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Clarifying Nursing as a Discipline: The Case for Nursology

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ABSTRACT

Nursing science has developed into a multifaceted field that integrates empirical, theoretical, and humanistic knowledge. Despite its intellectual development, questions remain regarding the conceptual clarity of its disciplinary identity, which is often positioned as an applied health science rather than an autonomous field of inquiry. In response to these ongoing debates, nursology has been proposed as a conceptual reframing that seeks to articulate the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of nursing more explicitly. This paper aims to explore the conceptual and philosophical basis of nursology as a proposed disciplinary reframing of nursing science through philosophical inquiry and theoretical synthesis. A philosophical–theoretical approach was employed using conceptual analysis, disciplinary critique, and integrative synthesis. Canonical works in philosophy of science, phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethics, and caring science were critically examined to explore the conceptual foundations of nursology. The analysis identified four interrelated conceptual dimensions disciplinary differentiation, caring ontology, epistemological coherence, and methodological pluralism that collectively provide a philosophical framework for understanding nursology as a proposed conceptual orientation for nursing science rather than as an empirically established independent discipline. This paper argues that nursology may offer a coherent philosophical framework for clarifying nursing's disciplinary identity and strengthening the theoretical integration of research, education, and practice. Further scholarly dialogue and empirical inquiry are warranted to examine the usefulness and applicability of this conceptual perspective.

Keywords: Caring Ontology, Integrative Epistemology, Methodological Pluralism, Nursology, Nursing Science



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1. Introduction

The evolution of nursing science reflects a sustained intellectual effort to articulate its disciplinary identity within the broader architecture of the health sciences. Historically, nursing has been positioned as an applied, practice-oriented field, drawing extensively on medicine, psychology, sociology, and allied disciplines. While this interdisciplinary orientation has undeniably enriched clinical practice and expanded the scope of nursing knowledge, it has also contributed to persistent ambiguity regarding the discipline's unique epistemic domain and theoretical foundations (Donaldson & Crowley, 1978; Newman et al., 1991). The ambiguity is not merely terminological but structural, shaping how nursing knowledge is produced, validated, and applied (Grace et al., 2016; Smith, 2019).

Despite substantial advances in nursing theory and philosophy, questions concerning the discipline's conceptual identity and philosophical foundations continue to be the subject of scholarly debate. Recent literature has highlighted the need for greater conceptual integration to strengthen nursing's academic identity, clarify its unique disciplinary contribution, and better connect philosophical perspectives with research, education, and practice (Barrow, 2023; van der Cingel & Brouwer, 2021). Likewise, contemporary discussions emphasize that methodological and epistemological pluralism enrich nursing knowledge but also require coherent philosophical frameworks capable of integrating diverse forms of inquiry within a unified disciplinary perspective (Dolan, 2022). Building on these developments, the present paper proposes nursing as an integrative philosophical framework that synthesizes caring ontology, integrative epistemology, and methodological pluralism to strengthen the philosophical coherence of nursing as a scientific discipline.

Within the philosophy of science, a discipline is distinguished by the clarity of its object of inquiry, its epistemological assumptions, and the coherence of its methodological frameworks (Kuhn, 1962; Popper, 2002). Mature disciplines are characterized by the presence of stable paradigms that organize knowledge production and guide research trajectories. These paradigms function not only as intellectual scaffolds but also as mechanisms for disciplinary consolidation and identity formation (Lakatos, 1978). Despite significant theoretical advancements, nursing science continues to grapple with questions regarding its central phenomenon and conceptual unity, often oscillating between biomedical alignment and holistic, person-centered paradigms (Fawcett, 1984; Popper, 2002). Nursing has emerged in response to this enduring challenge. Rather than treating nursing as an extension of other sciences, it reframes the field as a distinct discipline centered on caring. This view grounds nursing in its own ontological and epistemological foundations, shaped by human relationality, vulnerability, and lived experience. In this sense, nursing represents not just a change in terms, but a redefinition of nursing's core focus (Smith, 2019; Watson, 2008).

This reframing aligns with philosophical traditions that emphasize the relational and existential dimensions of human existence. The existential ontology of Martin Heidegger conceptualizes human beings as *being-in-the-world*, wherein care (*Sorge*) constitutes a fundamental structure of existence rather than a contingent activity (Heidegger, 1962). From this perspective, caring is not an optional attribute but an ontological condition that underlies all human engagement. Similarly, the hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer underscores the interpretive nature of understanding, wherein meaning emerges through dialogue, historical situatedness, and relational interaction (Gadamer, 2004). These perspectives collectively challenge reductionist and mechanistic models of healthcare by emphasizing the primacy of relational meaning and contextual interpretation.

Ethical philosophy further deepens this ontological orientation. Emmanuel Levinas situates responsibility to the Other as the foundational ethical condition of human existence, positing that relational obligation precedes cognition and action (Levinas, 1969). This ethical primacy resonates profoundly with the moral dimensions of nursing, wherein responsiveness to patient vulnerability and the preservation of dignity are central to practice. Such philosophical insights provide a robust conceptual foundation for understanding caring not merely as a professional function but as an ethical and existential imperative embedded within human relations.

