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# *The Metabletic Method: An Interdisciplinary Look at Human Experience*

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## **Abstract**

Metabletics was first introduced by J.H. Van den Berg as a systematic study of the changing nature of human existence. It gives special focus to phenomena within their specific historical and social-cultural contexts, and inside a complex matrix of relationships. Metabletics provide a uniquely interdisciplinary approach through the analysis of simultaneous events to identify patterns in human experience. Most central to the metabletic method is that, while the world of science is constant, the landscape of human existence is continually changing and causing humans to change. This article outlines the central principles and applications of the metabletic method and addresses tensions and possible challenges within the approach.

## **Introduction**

J. H. Van den Berg's original metabletic method is well established today and belongs to the family of the qualitative human science research methodologies. Yet the use of a metabletic approach to the human sciences remains poorly known in North America, which is partially due to a lack of translation of the majority of his works. The word "metabletics" has been coined by Van den Berg who derived it from a Greek verb indicating change. Metabletics can be described as the systematic study of the changing nature of phenomena of human life as they are lived and experienced. It addresses and explores human existence as given in relationships within a specific historical and social-cultural context. It deals with things, with adults and children, with men and women, and with their relationships to God. Human existence is seen as a whole, and as a matrix of meaningful relationships.

Van den Berg's first major work, *Metabletica* (1956), exposed his new, innovative approach and verified his thesis of the changing nature of the human being. It was both widely applauded and critiqued by professionals across disciplines. It was also widely read by the public at large. In fact, it was reprinted 20 times, and translated in many languages, including English, French, German, and Spanish. In short succession, it was followed by three other major publications wherein the metabletic method was applied to various phenomena of the human body, and to the problem of the divided self in Western society. Today, Van den Berg's original and thought-provoking work is documented in over 20 publications published between 1956 and 2000. In it,

he related developments within medicine, psychology, mathematics and other sciences to simultaneous events in cultural and political history. Van den Berg's metabletics has influenced a wide range of scholars in Western Europe and beyond, including enclaves in North America, South Africa, and Japan (Kruger, 1984). Ever since I discovered Van den Berg's work in the early 1970s and had the privilege of studying with him, his metabletic method and its applications have pervaded my own approach to psychology. It has inspired me to conduct my own metabletic investigations which include the changing nature of the family (1999), the changing nature of childhood (2006) and the changing nature of neurosis (2008).

At the heart of Van den Berg's metabletics lies his conviction that every time period has its own reality, and its own truth which is manifested in all domains of human activity. He holds that human beings have changed over the course of history because the reality of the world in which we live has changed. His approach stands in sharp contrast to modern psychological theories which are based on the postulate of continuity and sameness, a result of their adoption of a natural-science model which presupposes a uniform, objective, and unchanging world wherein phenomena are seen as continuous and quantifiable. Van den Berg was one of the first to challenge this conviction. He differentiated between two dimensions, or two structures, of reality: the changing world of everyday life, and the unchanging world of science, based on the principle of continuity. Van den Berg focused on the first structure, the everyday-life world. He argued for the changing nature of human beings and the world in which they live. For example, he described in detail how in the Renaissance, the realms of sexuality and of death were present and visible to adults and to children alike. With the increasing complexity and secularization of modern society, these vital domains became obscure, hidden and invisible, especially to children. Van den Berg's perceived that metabletic changes are often sudden, able to be pinpointed and dated. In his four main volumes on metabletics, he provided ample evidence for his belief that the existence of men, women, and children in the Western world underwent essential changes expressed simultaneously in various field of human activity (Mook, 1984).

Metabletics hold that a change in one field of human activity never stands alone but coincides with changes in related fields. The idea of the "synchronicity of change" lies at the heart of this discipline. A shift in a metabletic sense indicates a significant change in a phenomenon which manifests itself in a new meaning, a new structure, and a new way of life. For example, with the birth of the concept of childhood, a metabletic shift took place. For centuries, children were seen as little adults who belonged to the adult world and played and worked alongside their elders. When the concept of childhood was finally borne towards the end of the 18th century, children were for the first time seen as children with their own thoughts and their own feelings (Van den Berg, 1956). This new meaning opened the way towards seeing children in a different light. Related synchronisms emerged at the same time. For example, children's literature suddenly flourished and clothing was designed especially for children as more and more people recognized the different and unique status of being a child in its own right apart from the world of adults (Mook, 2006).

