

Metabletics:
A Foundation for a Therapy of Culture

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Part One: Introduction to Some Basic Themes

The Dutch psychiatrist and phenomenologist J.H. van den Berg coined the term metabletics more than fifty years ago to describe his work in the field of historical psychology. That first book, which has been followed by numerous other works in this field, describes an approach to history that is radically psychological. His metabletic studies are not a history of psychology. On the contrary, they are a psychological history, a history of the changing nature of humanity's psychological life. Here are his words from his first metabletic publication, which was translated into five languages including English under the title *The Changing Nature of Man: Introduction to a Historical Psychology*:

“The whole science of psychology is based on the assumption that man does not change...Whereas, in traditional psychology, the life of a previous generation is seen as a variation on a known theme, the supposition that man does change leads to the thought that earlier

generations lived a different sort of life, and that they were essentially different. It is this thought which, in principle, defines historical psychology.” (1961, pp.7-8, his italics)

The work of metabletics, which means a theory of changes, is guided by six principles, three of which are theoretical and three of which are practical. The three theoretical ones are the principle of non-interference, the principle of reality and the principle of mutability. The three practical ones that flow from the theory are the principle of simultaneity, the principle of the unique event, and the principle of emphasis. Rather than define them in the abstract I will illustrate what they mean through some examples. I hope that by doing so I can give the audience a felt sense of his work. My intention in this talk is introduce the sadly neglected work of van den Berg to an American audience, because of the specific cultural therapeutic value of his work in an age when differences among peoples are causes for rejection and violence. Van den Berg’s metabletic method is the foundation for a liberation psychology, a point I will discuss in Part Two.

As indicated in the quote above, the basic key to van den Berg’s metabletic studies is that humanity’s psychological life changes. But if humanity’s psychological life is fundamentally mutable how does one discover these changes? Where does one locate a record of them? What visible traces do these shifts in psychological life leave?

Van den Berg’s metabletics is inseparable from his phenomenology. As such he bases his work, as do all phenomenologists, on the foundation that the human person is a being-in-the-world. A person lives his or her life in media res, in the

midst of things. Individual and collective psychological life is visible in the ways in which a person and a particular historical age make the world. In his brief but profound re-visioning of psychopathology in his book, *A Different Existence*, van den Berg offers a fine example of how disturbances in a person's psychological life show themselves in the ways in which the world of the patient changes, the ways in which his or her perceptions of space, time, relations with others and with one's own body reflect these disturbances. His equally fine study of illness in *The Psychology of the Sickbed* demonstrates the same point. If one, therefore, wants to understand the other, one has to understand the landscape of that person's existence, the stage, as it were, upon which a person enacts the dramas of a life.

The same requirement is present with respect to our efforts to understand the psychology of people of earlier periods. Men and women of the Medieval world, for example, lived upon a different stage and enacted the recurring dramas of human life, the dramas of birth and death, of marriage and sexuality, of the relation of the human to the divine in radically different ways, and if we are to understand them, as we hope one day to be understood by those who come after us, as more than pale approximations of the truth of reality, then we have to avoid what van den Berg calls the principle of constancy, according to which the essential nature of man and woman remains the same, and according to which the march of history is a march of progress that overcomes the erroneous and even false knowledge of earlier eras.

To appreciate what van den Berg is doing here we have to understand that he is not saying only that our perceptions of reality

change, while reality itself remains immutable. Psychological life is not essentially a projection unto a fixed and immutable material world. No, the world too changes. Indeed, the singular most daring aspect of van den Berg's work is this insistence upon the interconnection between the changing character of psychological life and the changing character of the world. When humanity's psychological life changes, the world changes as well. Psychological life and the material world are two sides of one coin. In three volumes, two devoted to the metabletics of the human body and one to the metabletics of matter, he has documented a series of these changes. These pioneering and important studies, however, still await an English translation.

To return to the questions raised above, one finds a record of humanity's changing psychological life in the world. The world, van den Berg says, is the home, the habitat, of our subjectivity and his metabletics locates the record of humanity's psychological life in the ways in which an age builds its buildings, and paints its paintings, develops its mathematics and arranges its music, does its economics and practices its politics, investigates the human body and explores the matter of the material world, buries its dead and worships its gods. In all these ways the world mirrors humanity's psychological life, and, indeed, this notion of mirroring is implicit in van den Berg's work. Before I continue the discussion of the six principles of his metabletic, method, I need to make a few remarks about this notion of mirroring that is implied in his work

Following van den Berg's work, I took this notion of mirroring as the central theme of my first metabletic study—Psychological Life:

From Science to Metaphor, and in subsequent metabletic studies of the origins of technology in 15th century linear perspective drawing techniques—Technology as Symptom and Dream—and in a study of the disappearance of Angels in Western art—Ways of the Heart—I continued to make use of it. The relation of mirroring between psychological life and the world indicates how van den Berg's pioneering metabletic studies of the changing character of psychological life also revision the nature of psychological life. They do so in three ways.

