

On Cautiousness

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Phenomenology plays a central part in Van den Berg's Metabletics. But phenomenology is not only a pure methodological or theoretical approach to reality: it also has an ethical implication. First of all, there is a certain respect for the things as they manifest themselves to us. Secondly, things are regarded as phenomena, situated in a context that gives meaning and significance. Finally, by avoiding so-called objectivity, things are not isolated entities, but realities accepted in their worldly integration. As Van den Berg demonstrates in his work, this approach has an important consequence in medical and psychological therapy. It resists the hypostatizing of science and technology, which is a process that deprives human beings of their humanity and the things of their existential reality. Being aware of the implicated meaning and significance of our daily-life situation, existential phenomenology represents an ethical and spiritual moment. We call it cautiousness.

Throughout his historico-phenomenological work, Jan Henrik van den Berg has always shown a remarkable fascination for the world of things. His attitude of care and caution in dealing with and handling things has been essential within his *Metabletics* or theory of change. It is only by seeing and observing, by describing and interpreting given things that we can detect the transformations of the world, the world of humans and things in their reality. As such, Van den Berg's writings very often give a striking picture of the range of a thing. Whether he is analyzing the human lower jaw¹, or looking at Jacques-Louis David's painting, *La marchière* (the vegetable woman)², in each case Van den Berg offers extremely apt evocations. Again and again he is interested in the wondrous aspects of things:

One who denies the wondrous aspect of things—that is, their changeability—loses respect for them. Once this respect has suffered, one can handle things casually. One handles them in this way when one passes them quickly. He who moves with speed through a landscape proves that he has little respect for the things in it.³

Here the poetical reality of things has its central place in Van den Berg's thinking. Scholars familiar with the writings of Gaston Bachelard will find a common approach. In his *La poétique de l'espace* ("Poetics of Space"), the French philosopher quotes Van den Berg and stresses that things speak to us. We must listen to the poets, and we must look at the canvasses or paintings to realize that things really speak to us.⁴

Accepting the world as the horizon of things, we see that a given thing, a table for example, has its specific reality, its size and dimensions, and consequently requires its own treatment and approach. Therefore, our relations to it cannot be an arbitrary one. I quote from *Things: Four Metablic Reflections*:

In front of me stands a table, a thing with a size of its own. On this table lie various objects—chisels, screws, a plane and an ashtray—each one a thing with a size its own. If I carry the table with the objects outside and look at all these things again from my porch, the changed size is related to the one I saw first, and it remains the things' own size, regardless of how that size changes. I cannot fail to observe this.⁵

Things make their way into our world; they inhabit it. In fact, they themselves presuppose the existence of the world. They are not to be found outside this world. On the contrary, they help us to *remember* the world that we are living in. Our contact with a thing is a process that the German philosopher of hermeneutics, Hans-Georg Gadamer, aptly calls *Horizontverschmelzung*, or the “fusion of horizons”⁶: the act of grasping and understanding a thing in its tangible concreteness occurs through a convergence of horizons, which Gadamer sees as a fusion. The perception of a thing can thus be considered as an encounter with otherness, which is represented by that thing. This happens through a process of increased consciousness and familiarity. The following citation, taken from the essay, *Things*, illustrates this very well. The author is in Rome, and stands facing Saint Peter's Basilica:

At first the façade remains a piece of architecture. But as I ascend the broad steps on the second square, the façade becomes enormous. It fascinates me. Now as I stand directly in front of it, it almost overpowers me. This wall, this façade with all its history. This entrance to another world. This is what I realize standing before these towering columns: a different world announces itself here. This is an impression, which even the most inveterate humanist cannot escape. I don't want to enter the church yet, for I know from experience that it will be much too confusing at first, a tumult of shapes and lines which will become orderly only after frequent visits and many discussions of what one sees and reads about them.