With his metabletics, Van den Berg introduced a new approach to writing history. It was discovery oriented and addressed the question why an initiative or discovery was made at a specific time and place. It claimed that we need to pay attention to the small events and anecdotes which are usually overlooked in the traditional approaches to history. In his captivating, descriptive, and at times, provocative approach, Van den Berg brought the dead facts of history to life and invited his readers to become eyewitnesses to unique historical events (Zwart, 2002). In particular, he emphasized the significance of unique events and exemplary,

typical moments which impact on human life as lived and carry within themselves the power to not only influence but to actually change the course of life. Emphasizing and analyzing the significance of unique events became core principles of his metabletic method.

The epistemological foundation of metabletics is based on Heidegger's (1962) conception of the subject-object relationship: People are seen as being-in-the-world, as related to, and interwoven, with the world in which they live, and with the people and objects which they encounter. Metabletics is usually translated as a historical phenomenology in that the nature of a specific phenomenon is described as it reveals itself within a particular historical time and place. Thus it incorporates the phenomenological principle of respecting a phenomenon as it manifests itself in a specific context. As a trained phenomenologist, Van den Berg manifests an extraordinary sensitivity to the observation and description of historical phenomena. Yet I find that the translation of metabletics as historical phenomenology is only partially correct. Despite a degree of overlap, metabletics departs significantly from phenomenology and instead manifests its own distinctive characteristics. It should also be differentiated from hermeneutics, the science of the interpretation of texts. The metabletic method certainly involves a detailed reading of historical events and texts, including documents, novels, and paintings. Van den Berg did not, however, specifically address hermeneutics and did not aim for a systematic hermeneutic reading and interpretation of texts. Instead, he incorporated his historical insights and interpretations into his conceived metabletic project. Despite the fact that phenomenology, hermeneutics and metabletics share some common characteristics, they remain distinct qualitative research approaches and methodologies in their own right. They can be seen as mutually enriching and complimentary approaches aimed at disclosing the rich yet mysterious meanings of our lives as lived and experienced.

Van den Berg was not alone in his historical approach to phenomena where relationships were sought between disciplines within the human sciences. We find a similar tendency in the work of Thomas Kuhn (1962) and, especially, in Michel Foucault (1972). Both authors have been recognized by Van den Berg who has called them co-metableticists (1996). Other examples of historical cross-cultural research in the humanities include the work of the historian Philippe Aries (1960), the sociologist Niel Postman (1982), the educationalist Klaus Mollenhauer (1985) and the psychologist David Elkind (1988). Recently, the philosopher Marvin Zayed (2008, 2009) has used a modified version of metabletics to explore a number of philosophical and cross-cultural relationships. Zwart (2002) made a significant contribution by reconstructing Van den Berg's work and by clarifying and evaluating his method and the coherency of his main themes. He also situated metabletics in a broader intellectual context by interfacing it with, and confronting it to, the work of related authors like Husserl, Freud, Bachelard and Foucault who, in turn, influenced the work of Van den Berg. He concluded that Van den Berg's oeuvre has great relevance for our time, but that it has been undervalued and is in need of rehabilitation.

## **Principles of the Metabletic Method**

In 1967, Van den Berg delineated three theoretical and three practical principles which underlie and characterize his distinctive method. A summary and brief discussion follows.

Theoretical Principles:

1. The principle of non-disturbance of phenomena

2. The principle of reality
3. The principle of change

Practical Principles:

4. The principle of synchronicity
5. The principle of the unique event
6. The principle of emphasis

### ***The Principle of Non-Disturbance of Phenomena***

A metabletic investigation of a phenomenon should leave the phenomenon intact as it manifests itself in a particular time and place in history and within a certain context. The phenomenon should not be disturbed or distorted and no detail should be isolated or eliminated. It should be respected and described as it reveals and manifests itself to the investigator. This is a core and well-known phenomenological principle which has been incorporated into the metabletic method as mentioned before.

### ***The Principle of Reality***

Metabletics sees a phenomenon as real and endorses a single reality. Herein it departs and differs from Husserlian phenomenology in that it rejects the distinction between a phenomenon as it appears and its existence in reality. It holds instead that the phenomenon as it reveals itself is real and exists as such in the world. Metabletics also rejects the Freudian notion of the unconscious as a different reality. Instead, it claims that there is only one reality, i.e., the single, concrete, materialistic reality of our daily life—that is, the way we live, eat, drink, work and travel. Van den Berg emphasizes that we live in the primary structure of daily realism, in contrast to the secondary structure invented by science (1965).

### ***The Principle of Change***

This principle is clearly the most central to the metabletic method. It holds that phenomena have not always been the same but that they have changed, or have newly emerged, over the course of history. Van den Berg emphasized the reality and the concreteness of change and provided ample illustrations of the way people and things have changed over the course of time. For example, his metabletic investigation revealed that the unconscious in terms of a hidden anti-ego did not always exist but was instead discovered by a number of independent researchers over the course of the 19th century (1965). He concluded that human existence itself had changed.