Within nursing theory, caring has consistently been identified as the central phenomenon of the discipline. Jean Watson conceptualizes caring as a transpersonal process that transcends physical interaction, emphasizing the interconnectedness of mind, body, and spirit (Watson, 2008). Katie Eriksson advances the notion of caritative caring, grounded in love, mercy, and human dignity, thereby situating caring within a moral and

existential framework (Eriksson, 2007). Also, the Theory of *Nursing As Caring* posits that all persons are inherently caring and that nursing is a relational practice that emerges through shared lived experiences. Together, these theoretical contributions affirm that caring is not peripheral but constitutive of nursing knowledge and practice.

Despite these advances, the integration of caring into a coherent disciplinary framework remains incomplete. Nursing science often lacks explicit articulation of its ontological commitments and epistemological structure, resulting in conceptual fragmentation and theoretical inconsistency (Alligood & Tomey, 2002; Chinn & Kramer, 2018). This fragmentation is reflected in the coexistence of multiple, often non-integrated theoretical frameworks, the absence of a consistently articulated central phenomenon, and the continued reliance on external disciplinary paradigms to define nursing knowledge. Variations in how caring is conceptualized ranging from behavioral interventions to moral virtues and relational processes—further illustrate the lack of ontological alignment within the discipline. As a result, nursing science frequently oscillates between biomedical reductionism and holistic, humanistic approaches, lacking a unifying philosophical framework. This condition underscores the need for a coherent disciplinary framework capable of integrating these perspectives while clearly defining the epistemic and ontological boundaries of nursing (Silva & Sorrell, 2020).

The emergence of nursing science can thus be understood as a paradigmatic response to these limitations. Drawing on Thomas Kuhn's notion of scientific revolutions, paradigm shifts occur when existing frameworks are no longer adequate to account for the phenomena they seek to explain, necessitating a reconfiguration of foundational assumptions (Kuhn, 1962). Nursing science represents such a shift by redefining the discipline's core phenomenon, rearticulating its ontological grounding, and integrating diverse epistemological perspectives into a coherent framework. This repositioning not only clarifies disciplinary identity but also enhances the capacity of nursing science to address complex human experiences of health, illness, and care.

Moreover, the movement toward nursing science reflects broader trends in contemporary science that emphasize complexity, relationality, and interdisciplinarity. Rather than adhering to rigid methodological hierarchies, emerging scientific paradigms advocate for integrative approaches that accommodate multiple ways of knowing and diverse forms of evidence (Morin, 2008; Braidotti, 2019). In this context, nursing science aligns with a post-positivist and post-humanist orientation that recognizes the interconnectedness of individuals, systems, and environments. Such an orientation is particularly relevant in healthcare, where the complexity of human experience cannot be fully captured through reductionist models alone.

In this light, the proposed framework of nursing science offers an integrative philosophical perspective for advancing nursing science. By grounding the discipline in a caring ontology, it directs scholarly attention toward the relational, ethical, and experiential dimensions of human caring that distinguish nursing as a discipline (Barrow, 2023; Tembo, 2024; van der Cingel & Brouwer, 2021). Through an integrative epistemology, the framework recognizes empirical, interpretive, and philosophical forms of knowing as complementary sources of disciplinary knowledge, thereby supporting a more comprehensive understanding of nursing phenomena (McCaffrey, 2021; Reed, 2022). Furthermore, by embracing methodological pluralism, it encourages the use of diverse research approaches that are responsive to the complexity of caring, enabling richer conceptual development and broader disciplinary inquiry (Dolan, 2022; Younas, 2021). Collectively, these philosophical orientations provide a coherent conceptual foundation that may strengthen the integration of nursing research, education, and practice while reinforcing the discipline's distinct scientific identity (Barrow, 2023).

This paper therefore aims to critically examine nursing science as a proposed integrative philosophical framework for understanding nursing as a scientific discipline. Through philosophical inquiry and theoretical synthesis, it seeks to articulate the ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations of this framework and to explore its implications for nursing research, education, and practice. In doing so, the paper contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions concerning disciplinary identity, philosophical coherence, and knowledge development within nursing, while offering a conceptual model that may strengthen the integration of theory and practice in an increasingly complex healthcare environment (Barrow, 2023; Holt, 2023; Tembo, 2024).

Although contemporary nursing scholarship has generated robust theoretical and philosophical traditions, it may be argued that the discipline already possesses sufficient conceptual and epistemological resources without requiring additional terminology or structural reframing. From this perspective, introducing nursing could be interpreted as a semantic reformulation rather than a substantive disciplinary advance. Such a critique is important because nursing philosophy continues to caution against conceptual proliferation that does not contribute meaningfully to disciplinary knowledge (Thorne, 2023a).