First, insofar as psychological life is mirrored through the world, it has, like the mirror reflection itself, the subtle quality of the image, and like the mirror image it is neither a thing nor a thought. The image of oneself, for example, is there in the mirror but its presence radically differs from the materiality of the mirror itself. The image, we could say, lacks 'punchability.' It is present in the world in a different way than are things. A consequence of this image quality of psychological life is that our mode of understanding it must differ from the ways in which we understand the domains of matter and mind. In short van den Berg's metabletics has epistemological implications for psychology. I will discuss this point on Part Two

The second point concerns the location of the mirror image. A phenomenology of the mirror experience shows that the image is over there, as far on that side of the mirror as one is on this side. The image is the depth of the one reflected. To say, then, that the world mirrors psychological life is to say the world deepens psychological life.

The third point addresses the issue of who or what is reflected. The phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty has noted that the mirror is an instrument of transformation through which one becomes another. The image that the mirror reflects is not a mere duplicate or copy of oneself. On the contrary, the image is precisely that, an image of oneself, a presentation of how one sees or imagines oneself, a reflection of some figure in a story. In this respect, the world as mirror of psychological life re-figures and deepens psychological life as a story. The truth of a person's psychological life is not, then, measured in terms of its facts but in terms of how one has shaped those facts, the fictions through which and the images by which one has made them into a life, the ways in which those facts have been storied. The same is true of another period of history. In this respect, van den Berg's metabletics is a record of the changing stories of humanity's psychological life, stories that our ancestors have told and which we are called to remember and understand on their terms and not ours. Herein lies a second implication of van den Berg's metabletics. It is an ethical obligation that I will discuss in Part Two.

Having taken this little detour to discuss the meaning of the world as the mirror of psychological life, I want to return to a discussion of van den Berg's metabletic method in order to illustrate his six principles.

In none of my own metabletic works was I functioning as anything but a psychologist who was interested in understanding our own contemporary psychological existence. For example, how did the technique of linear perspective drawing, with its emphasis of knowing the world as if looking at it through a window, shift 15th century's

humanity's relation to space and change its relation to self, world and body? Or how did the eclipse of Angels in European painting chart the changing character of humanity's relation to a sense of the sacred? In investigating each of these significant moments in history I was making use of van den Berg's metabletic principle of the unique incident and the principle of emphasis, and in doing so three other principles came into play.

First, changes in one area of human life were always reflected in other areas, which is a hallmark of van den Berg's principle of simultaneity. So, for example, when William Harvey described the heart as a pump in his 17th century book on the motion of the blood in the heart of animals and humans, he changed the rhythm of the heart from one in which the blood percolated back and forth in tune with the slower natural rhythms of the world to one in which the blood now flowed faster in its circulation around the body. Somewhat earlier Copernicus had set the earth in motion around the sun, and somewhat later church architecture became Baroque, a style of building which emphasized matter in motion. Logarithms, a mathematics of faster motion, also belongs to this period of time as do the circulation of money and the voyages of discovery around the globe. Each change is mirrored in the others and taken together they indicate some of the fundamental themes in this shift of humanity's psychological life. For example, drawing upon van den Berg's work, I showed in my first metabletic book mentioned above, how Harvey's description of the heart as a pump equalized the hearts not only of animals and men, and also erased the difference between the hearts of a king and his or her subjects. It is no accident, therefore, that this democratization of the heart had an effect on King Charles I of

England, to whom Harvey, as court physician to the King, dedicated his book. Before being beheaded by the parliamentary forces of Oliver Cromwell, he is reported to have said that the king and his subjects are clearly two different things. Harvey's heart, however, erased that difference and perhaps the King would have been well advised to read that text in physiology as also a political text.

The principles of the unique incident, of emphasis and of simultaneity are illustrated in Harvey's work. His vision of the heart as a pump was a unique event in the history of the body and van den Berg emphasizes these kinds of events as moments that record and mirror profound simultaneous shifts in multiple areas of humanity's psychological life. But what does that work in physiology really have to do with the Copernican earth, or changes in church architecture, or the mathematics of faster motion? Is not the only reality that counts here the fact that the heart is a pump? Is van den Berg really saying that people in earlier ages lived with a different heart? To answer these questions one has to understand what van den Berg means by the principles of reality and mutability.

People of earlier ages lived with different heart, with a heart that was not a pump. They lived in a different world with a different body and that world and that body were as real as the reality and the body of the pumping heart is for us. Harvey changed the reality of the heart.