Every church is a challenge, and especially this one. I therefore wish to stay in front of the façade a little longer, and meet the challenge

there. People pass me going in and out of the church. Some people look up at the stones in amazement. But I also see others, who are used to it, look at nothing and enter the portals as if there were no threshold. All of these people are on a boundary, out here or in there. Some remain outside even when they go inside. Others take the inside with them when they go outside; the church goes beyond the steps, to the two squares and deep into the outside world from which I have come. The façade is all movement; it is a moving, yielding boundary, which remains self-consistent. A wall, which relocates its power.

“Well,” I say to myself, “let me touch this wall, feel the stone which accomplished this feat.” I feel hard material, stone earth, rock. Of course. Nevertheless, I don’t feel the rock of the rocky landscape from which the stone was cut. If I wished, I could undoubtedly feel that same rock, but then I would almost commit a crime. My gesture would move the stone back to the place of its origin. That wouldn’t be right, for the stone has been brought here for a reason. If the stone wasn’t meant to be changed, it could have been left where it was. It was given a function, an additional property, Gradually, its function merged with the stone. Generations learned to use stone; it assumed a place in our history. The multitudes who entered and left through this façade, whether alone, in groups, in processions, in silence, talking or singing, laughing or crying, these multitudes gave the stone its character, its substance.

It is a new substance, which I can feel with the palm of my hand. I would feel even better if I wore a cassock that could slide along the stones (of course, I don’t wear a cassock). I must be careful with my hands. To put a hand on the stones, that’s all right. My scratches would damage its substance; that would go counter to the function of the stone. One doesn’t scratch portals, at least not the portal of this boundary. That’s why no one is tempted to do this. I have never seen anyone merely lay the palm of his hand against the stones, although this would be the slightest form of touch. Thousands, even tens of thousands pass through this façade on a single day, yet no one touches the stones and certainly no one scratches them with his nails. But if those crowds were led through the quarry where the stones are cut, many of them would then pick up a piece and test it with their nails to see how hard the stone is. There such an action would be right, but here at the façade the stone’s being does not permit that.⁷

In this phenomenological description, the things themselves speak. In their complexity, they have not become detached or self-sufficient entities, but they inevitably presuppose a reality—the reality of Saint Peter’s. The things we talk about refer to and report of a specific situation. When Van den Berg describes the things themselves, within the context of discussing the architecture of Saint Peter’s Basilica, he calls to life the situations in which the things reveal their reality. He describes Saint Peter’s Basilica just the way we would see it if we were in Rome. However, will our perception of this church and its walls be the same? Will we experience the same “fusion of horizons”? This is not necessarily so. Still, we would be able to talk about the situation and the many things within this situation, and consider them as a mutual or shared reality. This is relevant to all things we talk about, as long as we refer to them by their direct appearances to us. Only then do we see or hear the things in the way they manifest themselves to us, in the way they express their *significance and meaning*. How would we see a thing if we took away any significance from our perception of it, if we were deprived of its significance? A church would no longer be a church, a seat not a seat, a pair of clogs would become meaningless, and a wine jug could no longer serve us. In brief, without their significance, destination and meaning, things disappear or become objectified.

However, the above description shows that a thing only appears and therefore reveals its significance, when we talk about it. It is therefore essential to look at or listen to things as closely as possible. This is a process in which language is absolutely prolific and vital. The author of *The Changing Nature of Man* repeatedly demonstrates this, when, in order to support his theory of the *transformations*, he refers to and describes a thing in such a way that he creates reality.

I am not sure whether Van den Berg would agree with my conviction that reality is evoked by linguistic expression. Anyone who is familiar with phenomenology will have noticed that when I stressed the importance of perceiving things in the embodiment of their significance and meaning, I relied on a method that Edmund Husserl successfully introduced into modern philosophy. In fact, the metabletical method explicitly calls upon phenomenology in order to appreciate a thing in its manifestation. The phenomenological approach is evident in Chapter Seven of *Metabletica van de materie*. The first theoretical principle of the metabletical method is for the witness “to leave the object of his study undisturbed, not to interfere with it, but—because of a genuine respect for what he sees or hears—to describe

this perception directly in the way it comes to him.” The name for this approach is derived from this respect: *Phenomenology*, which means the study of manifestations of phenomena *as they manifest themselves to us*.⁸ Consequently, from that which we perceive nothing should be cut away or reduced, unless—and this is one of the problems which phenomenology faces—it does not belong to the phenomenon itself, and therefore is irrelevant. This is a kind of reduction that is entirely different from the reductionism found in the sciences. It is a reduction that asks for cautiousness.