However, the framework proposed in this paper is not intended to replace established nursing theories or redefine the profession. Rather, it seeks to integrate existing theoretical and philosophical contributions within a coherent conceptual structure that explicitly relates caring ontology, integrative epistemology, and methodological pluralism. By emphasizing these interrelated philosophical dimensions, the proposed framework aims to enhance conceptual coherence, clarify nursing's distinctive object of inquiry, and provide a more integrated foundation for future scholarship, education, and professional practice (Dolan, 2022; McCaffrey, 2021; Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023).

2. Methods

2.1 Study Design

This study employed a philosophical–theoretical design to examine the conceptual foundations of nursing as a proposed framework for clarifying nursing as a distinct scientific discipline. Rather than generating empirical evidence, the study adopted philosophical inquiry as a systematic methodology for conceptual clarification, theoretical interpretation, and framework development (Pesut & Johnson, 2008; Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023). This approach is consistent with established traditions in the philosophy of science, wherein conceptual analysis and theoretical reconstruction are recognized as legitimate methods for advancing disciplinary knowledge and examining foundational assumptions (Chiu et al., 2022; Kuhn, 1962; Popper, 2002). Within nursing scholarship, philosophical–theoretical inquiry is appropriate for addressing questions concerning ontology, epistemology, methodology, and disciplinary identity (Walker & Avant, 2019).

The study was guided by the premise that, despite significant theoretical developments, nursing continues to lack an integrative philosophical framework that coherently synthesizes its ontological, epistemological, and methodological foundations. Accordingly, the objective of this inquiry was not to empirically establish nursing as an independent discipline but to develop and examine a conceptual framework that integrates caring ontology, integrative epistemology, and methodological pluralism as complementary dimensions of nursing knowledge.

The philosophical theoretical design followed a structured process of conceptual inquiry. Existing philosophical and nursing theories were systematically examined to identify concepts relevant to disciplinary identity, caring, knowledge development, and methodological orientation. These concepts were subsequently interpreted through an integrative philosophical perspective informed by phenomenology, hermeneutics, ethical philosophy, and caring science. The resulting interpretations were then synthesized to construct a coherent conceptual framework that explains the interrelationships among the proposed dimensions of nursing. Throughout the inquiry, emphasis was placed on conceptual coherence, logical consistency, philosophical congruence, and disciplinary relevance rather than empirical verification.

To ensure methodological transparency, the analytical process was organized into four sequential stages: (1) concept identification, involving the extraction of key philosophical and disciplinary concepts from selected texts; (2) theoretical interpretation, in which these concepts were critically examined and interpreted within their philosophical and nursing contexts; (3) conceptual synthesis, wherein related concepts were integrated into higher-order conceptual dimensions; and (4) framework development, through which the synthesized concepts were organized into an integrative philosophical model of nursing. These stages collectively provided a systematic and transparent approach to developing the proposed conceptual framework while maintaining consistency with established standards for philosophical and theoretical inquiry.

2.2 Philosophical Orientation

The inquiry was grounded in an integrative philosophical orientation that drew on phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ethical philosophy. Phenomenology, particularly the work of Martin Heidegger, provided the ontological lens for understanding caring as a mode of *being-in-the-world*, emphasizing relationality and existence as fundamental structures of human life (Heidegger, 1962). From this perspective, caring can be understood as supporting the conceptualisation of caring as an ontological condition rather than a mere functional activity.

Hermeneutics, as articulated by Hans-Georg Gadamer, informed the interpretive dimension of the analysis. Hermeneutic philosophy emphasizes that understanding is historically situated and dialogical, requiring engagement with texts and concepts within their contextual meanings (Gadamer, 2004). This orientation enabled a nuanced interpretation of both philosophical and nursing theories, facilitating the integration of diverse perspectives.

Ethical philosophy, particularly the work of Emmanuel Levinas, provided the moral grounding for the study. Levinas' emphasis on responsibility to the Other as the foundation of human existence aligns closely with the ethical dimensions of nursing practice (Levinas, 1969). This ethical orientation underscores the centrality of relational responsibility in the conceptualization of caring ontology.

2.3 Data Sources and Selection

The study employed a purposive and theoretically driven selection of primary philosophical and disciplinary texts aligned with the research objectives. Rather than aiming for exhaustive coverage, the selection strategy prioritized canonical, high-impact, and conceptually generative works that have significantly shaped discourse in philosophy of science, phenomenology, hermeneutics, and nursing theory. This approach is consistent with established standards in philosophical inquiry, where depth, relevance, and theoretical influence are prioritized over numerical completeness.

Selection criteria were guided by three core principles: (1) foundational significance, referring to texts that have contributed to the development of disciplinary paradigms; (2) conceptual relevance, ensuring alignment with the central constructs of caring, ontology, and disciplinary identity; and (3) cross-disciplinary influence, enabling integrative synthesis across philosophical and nursing domains. Texts were included if they provided explicit or implicit frameworks for understanding the nature of scientific disciplines, the structure of knowledge, and the relational dimensions of human existence.

Key philosophical sources included the works of Kuhn (1962), Popper (2002), and Lakatos (1978), which collectively informed the analysis of disciplinary formation, paradigm development, and theoretical progression. These works provided the evaluative criteria for assessing whether nursing science meets the characteristics of a mature scientific discipline and offered a conceptual basis for situating nursing within the broader philosophy of science.

