

Jan Hendrick van den Berg Answers Some Questions

An Interview with J.H. van den Berg

Robert D. Romanyshyn
Pacifica Graduate Institute

In this interview with Jan Hendrick van den Berg, the Dutch phenomenologist and psychiatrist addresses the origins of his work, his most significant influences, and the purpose of metabletic phenomenology in the modern age. In the course of the interview, Dr. Van den Berg provides a basic overview of his work, and highlights the central finding of his metabletic analyses: a loss of wonder before nature, which results from the more fundamental loss of genuine spirituality in the modern world.

How did metabletics begin? What were some of the early circumstances that led to this work and what were some of the early influences that guided its beginnings?

At first glance my answer may be an autobiographical anecdote. For my twenty-second birthday, I asked for a certain gift, a small book about the history of biology by a professor from Hamburg, Adolf Meyer: *Krisenepochen und Wendepunkte des biologischen Denkens*. I had seen a copy of it on the desk of a lecturer in biology. Glancing through it, I saw that there is a connection between the discovery of the circulation of the blood, early in the seventeenth century by William Harvey, and Baroque, the style of living and building dominant from the mid-sixteenth to the mid-eighteenth centuries. That assertion struck me like a lightning bolt out of a clear sky, and that was why I asked for a copy of that book as a birthday present.

Now, as you know, connections between heterogenous things and historical events have demanded my attention my whole life: to see that there is a certain synchronicity between the discovery of blood circulation and the Baroque was an amazing insight.

Concerning the Baroque, many years later I read the famous book of Heinrich Wölfflin, *Renaissance und Baroque*, which characterizes the Baroque style of building in such a way that the connection between Harvey's discovery of blood circulation and the Baroque becomes clear at once. According to Wölfflin, two features characterize the Baroque: *weight* and *movement*. Any Baroque church shows this. For my research I went to Rome and there I discovered impressive examples as the *Il Jesu* and the *San Ignatio* churches.

You must look at the façade of such a Baroque church: it is massive; it has more pillars than needed; you see barely a window. Moreover, there are two volutes, one of each side of the façade, i.e. long ‘rolling,’ ‘moving,’ ornamental scrolls. Weight and movement!

Well, these features also characterize Harvey’s discovery. In the human body, the heart functions as a pump, as a heavy material motor. No wonder I was astonished. Harvey and the Baroque style of building—these two very different things are connected by being simultaneous. The synchronism is striking and outstanding. Now the core of metabletics is the study and the description of *synchronicity* in history. When I glanced through that book of Professor Meyer on the desk of the biologist I had my first metabletical experience, though the term ‘metabletics’ did not exist as yet. I used it when I wrote my first book in the early fifties of the twentieth century. The word is derived from a Greek verb, *metaballein*: the change, so the ‘metabletics’ means theory of change. Another word for it would be *historical phenomenology*. A historical phenomenon comes to the fore not only when we discover the synchronism of a thing or event in two heterogenous structures of constructs, but also in the diachronic development of these structures or contexts. The meaning of things and events changes by the fact that they undergo a metaphorphosis because things and events are more than they seem at first glance. Things are more than just things, are always more than physical science can describe. That is something phenomenology establishes by discovering the hidden meaning of things. Also this meaning changes in the temporal development in what happens in our world. We live in a world of ever-changing things. As we observe it in history and when we can apply these observations in the study of history, we are doing metabletics as historical phenomenology.

The metableticist is convinced that the things in, say, the Middle Ages, are not equal to ‘the same’ things in our time. Since phenomenology conceives human existence as *world* (world of things), our world is unlike the world of the past and will also be unlike the world after us.

How would you describe the importance of a metabletic attitude today? Since metabletics means a theory of changes, does knowledge of how changes in the past have shaped our current circumstances permit us to make conscious and informed decisions about how to shape our immediate future? In other words, can metabletics have a therapeutic value?

First of all: metabletics can help us to see more, to have a better perception of the world wherein we live. Of course it is not only a matter of pure perception or pure observation. Perception without reflection is, as Kant said, empty; we need a view of what we want, a perspective on the issues of our investigations; we want to situate the results of our research in a broader context. The range of a phenomenon is always implanted in a whole structure of synchronicities and in the diachronic movement of history. Well, if we want to understand what is at stake with the major themes of our culture, we need metabletics as a final synthesis of the phenomenological descriptions of things and events.