In a methodological reflection, Van den Berg distinguishes between a phenomenological and a natural scientific approach, illustrating this by the study of sunlight and its color. The first approach stresses the given context:

If I try to find words to express what the red of the setting sun means, I may not throughout my inquiry lose sight of the fact that the red setting sun belongs to the totality indicated by the term ‘sunset.’ The reasons are obvious... (N)o one witnesses a segregate red sun; one always sees scenery under the setting sun; for instance, a sea over which the sun sets.... (I)f I wish to indicate what I see, then I must maintain the unity of what is presented to me.⁹

What is the unity Van den Berg is looking for? He finds an answer to this question in the practice of phenomenological understanding. Not a concept of understanding that should be related “to a laborious and involved process of thinking”¹⁰, but an understanding that is accessible to an immediate, pre-reflexive intentionality. The answer to this question about the unity is given at once: “The panorama of the sunset is the panorama of the *evening*.”¹¹ For us the evening is a totality in which the sun is red. The color of the sun is the red of the evening. And, of course, the meaning of this red will be influenced by all the connotations of the specificity of the given evening.

Is such an answer a trivial one? Certainly not if we recognize the implications of our experience of the evening:

I wish that I could express what I experience, what everybody experiences, when the evening is closing in. Every moment of the day has in all simplicity its own grandeur. The evening brings the day to a close and shrouds whatever happiness or sorrow the day has brought. The evening, which brings peace to the impetuous heart, has descended

upon every battlefield throughout mankind's warlike history. This is the dusk that one day will settle over each one of us at death. The ever-recurrent consolation in man's always dissatisfied, always rebelling, always seeking and doubting existence. The ever-recurring affirmation of the moment of bliss.¹²

"The moment of bliss" is not a scientific concept. Nevertheless, Van den Berg wishes to introduce words like those into science, "which is so indigent in this matter."¹³ Again, for Van den Berg, the wondrous aspect or dimension of things is essential. He asks: "If events or things act on our emotions, or at least strike us, why should this aspect be so consistently passed over in silence?"¹⁴ The author of *The Changing Nature of Man* protests against this distortion of reality, and this protest is embodied in his metabletico-phenomenological method.

In a scientific point of view, the sun is a celestial body, about one million miles away from us and having a diameter that is more than one hundred times that of the earth; only two billionth of its radiation reaches the earth, etcetera, etcetera. Within the context of such facts—which Van den Berg cannot and does not wish to deny—the moment of bliss is not to the point. In a scientific approach, we use for example instruments to measure this celestial body, taken as an object as such as if we were not there, as if there was no evening. In his "Four Metabletic Reflections," the author dwells a little on this point about using instruments:

An instrument used in measuring the sun doesn't take the sun's position in the sky into account. It removes the time element from the event, and what is an event without time? It is an event that doesn't happen. No one can expect the sun to change much in an event that doesn't happen. But what is surprising is the fact that the sun can adapt itself so well to the instrument with respect to its dimensions. The instrument, which makes things stable and, by the same token, almost makes us forget how much they change, in this way helps us realize that things do change and that they even change considerably. The instrument makes this contribution in the following way. If one removes the element of the morning time and the evening time, then the two suns are equal. The instrument makes this important 'reduction'; it removes the evening from the evening and the morning from the morning. When this is done, the things of both time periods—in this case the evening sun and the morning sun—show that they can adapt themselves to this

‘reduction.’ They are then equal or nearly equal; they have been able to go through the change toward equality almost completely.¹⁵