To establish ontological and interpretive grounding, the study also drew upon major traditions in phenomenology and hermeneutics, particularly the works of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer, which articulate the relational and interpretive nature of human existence and understanding. These perspectives were complemented by ethical philosophy, particularly Emmanuel Levinas, whose work foregrounds responsibility to the Other as a foundational ethical condition. Together, these traditions provided a robust philosophical lens for conceptualizing caring as an ontological, relational, and ethical phenomenon.

Core nursing theories were purposively included to ensure disciplinary anchoring and theoretical congruence. These comprised the caring science framework of Watson (2008), the caritative caring theory of Eriksson (2018), and the relational model articulated by Boykin and Schoenhofer (2001). In addition, the Theory of Communion-in-Caring developed by Tuppal et al. (2021) was incorporated as a contemporary theoretical extension that advances a relational-participatory ontology of caring. This theory conceptualizes caring as an emergent phenomenon arising through mutual presence, ethical engagement, and shared meaning-making, thereby deepening the understanding of caring beyond individual action toward a co-constituted relational

experience. These theories were selected due to their explicit positioning of caring as the central phenomenon of nursing and their compatibility with a relational ontology.

To situate the analysis within contemporary discourse, additional scholarly works in nursing theory and knowledge development were incorporated, including Alligood and Tomey (2002) and McEwen and Wills (2019). These sources provided updated perspectives on theoretical advancement, disciplinary structure, and the evolving landscape of nursing knowledge. Their inclusion ensured that the analysis remained both historically grounded and responsive to current scholarly developments.

The purposive selection process facilitated a theoretically coherent and philosophically grounded corpus, enabling a rigorous synthesis of ideas across disciplines. This approach ensured that the conceptualization of nursology was not only anchored in foundational theory but also informed by contemporary scholarly discourse, thereby enhancing the credibility, depth, and relevance of the study.

2.4 Analytical Procedure

The analytical process followed a four-stage iterative procedure designed to achieve conceptual rigor, philosophical coherence, and disciplinary relevance. This approach is consistent with contemporary philosophical inquiry in nursing, which emphasizes systematic concept development, critical interpretation, and theoretical integration as essential strategies for advancing disciplinary knowledge (Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023).

Stage 1: Disciplinary Analysis. The initial stage examined nursing science against recognized characteristics of a scientific discipline through a systematic analysis of its central phenomenon, theoretical foundations, epistemological assumptions, and methodological orientations. Particular attention was given to areas of conceptual ambiguity concerning disciplinary identity, the object of inquiry, and the philosophical foundations of nursing knowledge. This stage established the conceptual basis for identifying the need for a more integrative disciplinary framework (Holt, 2023; Thorne, 2023a).

Stage 2: Conceptual Positioning of Nursology. Building upon the findings of the disciplinary analysis, the second stage explored nursology as a proposed conceptual and philosophical reframing of nursing science. The analysis clarified its defining characteristics by examining caring as its ontological foundation, the integration of empirical, interpretive, and philosophical knowledge as its epistemological orientation, and methodological pluralism as its approach to knowledge generation. Throughout this stage, concepts were iteratively compared and refined to ensure conceptual clarity and internal consistency (McCaffrey, 2021; Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023).

Stage 3: Philosophical Interpretation and Theoretical Synthesis. The third stage employed an interpretive comparison of philosophical literature and established nursing theories to identify conceptual convergences and divergences regarding caring, knowledge, disciplinary identity, and professional practice. Guided by hermeneutic principles, this stage emphasized dialogue between texts rather than simple comparison, enabling deeper philosophical interpretation and integration of complementary perspectives (James & Komnenich, 2021; Tembo, 2024).

Stage 4: Framework Development. The final stage synthesized the conceptual insights generated during the preceding stages into an integrative philosophical framework positioning nursology as a proposed conceptual framework for understanding nursing as a distinct scientific discipline. The resulting framework integrates caring ontology, integrative epistemology, and methodological pluralism into a coherent disciplinary model that explains the interrelationships among nursing's philosophical foundations, knowledge development, and methodological approaches. Rather than constituting empirical validation, this stage represents a process of conceptual synthesis intended to strengthen philosophical coherence and disciplinary integration (Holt, 2023; Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023).

Although the study did not involve empirical data collection, the analysis was informed by sustained engagement with contemporary nursing philosophy, foundational nursing theories, and relevant philosophical scholarship. Interpretations were developed through iterative reading, critical comparison, conceptual

refinement, and reflexive analysis to ensure that the emerging framework remained philosophically coherent, theoretically grounded, and relevant to contemporary nursing scholarship (Tembo, 2024; McCaffrey, 2021).

To enhance methodological transparency and facilitate conceptual understanding, the integrated framework guiding this philosophical–theoretical inquiry is presented in Figure 1. The figure illustrates the relationships among the philosophical foundations, theoretical sources, and iterative analytical stages that informed the development of the proposed conceptual framework of nursology.