Now you ask me if metabletics can have a therapeutic value: my answer is not directly “yes,” but I must say that we as therapists must be aware of the changes the patient has to undergo. For me these changes in the behavior of the patient were very important for the further development of my metabletic convictions. I had to admit that the neurotic patient at the end of the nineteenth century is no longer the one we see today: the patient has changed, and we must be aware of this remarkable fact when we read about psychiatry and psychotherapy in the nineteenth and in the first half of the twentieth century. I wrote about that fundamental theme in my book, *Dieptepsychologie* (Depth Psychology), especially in the last chapter on Depth Psychology as a cultural phenomenon. What Breuer and Freud discovered at the end of the nineteenth century was very important in *their* time: the *It*, the *Super-ego* and the *Ego*. All these ‘realities’ of Depth Psychology originated in the culture of Breuer and Freud, but disappeared during the last century. Well, what I learned from my metabletic discoveries is that I no longer can use the superseded concepts of a discipline that I must call out of date. We must accept the changing reality of our psychotherapy and of our modern patient.

Am I correct in assuming that you have written a book on the metabletics of God? If so, could you summarize the intentions of that book for us?

Perhaps you know that ‘wonder’ has always fascinated me. At the end of my first book on metabletics, *The Changing Nature of Man*, I discussed the difficulty of seeing wonder, the idea of God’s manifestation in things and events, in our time. It seemed to me that God disappeared and that—apart from some exceptions like mystics—we can no longer see His presence in our world. This insight disturbed me, and I had the intention to write a

book on this metabletic phenomenon: the changes of God's manifestations in our world. For me, it took a lot of time to conceptualize the structure of such an enterprise. But at the end of the last century, I had the impression that the time was ripe and that I was able to write this metabletic study. Now I am very happy that I succeeded.

To avoid a misunderstanding, I want to stress that I did not intend to write a history of God. That would be impossible. The subtitle of my book, *Metabletica van God* ("Metabletics of God") must be clear: "the three most important changes." Well, what I wanted to show is that there are *synchronisms* of God, manifestations and expressions of the divine in earthly events and things implanted in a structure of synchronisms. As a metabletician, I can discover these phenomena in the dynamics of the great themes of our culture, and I can describe them as such. Once again, I cannot describe God.

What are God's most important synchronisms? We must think about the human being, conceived as the couple, understood in their sexual relationship, and above all as the speakers of the human word; we must think about the architecture of the holy places, i.e., the church, the temple; we must think about the nature and the study of nature in biology and physics, in botany and entomology. Of course, I am convinced that language, the word spoken by human beings, is the most important synchronism of God. So, one could say that this book contains a threefold metabletical investigation: metabletics of sexuality, metabletics of architecture, metabletics of natural phenomena integrated in the structure of the *logos spermatikos*, in the prolific word.

I want to make a final but very important remark. As such, time is not a synchronism of God, but we must conceive it as an attribute of God. Although in the way we deal with God's time and in the way we give time a form, time is at last a synchronism of God.

One may ask now if the modern person is able to realize that his 'being in the world' means that he embodies these synchronisms of God. I am not sure that people in the modern age are so acute. But I live in hope.

You have been a practicing psychiatrist and phenomenologist for more than a half century, and in that time you have traveled widely, written many books, and encountered many people. Looking back, what have been some of the more important events in your life, and who have been some of the more important colleagues with whom you have worked?

I am very grateful that I have met many marvelous people who had a great influence on my career. First of all, there is Frederik Buytendijk (1887-1974), who was not only a biologist and a psychologist but also an important phenomenologist. His writings on anthropology, human movement, the psychology of pain, the behavior of animals, on emotions, on femaleness etcetera, are famous and pioneering. I was very close to Buytendijk and our correspondence, edited by Peter Heij, was published twenty years ago.

Of course, I cannot forget H.C. Rümke (1893-1967), undoubtedly the most important psychiatrist in the Netherlands in the twentieth century. He was my mentor while I prepared my doctoral degree with a thesis on the phenomenological approach to schizophrenia. It was Rümke who advised me to accept psychoanalysis, but at the same time, he warned me not to stay too long under a therapeutic regime—no more than a year—on the *chaise lounge* of the analyst. You must avoid becoming a “decerebrated dog,” he said. In the forties, I was Rümke’s *chef de clinique* in the psychiatric hospital of the University of Utrecht. That was a marvelous time, and altogether an excellent opportunity to acquire many experiences.