Phenomenology or metabletics on the one hand and physics or natural sciences on the other are different systems of understanding and cognition that enable us to claim that we observe and describe aspects of reality. To clarify his methodological distinction between the two dimensions, Van den Berg introduces the idea of a first structure and a second structure without our approach of events, things and objects. The first structure is that of our daily-life experience, the pre-reflexive understanding of manifestations and phenomena, independent of theories or scientific explanations. The second structure contains a systematic observation within the criteria of a specific cognitive model. When we use a microscope, the instrument reveals a different nature than the nature of things we grasp in daily-life understanding. The second structure is self-consistent and self-sufficient. Here a special attention is drawn to the fact that this structure is complete and is the bearer of all the properties implied in the new reality given by this structure. Van den Berg writes:

All this becomes perhaps most evident if one uses the microscope for one’s own body and discovers there, in the second structure of that body, certain peculiarities, let us say again, an illness. To be more specific, I make a microscopic blood slide of my body, look at the slide through the microscope and discover in the second structure malaria parasites. So I take quinine and I get better in the first structure. But also better—or at least, different—in the second structure, as is proved by a second blood slide.

If, however, I regard this recovery in the second structure as the recovery of my illness, I am wrong. For *I* was ill, and only *I* can say of my body or myself that it becomes healthy. This reality of illness or health is something which escapes the microscope. For I cannot say that the observed slide is diseased or that it is healthy. By way of a neutral structure, which is neither healthy nor ill, I pass from illness to health. The relationship between these structures is obvious, but also obvious is their difference. Between the two structures stands the magnifying glass—and everything connected with it. This takes the object out of its dimensions and takes away its meaning.¹⁶

Although they are different, both realities (or structures) are still related. For example, when someone looks unhealthy, microscope examination may reveal a disease. Consequently, the second structure helps us to explain what is wrong with this person in his daily-life situation (in the first structure). With the information derived from this first structure, we know to proceed and treat the disease reformulated in the concepts of the second structure.

It is important to acknowledge the limits of either structure: “It is very easy to confine oneself to the second structure, and mistake its features for those of the first structure.”¹⁷ The structure of the ill person, which we actually see, and the structure of the disease, which is diagnosed by a clinical biologist, do not form one unity. They are two different ‘stories,’ belonging to two different and irreducible language games—to reference Wittgenstein—, which we should not confuse. Nevertheless, those two structures are unmistakably related. It is in fact, on the basis of knowledge acquired in the second structure that we are able to reach conclusions, which apply to the first structure. At the same time, we have to be aware of their fundamental difference.

But which position do we have to take so as to distinguish between both structures within reality? How can we avoid a certain contamination? What brings us to the conclusion that a dominance of the second structure of reality can result in a lack of respect for the world of things and for our existential involvement?

The essay *Medical Power and Medical Ethics*, which at the time of its publication caused much reaction, offers a few valuable suggestions within this context. Those who have read this essay will remember how the author writes about the technical power of contemporary medicine and about its ‘victims.’ The author, Van den Berg, believes that this medical/technical power has victimized man, and sacrificed him to the mere demonstration of its skillfulness. This medical/technical power has informed impressive achievements within the second structure of reality, in this case within the second structure of the human body. After a long period of medical/technical ignorance, the medical world has acquired a power of increased technicality, which in the last few decades seems to have grown to become a dominant power. According to Van den Berg, this technical skillfulness has become all-important, so that it has subjected physicians. In this context, a physician is no longer the person who assists in the healing process, the one who realizes that man is a mortal being, for who it is preferable to die in a dignified way than to become an ignoble victim, dependent on the medical/technical machinery that lacks any sense of cautiousness.