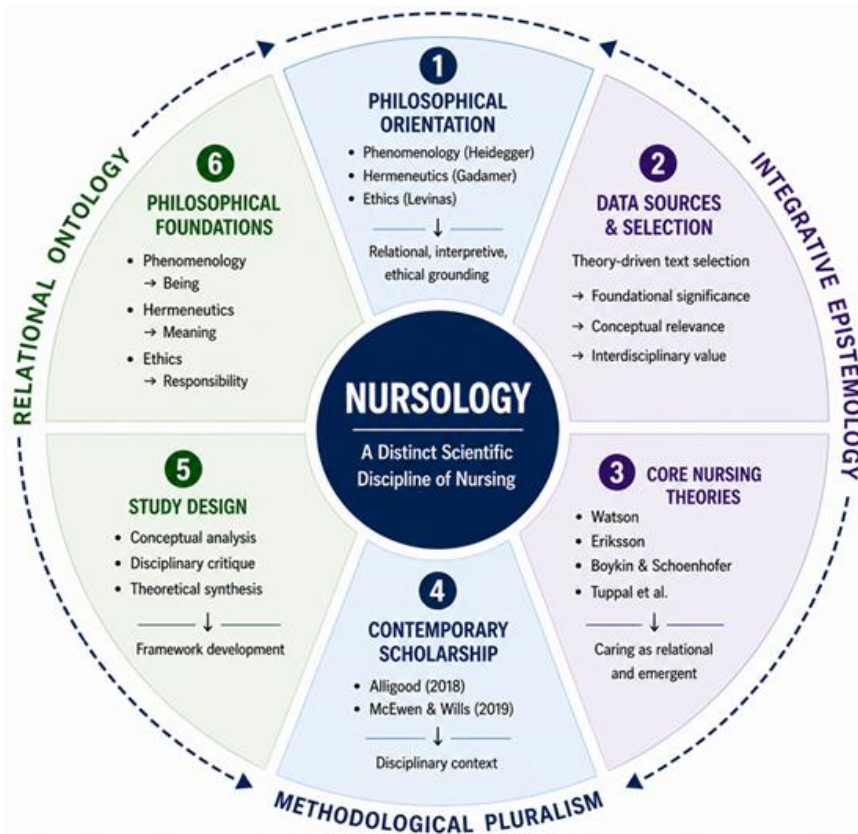


Figure 1. Methodological Framework for the Philosophical–Theoretical Analysis of Nursology (Author-made)

2.5 Rigor and Trustworthiness

Rigor in this philosophical–theoretical study was established through methodological strategies appropriate for conceptual and philosophical inquiry. Theoretical triangulation was achieved by critically integrating perspectives from diverse philosophical traditions and established nursing theories to examine the proposed framework from multiple conceptual viewpoints, thereby enhancing the depth, breadth, and credibility of the analysis (Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023). Conceptual coherence was maintained through iterative comparison of concepts, logical argumentation, and continuous refinement of emerging interpretations to ensure consistency across the ontological, epistemological, and methodological dimensions of the proposed framework (McCaffrey, 2021). Reflexivity was embedded throughout the analytical process by critically examining the assumptions, interpretive decisions, and philosophical positions that informed the conceptual analysis and theoretical synthesis, thereby promoting transparency and minimizing interpretive bias (James & Komnenich, 2021). Furthermore, the analytical procedures were explicitly documented to provide a transparent account of the progression from concept identification and theoretical interpretation to conceptual synthesis and framework development, enabling readers to evaluate the logical consistency and credibility of the inquiry (Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023). Finally, philosophical validity was strengthened by grounding interpretations in contemporary nursing philosophy and established conceptual scholarship, ensuring that the resulting framework demonstrated conceptual clarity, disciplinary relevance, and philosophical congruence with current discourse in nursing science (Holt, 2023; Tembo, 2024).

3. Results

The philosophical analysis identified four interrelated conceptual findings that emerged through iterative engagement with the selected philosophical and nursing literature. These conceptual findings describe the major dimensions underlying the proposed framework of nursology and are presented descriptively in this section. Their broader theoretical significance and implications for nursing as a discipline are discussed in the subsequent Discussion section. The four conceptual findings comprise: (1) disciplinary differentiation, (2) ontological grounding, (3) epistemological coherence, and (4) methodological pluralism.

3.1 Disciplinary Differentiation

The first positioning argument establishes nursology as a distinct scientific discipline by explicitly identifying its central object of inquiry: caring as a human phenomenon. This differentiation is essential in delineating nursing knowledge from adjacent health sciences, which are typically oriented toward disease, pathology, or population health outcomes.

Within Philosophy of Science, a discipline is defined by the clarity of its domain and the coherence of its theoretical focus (Fawcett, 1984; Kuhn, 1962). Nursology offers a clearer articulation of nursing's core by positioning caring not as a secondary or instrumental concept, but as the primary phenomenon of inquiry. In doing so, it responds to persistent concerns about the conceptual ambiguity of nursing science, in which the discipline has often been subsumed under biomedical paradigms.

