team approach to moral decision making if it does not allow individual choice. Taken to a logical end, this team approach becomes a modern version of Dante Alighieri's point—The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who in time of great moral crises maintained their neutrality.

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The thesis of Packard and Ferrara is that a moral foundation of nursing is discerned by a clear understanding of the idea of nursing. It is unclear what they mean when they state that certain intellectual errors of nurses have become the source of their moral predicament. They recommend embarking on a journey to close the distance between contemporary nursing paradigms and the moral foundation of nursing. There is a tinge of despair in their suggestion that after we are clearer about the idea of nursing all we will know is that nursing is not the job nurses hold. These authors introduce a large number of ideas, but dismiss many of them, without sufficient development, with comments such as: "The implications of these statements are complex and go beyond the preliminary scope of this article."<sup>1(p64)</sup>

Overall, any relationship between the Packard and Ferrara article and our thesis is purely accidental. They worry that the ideas we have advanced are setting conditions for abuse of patients because it is too easy to draw misleading inferences from our ideas. Rest assured, we do not think the possession of moral agency ensures that we will always know good decisions from bad decisions.

The Cooper article begins with the erroneous idea that we had interpreted nursing ethics as grounded in the social reform of institutions, such as hospitals. For Cooper, the covenantal relationship that nurses have with patients provides the foundation for a nursing ethic, one that is built upon the principle of fidelity. We presume that a necessary condition for fidelity is the freedom of choice that allows one to enter into covenantal relationships. Likewise, one should have such freedom of choice in order to work for the social reform of institutions.

One of the interesting insights we gained

from the above responses is that the language for discussing nursing ethics is so varied. Each author (including ourselves) works from the premise that it is our experience of nursing, or knowing, that provides the base from which we begin the discourse. The words are grounded in the language of the disciplines we have studied. Thus, a discourse in nursing ethics reveals a diversity in nursing that assures us our strength, and our problems. To this discourse we bring various traditions and positions in philosophy, sociology, psychology, theology, and so forth, and eventually they become translated into that aspect of nursing science we call nursing ethics. The word that we used in the first article that seemed to inflame people was autonomy. We have written this response without using that word to explain our position, but wonder if it is a taboo word for nursing. Autonomous individuals do enter into relationships with others, and they do work for the changes needed in their society. We commend Alan Gewirth's 1978 work<sup>2</sup> to *ANS* readers for an in-depth discussion of the reasons why a person (and that does mean nurses) has rights to freedom of action and ought to be able to live in relation with others free from forced choice.

## REFERENCES

1. Packard JS, Ferrara M: In search of the moral foundation of nursing. *Adv Nurs Sci* 1988;10(4):60-71.
  2. Gewirth A: *Reason and Morality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978.
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