With the combined theoretical principles of non-disturbance of phenomena; of a single, concrete, everyday reality; and of the changing nature of the human being in the world, metabletics ushered in a new way of thinking that has led to new insights into the nature of historical phenomena and of scientific discoveries.

### ***The Principle of Synchronicity***

The principle of synchronicity lies at the heart of the metabletic method. Van den Berg differentiated between homogeneous and heterogeneous synchronisms. A homogenous synchronism is not unusual and occurs when a new phenomenon is discovered simultaneously by more than one independent researcher across various disciplines. For example, the philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, the historian Philippe Aries and the psychiatrist J. H. Van den Berg all wrote independently about the emergence of the concept of childhood in Western Europe during the latter part of the 18th century. A related homogeneous synchronism has been revealed in the emergence of the nuclear family in Western society towards the end of the 18th century (Mook, 1999).

Much more striking, and unusual, are heterogeneous synchronisms which point to the simultaneous emergence in time of very different but related phenomena. One of Van den Berg's (1965) famous examples is the synchronicity between William Harvey's discovery in 1628 of the physiological function of the human heart, and the birth of Jean Eudes' devotion of the Sacred Heart in 1629. Both phenomena were about the human heart, but vastly different in nature. Harvey was the first to declare that the human heart is like a mechanical pump which circulates the blood through the body. With his devotion of the Sacred Heart, Eudes meant that through this devotion, the heart of the believer would melt into the heart of Christ. Van den Berg's originality and the power of his metabletic approach is especially revealed in his discovery of a multiplicity of heterogeneous synchronisms in specific times and places over the course of history.

### ***The Principle of the Unique Event***

This principle holds that if we want to understand a phenomenon or discovery in the past, we should pay attention to the words, the acts, and the writings of a leading person—in short, to his or her unique event. Van den Berg believes that the discovery or insight of one or a few people is more important than the discovery of a group. By the time a group supports a discovery, it has often already been dated. Similarly, the solution to a historical problem is to be found by an outstanding individual and his or her actions. The principle of the unique event is very important for metabletics and Van den Berg's work is full of the discoveries of unique events in history. This principle presents a polar opposite to the position of empirical psychological or sociological research which seeks to verify its hypotheses by testing large numbers of subjects before submitting the results to a quantitative statistical analysis.

### ***The Principle of Emphasis***

Once the unique event has been found, it is emphasized, described in detail, investigated, and analyzed to reveal its meaning and the reasons for its uniqueness. The researcher should stay as close as possible to the real event, or to the text and the intended meaning of its author. Today, we could add that the interpretation of a text should also adhere to hermeneutic principles. A hermeneutic approach that is rooted in phenomenology as found, for example, in the work of H.-G. Gadamer (1982) and Paul Ricoeur (1974) could be fruitfully applied within the principles of emphasis of a unique event as outlined by Van den Berg.

## **An Application of the Metabletic Principles**

Van den Berg's metabletic principles can be illustrated by an example from his second major work entitled *Leven in Meervoud* (1965), and translated in English as *Divided Existence and Complex Society* (1974). Herein, Van den Berg explored the relationship between personality and society and raised the question as to why the concepts of neurosis and the unconscious were born at the end of the 19th century and not earlier or later in history. His extensive metabletic investigation, in which he always situated the human being in a historical, social, and cultural context, revealed that, from the Middle Ages up to the 17th century, Western society was still relatively coherent and relationships between people were visible, accessible, and comprehensible. However, towards the end of the 18th century, society had changed and had become increasingly divided, separated, and disconnected. This was, in turn, reflected in a division of personality that first emerged as a new theme in literature called the "Doppelganger" or the alter-ego. A heterogeneous synchronism at the time was the emergence of magical phenomena such as artificial somnambulism and a rising interest in hypnosis, the occult, and the unknown.

Towards the end of the 19th century, the theme of a dual existence manifested itself in daily life. In 1891, William James was the first social scientist to realize that people were living in multiplicity and that the self was not unitary but multiple. A heterogeneous synchronism emerged in 1893 when Durkheim observed that society was suffering from *anomie*, or social disorder. In the same year, Freud and Breuer published their first article on a neurotic patient and claimed that she was living in duality as she was found to be partly conscious and partly unconscious. Van den Berg concluded that the trio-depth psychology, subjective dualism, and neurosis were born at the end of the 19th century. They were recognized and articulated by Freud who saw them as the nucleus of his theory of psychoanalysis.