Within nursology, caring extends beyond technical competence and clinical intervention to include relational engagement, attentiveness to personhood, and responsiveness to human vulnerability. This understanding resonates with established nursing theories, particularly those of Jean Watson and Katie Eriksson, which position caring at the center of nursing knowledge (Eriksson, 2018; Watson, 2008).

Moreover, Boykin and Schoenhofer (2001) reinforce this disciplinary differentiation by asserting that caring is inherent to human existence and that nursing is a relational practice grounded in this shared human capacity. Through this lens, nursology is defined not by its tasks or settings but by its commitment to understanding and advancing caring as a fundamental human phenomenon.

3.2 Ontological Grounding

The second positioning argument locates nursology within a caring ontology, where caring is understood as a mode of being rather than simply an activity or intervention. This ontological grounding marks a shift away from functionalist and reductionist perspectives that define nursing primarily in terms of tasks or outcomes. Drawing on the phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, human existence is described as being-in-the-world, in which care (*Sorge*) constitutes a fundamental structure of existence. (Heidegger, 1962). From this perspective, caring is not an optional attribute but an intrinsic condition of human life. This ontological view is reinforced by the ethical philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, who understands responsibility to the Other as a fundamental expression of human existence (Levinas, 1969).

In nursing, this ontological orientation is reflected in caring theories that emphasize the existential and moral dimensions of care. Katie Eriksson's theory of caritative caring, grounded in love, mercy, and human dignity, presents caring as an expression of human existence (Eriksson, 2007). Extending this perspective, Tuppal et al. (2021) advances a relational ontology in which caring is constituted through mutual presence, ethical engagement, and shared meaning. Together, these frameworks position caring as a relational mode of being grounded in shared meaning. The Theory of Communion-in-Caring extends this view by framing caring as an emergent, co-constituted phenomenon, bridging ontological grounding and lived practice, and reinforcing nursology as centered on being-with.

3.4 Epistemological Coherence

The third positioning argument focuses on epistemological coherence by bringing together multiple ways of knowing. While traditional paradigms prioritize empirical and positivist approaches, these alone cannot fully capture the complexity of caring, which involves experience, relationships, and context. Nursology, therefore, adopts an integrative epistemology that includes empirical, interpretive, and philosophical knowledge. Empirical approaches inform clinical understanding, interpretive perspectives explore patient experience, and

philosophical inquiry provides the conceptual and ethical grounding that connects them. The hermeneutic philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer underscores that understanding is always situated within historical and cultural contexts (Gadamer, 2004). In nursing practice, this implies that knowledge emerges through dialogue, interpretation, and engagement with patients' lived experiences. This view is consistent with established nursing epistemologies, including Carper's (1978) patterns of knowing and later developments that highlight aesthetic, ethical, and personal knowledge. By integrating these perspectives, nursology maintains coherence without reducing complexity. It treats different forms of knowledge as complementary rather than hierarchical, supporting a more holistic understanding of caring.

3.5 Methodological Pluralism

The fourth positioning argument highlights methodological pluralism as central to nursology. Because no single approach can fully capture the complexity of caring, the discipline draws on quantitative, qualitative, and philosophical methods. Philosophical inquiry plays a key role by examining questions of meaning, existence, and ethics, and by making explicit the assumptions and concepts that shape knowledge beyond what empirical methods can capture (Lakatos, 1978; Popper, 2002). In nursing, methodological pluralism brings together approaches that address different dimensions of caring. Quantitative methods support evidence-based practice, qualitative approaches explore lived experience, and philosophical inquiry provides the conceptual and ethical grounding for interpretation. This orientation keeps nursology both rigorous and responsive to the complexity of human experience.

The philosophical analysis identified four interrelated conceptual findings that collectively constitute the proposed framework of nursology. Rather than representing independent categories, these findings emerged through iterative analysis and synthesis of philosophical and nursing literature and reflect complementary dimensions of the discipline. Table 1 provides a concise summary of these conceptual findings, their defining characteristics, and their respective contributions to the proposed philosophical framework of nursology.

Table 1. Summary of the Conceptual Findings

Conceptual Finding	Description	Contribution to the Proposed Framework of Nursology
Disciplinary Differentiation	Identifies caring as the central phenomenon that distinguishes nursing from related health sciences.	Clarifies the disciplinary focus of the proposed framework.
Ontological Grounding	Positions caring as a relational mode of being grounded in human existence, dignity, and ethical responsibility.	Establishes the philosophical foundation of nursology through caring ontology.
Epistemological Coherence	Integrates empirical, interpretive, and philosophical ways of knowing as complementary sources of nursing knowledge.	Provides a coherent philosophical approach to knowledge development.
Methodological Pluralism	Supports the use of quantitative, qualitative, and philosophical inquiry to investigate caring.	Broadens methodological approaches consistent with the complexity of nursing phenomena.