Van den Berg is a medical doctor and he knows, as all of us do, that the heart is a pump. But that heart belongs to what van den Berg calls the second structure of reality. It is the structure of

explanation and it differs from the first structure of experience, the structure of life as we live it. While this second structure is an immutable fact, the first structure matters in multiple ways for individuals and it changes across time and cultures. The first structure is real and it is mutable. Van den Berg's book, *Things*, is a wonderful example of this difference between structures. An example that I use with my students easily makes this point. If, while one is giving a lecture one becomes short of breath and experiences pains in the chest, one wants to be brought to a physician. But, if in the middle of one's lecture one confesses that he or she is dying of a broken heart because of a failed love affair, then that is an entirely different matter. In this case one wants to be understood, one wants a heart response, a response of sympathy and compassion from the other. We live in this first structure of existence and the second structure is real only when that first structure is interrupted either by events like a heart attack, or when we intentionally take our leave and distance ourselves from the first structure, as Harvey did when he made his great discovery.

Van den Berg's metabletics is a study of the changing character of these first structures of existence, these structures of existence where we live, enact out our stories and build our worlds. In order to do this work, the first principle of non-interference is required. If one is to understand the heart of a different age one cannot import the knowledge we have now of the second structure of the heart into that period. One has to avoid interfering with that earlier age by projecting or imposing the second structure of our knowledge onto it. Indeed, we have, as I suggested above, an ethical responsibility to do so if we are to understand not only those who have come before us

but also our own current psychological stories as something we have participated in creating and for which we are, therefore, responsible.

At the start of my talk I said that my intention was to introduce van den Berg's work to the wider audience of American psychology. I hope that my illustration of his six metabletic principles has at least awakened a curiosity about this man's unique and important contributions to the field of psychological studies. While I will have to leave for another occasion a discussion of the ethical and epistemological implications of his work, I can send the full copy of this talk to those who might be interested. Requests can be sent to Romany@pacific.edu.

Part Two: Metabletics : Epistemological and Ethical Implications

Van den Berg's metabletic studies force us, or at least invite us, to re-consider how we understand the nature of psychological life. What kind of consciousness do we need to understand and explore psychological life as a reality of reflection, as something that is mirrored through the world? If, in its mirroring, it has the quality of an image, then psychological life is neither a fact nor an idea, neither a thing nor a thought. In this respect, psychology needs a way of thinking about psychological reality on its own terms, a way of thinking that avoids on one hand the reduction of psychological life to its material conditions and its causal explanations in terms of those conditions as either the effect of conditioning by external forces or the effect of biological processes; and, on the other hand, avoids the severing of psychological life from the world and its placement

within the person as an interior experience that requires the notion of projection to restore the bond between person and world, between the inside space of psychological life and the outside space of the world.

That way of thinking I have come to describe as a metaphorical consciousness, which situates the psychologist in that epistemological space between the realism of facts and the rationalism of ideas. In psychological life the fact and the idea matter as they are storied. To go from the second structure of explanation to the first structure of experience, as van den Berg's metabletics does, requires a shift in consciousness from literal thinking to metaphoric thinking. This shift is the epistemological implication of van den Berg's work, which I have described in detail over the past quarter century in several books and articles.

The second implication of van den Berg's work is an ethical one. If his metabletics were only a radical way of addressing the changing nature of humanity's psychological life, his work would be an interesting and challenging addition to the discipline of psychology, an interesting academic adjunct to the field. But it is much more than that. The mirroring between humanity and world and the mirroring among multiple aspects of human life in any period of change, are amplified by the mirroring that takes place between those moments of change and we who now explore them, and it is in this third mirroring that I find van den Berg's work to be an ethical psychology.

In his archaeology of the psychological history of humanity, van den Berg offers us mirrors, which reflect what we have made of those originating moments of change and in those reflections we are given the opportunity to remember what we have forgotten and left behind. His metabletic method is a call not to reduce the first structure of reality to the second and thereby forget the difference between the two, which is a difference between assuming that the second structure discovers the world as it is apart from our participation and the first structure of participation. In the gap between those originating moments of change, which have seeded the world we now assume and too often take for granted as having always been; in the measure of the difference between those moments when one manner of psychological life is giving way to another, different order, we are offered a glimpse of how we have managed the gift of those changes as well as a glimpse of what we have lost, and, I would argue, what we need to mourn. Van den Berg's metabletics is a psychology of mourning, in which mourning becomes an ethical act of remembering what has been lost and a creative act that releases the imagination into new possibilities. It is a foundation for a cultural therapeutics, for an in depth psychology of history, for a liberation psychology, which, in helping us throw off the encrusted shackles of our cultural belief systems whose historical origins have been forgotten, prods us to become more responsible for the ways in which we have made use of the past that has been bequeathed to us and have failed to make use of its unfinished possibilities that weigh upon us as history and wait for us to be able to respond, to be 'response-able.'