Over the course of the 20th century, the nature and the structure of neurosis changed once again. By the mid-fifties, Van den Berg reformulated neurosis in interpersonal terms and suggested the term "sociosis", by which he implied that society itself was at fault as it harbored many neurotic factors. These factors included, amongst others, the increasing ambivalence of society, a weakening of family ties, a disappearance of small groups, and an increase in mobility and pressure of time. In 1980, the long used term neurosis was dropped all together from the DSM-III-R, the diagnostic and treatment manual for psychologists. The birth and the death of the concept of neurosis provided powerful insight into the changing nature of a phenomenon and of personality and society over the course of time (Mook, 2008).

## Evaluation and Conclusions

With his original metabletic method, Van den Berg initiated a new approach and a paradigmatic shift towards understanding and interpreting the changing nature of historical phenomena as lived and experienced. Revealing how events across human science disciplines are synchronistically related opened up a new perspective as to their meaning and significance. By outlining the theoretical and practical principles of his method, he aimed to provide a foundation and guidelines for how to conduct a metabletic study.

Metabletics remains an ambitious discipline and its method demands outstanding qualitative research skills. Above all, it calls for intuition and imagination to perceive the unique event and the relevant heterogenous synchronisms across various disciplines. Herein, Van den Berg was an unsurpassed master and a brilliant advocate of his own method. Yet his work has been perceived by critics as controversial. On the one hand, it has been applauded for its ingenuity and its numerous new historical insights. On the other hand, it has been critiqued by some scholars for being overly subjective and lacking in scientific rigor (Parabirsing, 1974; Zwart, 2002).

In evaluating the metabletic method from today's perspective, we need to keep in mind that the method has never been renewed since its inception in 1956 when qualitative human science research barely existed. At the time, the human sciences were heavily caught up in the natural science model with its rigid logical boundaries and its objectified notions of truth and reality. The natural science model itself was a product of modernity which embraced the principles of progress, regularity and universality (Roseneau, 1992). In rejecting the natural science model and creating a metabletic approach towards understanding historical human phenomena, Van den Berg emerged as an original and courageous voice in the wilderness.

In our contemporary world, we are living in a very different postmodern era which is pervaded by an accelerating pace of change. Postmodernism not only rejects the modernist principles but also the natural science model. Instead it celebrates diversity, concrete reality and daily lived experience. In this climate, qualitative research approaches applied to psychology and the social sciences have gained new ground. I am convinced that metabletics as a science of change is a particularly suitable discipline to study the changing nature of phenomena in which we are all caught up today.

In evaluating Van den Berg's work, Zwart (1992) raised questions about some of his metabletic principles. He correctly noticed a tension between the phenomenology-based principle of non-disturbance of the phenomenon and the practical principle of selecting and emphasizing specific events. Although Van den Berg endorsed the non-disturbance principle, he appeared inconsistent by, at the same time, accentuating and isolating unique events. Also, the focal attention paid to the unique initiative seems to contrast the principle of synchronicity. Despite his positive evaluation of metabletics Zwart (1992) concluded that Van den Berg practiced metabletics without a clear explication of his method.

Another important issue that needs to be addressed is how the validity and the reliability of the metabletic method can be assured. In meeting the criteria for qualitative human science research, we need to ask how faithfulness to the phenomenon can be validated and how the interpretation of real events, as well as of texts, can be verified. Here, we can draw on validation criteria already developed for phenomenological and hermeneutic research methods (e.g., Giorgi, 1984; Kvale, 1989; Van Manen, 1990). Criteria also need to be developed for the selection of unique events which play a central role in the metabletic method. This practical principle raises

questions such as what constitutes a unique event and what are the criteria for its selection? In a further development and verification of the metabletic method, such questions will need to be addressed. Another issue is the vast scope of metabletic research which is detailed and interdisciplinary in nature. It is advisable that it be conducted by a small group of like-minded researchers across disciplines within the human sciences. For single or multiple metabletic investigators, validation criteria must be applied to ensure the relative objectivity of the results.

The metabletic method remains a powerful tool for advancing our scientific knowledge and insight into phenomena of the human sciences as they were lived and experienced in past times. Today, our high-speed internet, with its numerous websites, provides access to massive amounts of information across disciplines—a treasure that was not available to Van den Berg when he wrote his major works. This information highway available at our fingertips, opens up new vistas and possibilities for conducting metabletic research. Furthermore, the value of the metabletic method for studying not only past but also present and future phenomena should be explored. The method could also be applied beyond the Western culture to explore other historical and social cultural worlds as has been initiated by Zayed (2008, 2009).

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