4. Discussion

The preceding conceptual findings describe the principal dimensions identified through the philosophical analysis. The following discussion interprets these findings in relation to nursing philosophy, disciplinary development, and their implications for nursing education, research, and practice. Collectively, the findings suggest that conceptualizing nursing through the proposed framework of nursology represents a process of philosophical and conceptual integration rather than merely a change in terminology. Contemporary nursing scholars have emphasized that the continued advancement of the discipline depends on ongoing philosophical reflection, conceptual clarification, and critical examination of its ontological and epistemological foundations (Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023; Tembo, 2024). Persistent debates concerning nursing's disciplinary identity, conceptual boundaries, and knowledge base further underscore the importance of strengthening the philosophical coherence of nursing science (Holt, 2023; Thorne, 2023a). In response to these challenges, the proposed framework of nursology offers an integrative philosophical perspective that positions caring as the discipline's central phenomenon while synthesizing caring ontology, integrative epistemology, and methodological pluralism into a coherent disciplinary framework.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the proposed framework of nursology is organized around four interdependent philosophical dimensions: disciplinary differentiation, ontological grounding, epistemological coherence, and methodological pluralism. Rather than functioning as discrete components, these dimensions operate synergistically to articulate an integrated understanding of nursing in which caring constitutes the discipline's defining phenomenon. Caring serves as the conceptual core that unifies relational ontology, integrative epistemology, and methodological pluralism, while simultaneously informing the domains of research, education, and practice. Consequently, the framework reinforces nursing's distinct disciplinary identity by positioning caring as its primary object of inquiry, thereby preserving the profession's relational, ethical, and experiential orientation while distinguishing it from adjacent health sciences (Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023; Tembo, 2024; Thorne, 2023a).

Ontologically, nursology reframes caring as a mode of being rather than a set of tasks or interventions. Drawing on Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world, care (*Sorge*) is understood as a fundamental structure of human existence (Heidegger, 1962). This view is reinforced within nursing theory by Eriksson's caritative caring, which situates care within the moral and existential dimensions of human life (Eriksson, 2007; Tuppal et al., 2021). Building on these foundations, the Theory of Communion-in-Caring further develops a relational ontology in which caring emerges through mutual presence, ethical engagement, and shared meaning (Tuppal et al., 2021).

From an epistemological standpoint, the proposed framework of nursology integrates empirical, interpretive, and philosophical ways of knowing. Empirical inquiry remains indispensable for generating evidence that informs nursing practice; however, empirical evidence alone cannot fully account for the relational, contextual, and meaning-laden dimensions of caring. Interpretive approaches grounded in hermeneutic philosophy facilitate understanding of lived experience, interpersonal meaning, and the contextual nature of human health and illness (James & Komnenich, 2021). Philosophical inquiry complements these approaches by critically examining the ontological, epistemological, and ethical assumptions that shape nursing knowledge and practice (Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023). Consistent with contemporary perspectives on epistemological pluralism, these forms of knowing are viewed as complementary rather than hierarchical, collectively contributing to a more coherent, comprehensive, and discipline-specific understanding of caring (Reed, 2021, 2022).

Methodologically, the proposed framework of nursology adopts a pluralistic orientation that recognizes quantitative, qualitative, and philosophical inquiry as complementary approaches for investigating the multidimensional nature of caring. Rather than privileging a single methodological tradition, this perspective acknowledges that different forms of inquiry generate distinct yet equally valuable contributions to nursing knowledge. Such an approach is consistent with contemporary nursing philosophy, which advocates epistemological pluralism and methodological diversity as essential for addressing the complexity of nursing phenomena and advancing disciplinary knowledge (McCaffrey, 2021; Younas, 2021; Yous et al., 2020).

Although the concept of nursology offers a potential integrative framework for clarifying nursing's disciplinary identity, it has not been without criticism. Some scholars may argue that introducing the term "nursology" is unnecessary because nursing science already possesses mature theoretical foundations, an established metaparadigm, and recognized philosophical traditions. Others may contend that adopting a new disciplinary label could create confusion among educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, particularly where "nursing science" is already widely accepted (Holt, 2023; Thorne, 2020, 2023a, 2023b).

These criticisms highlight the need to distinguish between a purely terminological change and a substantive conceptual contribution. In the present paper, nursology is not advanced as a replacement for nursing science but as a proposed integrative philosophical framework that seeks to synthesize caring ontology, integrative epistemology, and methodological pluralism into a coherent disciplinary perspective. Its value, therefore, lies in its conceptual integration rather than in the introduction of new terminology (Tembo, 2024).

These conceptual shifts have important implications for nursing research, education, and practice. In research, they encourage greater philosophical engagement and conceptual rigor to strengthen disciplinary knowledge and theoretical development (Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023; Tembo, 2024). In education, they support

curricula that cultivate relational, ethical, and reflective competencies alongside scientific and technical expertise, reinforcing the humanistic foundations of professional nursing (Holt, 2023; Tembo, 2024). In practice, they emphasize caring grounded in presence, responsiveness, and meaningful human relationships while recognizing philosophy as an essential guide for ethical decision-making and professional identity (Tembo, 2024). Although challenges remain, particularly in integrating philosophical inquiry into mainstream nursing research and education, the proposed framework of nursology offers a coherent conceptual direction for strengthening nursing as a distinct scientific discipline through greater disciplinary integration and philosophical coherence (Sharifi-Heris & Bender, 2023; Thorne, 2023a).