In the forties, I traveled a lot. I was convinced that I had to see what psychiatrists did in France and Germany and how my colleagues had been influenced by other disciplines like literature and philosophy. I went to Paris several times to see Gaston Bachelard (1884-1962) and to attend his lectures at the Sorbonne. Sartre’s great philosophical book, *L’Être et le Néant* and his novel, *La nausée*, were decisive for my orientation in the phenomenological approach of human experience and for the relationship between humanity and world. Unfortunately, I never met Sartre himself. I will not forget my contacts with Henry Ey (1900-1977), the French psychiatrist, psychoanalyst and philosopher who developed an organo-dynamic theory of the mind’s function and of consciousness. He organized a weekly seminar in Saint-Anne’s Hospital, and I had the opportunity to be there with excellent colleagues.

One of my most important encounters took place in Germany, where I had the chance to meet Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) and to stay three days in his “Hütte.” Of course, I had read his major book, *Sein und Zeit*, but I wanted to ask him many questions about matters that were not so clear at that moment and that would be a step forward in my investigations of the phenomenon of encounter. I shall never forget my hours with Heidegger.

How would you describe the value of a phenomenological perspective in psychology, and from the perspective of phenomenology, how would you judge the state of psychology today?

I want to confess that the notion of psychology gets on my nerves. What do we know about the object of psychological science? Nothing! Do we have a definition of psyche? No! A philosopher loves wisdom; at least, he wants to be a wise man. But what is the purpose of a psychologist? Yes, you can say that he wants to know...to know what about what? Some psychologists prefer to speak about the science of human behavior. Of course, I accept that human existence is a bodily existence, but I cannot believe that behaviorism as a science can reveal what we really are or that one can see that our behavior or our movements in a certain situation are expressions of our being in the world. Thus, about modern psychology, I am rather negative, since it fell on its knees before positivism.

I prefer to speak of the phenomenological dimension in psychotherapy, as I did in my book, *A Different Existence*. Before any theory of human behavior, we must deal within an existential orientation; we must describe how a human person is there in the world; how he is there with the things of daily life. As psychotherapists, we must listen to what a person has to tell us or what he is keeping silent. That is at stake when we try to describe what is really happening; we try to reveal phenomena *as they are*. Being a phenomenologist means that the psychotherapist respects the incidents just as they are occurring and just as the patient tells about these incidents and tells about his experiences. A phenomenologist does not want to be that kind of scientist who will disturb the phenomena by his methods of observation or by closer inspection as this way of research reduces things to those that can be observed without emotion. When we really want to know what in a given situation is happening with a patient, one does well to put himself in that situation. We may never forget what the basic principle of phenomenology is: as investigators, we remain true to the facts as they are happening. I cannot trust this sort of psychology that wants to see the triumph of a theory or that wants to subordinate phenomena to the application of a theory. That does not mean that I am against theory. But to describe is the most important and therefore description comes first. A theory comes later when it concerns the incident or the world of the patient. Also a general theory can help us, but only then when we need it for the elaboration of the descriptions.

From the perspective of your long life and career, and given all the changes you have seen in the world, can you share with us some of your thoughts on our current world situation today?

At the end of my book on the metabletics of God, I expressed my hope regarding an important change in the way we investigate nature. I hope that not only scientists or scholars but also laymen become aware that modern science cannot explain the essential problems of man. I am asking now: what are our alternatives for the explanation of what really matters in our existence? One would say “the Bible”! I am not sure that many people read the Bible in the perspective of their problems. Even more: I fear that modern man cannot find the necessary inspiration in the Bible for what concerns his existential situation and that he therefore refuses the reading of the Bible.

We need something else, a new grammar. In our modern era of successful science and technology—successful only for a certain range of problems—we lack the words to grasp and to understand the wonder of nature. That is what concerns me at last when I look back and look over the changes I have seen in my long career. But I know that science and philosophy are not enough. What matters in our human existence is spirituality. To clarify this, we need another prolific word.