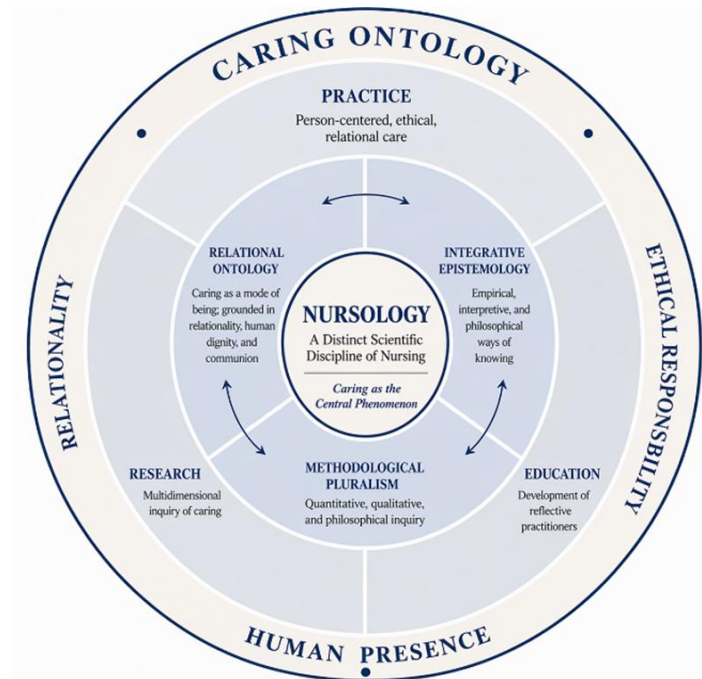


Figure 2. Conceptual Framework of Nursology as a Distinct Scientific Discipline (Author-made)

5. Limitations

This study is conceptual in nature and does not include empirical data. The framework is derived from philosophical analysis and theoretical synthesis, which may limit its immediate applicability in practice without further validation. While the selection of philosophical and nursing theories was purposive and grounded in their relevance and influence, other perspectives may offer additional insights that were not captured in this analysis. The interpretation of foundational texts is also shaped by the authors' scholarly standpoint, which may introduce interpretive bias despite efforts toward reflexivity and theoretical rigor. In addition, the integration of philosophical inquiry into mainstream nursing research remains a challenge, particularly in contexts that prioritize empirical methodologies. Future research is needed to examine how the proposed framework can be operationalized, tested, and refined across diverse clinical, educational, and research settings.

6. Conclusion

Nursology is proposed as a conceptual and philosophical framework that seeks to clarify nursing as a distinct discipline centered on caring. Rather than representing a purely terminological shift, it offers an integrative perspective that brings together caring ontology, integrative epistemology, and methodological pluralism to provide a more coherent articulation of nursing's disciplinary identity. By situating caring within a relational ontology, the framework moves beyond task-based and biomedical reductions toward a participatory, ethical, and meaning-centered understanding of nursing. Integrating classical caring theories with contemporary perspectives, including the Theory of Communion-in-Caring, further conceptualizes caring as an emergent and co-constituted relational phenomenon. As a conceptual framework, nursology has the potential to strengthen theoretical development, inform nursing education, and guide research and practice. However, its

philosophical propositions and practical applicability require further scholarly dialogue, empirical investigation, and validation across diverse educational, clinical, and research contexts before broader disciplinary adoption can be fully justified.

Ethical Considerations

This study is a philosophical–theoretical inquiry and did not involve human participants, animals, identifiable personal information, or the collection or analysis of empirical data. Consequently, institutional ethics committee approval and informed consent were not required in accordance with institutional and international ethical guidelines for non-empirical research.

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of academic integrity, intellectual honesty, and responsible scholarship. All concepts, arguments, and interpretations were developed through critical engagement with published literature, with appropriate acknowledgment and citation of original sources. Every effort was made to ensure accurate representation of existing theories and philosophical perspectives while clearly distinguishing the author's original conceptual contributions from established scholarship.

The proposed framework of nursology is presented as a theoretical and philosophical contribution intended to stimulate scholarly dialogue rather than as an empirically validated model. The author accepts full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the manuscript and declares that no conflicts of interest influenced the development or presentation of this work.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable. This study is a philosophical–theoretical analysis based exclusively on published literature and did not involve human participants, human data, or animal subjects. Therefore, institutional ethics approval and informed consent were not required.

Consent for Publication

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The author is a member of the journal's Editorial Board but was not involved in the peer review, editorial assessment, or decision regarding this manuscript. The author declares no other competing interests.

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Declaration of Artificial Intelligence (AI)-Assisted Technologies

The author used Grammarly, QuillBot, and Microsoft Copilot solely for language editing, grammar correction, readability enhancement, and formatting assistance during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools were not used to generate the study's research questions, conceptual framework, methodology, analysis, interpretation, or conclusions. All scholarly content, intellectual contributions, critical analyses, interpretations, and conclusions were independently conceived, developed, verified, and approved by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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