In the spirit of metabletics,—and in addition to Van den Berg’s thoughts—we also could stress that our era asks for a dominating medical power, since man can no longer accept that the modern technical world could fail in healing patients. People make the demands that the physician must be a permanently assisting caretaker who has to guarantee a complete recovery. In many cases, of course, this is impossible. Yet, more and more, people demand a more peaceful death without suffering, even to the point where it proceeds to the use of so-called “medical assisted suicide.” Of course, one can ask if this is not an overcharging of the medical world an unreasonable demand, which expects again the presence of a dominating medical power. Then, it seems that medicine cannot afford to give up its power by accepting that there are boundaries that transcend the range of therapeutics.

The medical power Van den Berg criticizes is in fact based upon an inordinate skillfulness, upon a mere *hubris* or exuberance of this skillfulness, which focuses entirely upon the second structure of the human body, the body as an object. As such, this skillfulness disregards the first and primary structure, the initial structure of man’s reality of suffering, the structure of the body as subject. Van den Berg believes this to be a disease of our medical education, which concentrates itself almost solely on the technical approach.

The future doctor learns anatomy and physiology. He learns the differential diagnosis of diseases. He is taught the treatments that can be used to combat disease and physical disorder. Yet his personal relationship with and responsibilities to the patient are left to his own discretion.¹⁸

Today, we must accept that in the medical world many things have changed. The physician is no longer a distant or reticent person. Unfortunately, he sometimes falls in the opposite direction by adopting the role of a priest or an ideological guide.

Van den Berg is right when he stresses that the attitude of a sole focus on the second structure of reality has not completely disappeared and that it still can lead to disrespect for humanity. But he sees that a new ethics is at work. Medical ethics today is opposed to medical/technical overconfidence and excessiveness. It retains the awareness that man is a mortal being and not to be subjected to mere medical/technical skillfulness. This is a consideration, based upon what Aristotle called *phronesis*, which is the virtue of practical insight and cautiousness and correct perception of one’s actions. It is not

through studying the second structure of the human body (or of any body) that we can come to reflection. No, the very reflection arises in the ethical power of reason, a sense modeled on the common usage of a moral *cogito*, a quality which finds its roots in the apperception of the first structure of reality. Consequently, the relation between both structures is, in fact, based upon an obvious hierarchy: the second structure derives its meaning and its significance from the reflective articulation of the first structure.

The opposite, the dominance of the second structure, in which we regard persons as machines and things as objects, has created a situation of increasing barbarity. The realization of a more integrated approach of the two structures calls for a different and more civilized perception of things, of the world, and of mankind. Things have become deprived of their soul, of their corporality and their world. By hypostatizing the second structure, a thing has become an isolated entity, an object, detached from its participation in the real world, and deprived of any human inspiration. This is the process of so-called objectivity, which essentially results in the destruction of a thing in its capacity of being a thing and disregards its human expression. In a similar way, this process also deprives man of his humanity. Science, which ultimately can be called the knowledge of the second structure within reality, sees objectivity as its aim. Consequently, this isolating scientific approach 'forgets' the essential quality of a thing. Here Van den Berg could agree with Martin Heidegger when this German philosopher writes:

The thingness of the thing remains concealed, forgotten. The nature of the thing never comes to light, that is, it never gets a hearing. This is the meaning of our talk about the annihilation of the thing.¹⁹

An isolated scientific approach, which claims to be objective, does not see that merely through the application of this process, the existential reality has already withdrawn itself from the things. So, things become objects. On the contrary, when we handle things as things, there is respect. In Heidegger's words:

If we think of the thing as thing, then we spare and protect the thing's presence in the region from which it presences. Thinging is the nearing of world. Nearing is the nature of nearness. As we preserve the thing *qua* thing, we inhabit nearness.²⁰

Cautiousness and respect for the things of the world form at least the ethical and spiritual moment within an existential phenomenology, when it describes a thing simply as it appears in our daily-life situation. Therefore, the phenomenological approach can contribute to a more civilized relation to persons, to events, to things and to our worldly reality. Phenomenology plays a central part in metabletics, which tries to assign sciences (or the second structure) a better-suited position, integrated in the study of reality.

However, because of our continuous barbarity towards things, we have forgotten so much of the 'thingness of things,' that it has become necessary to start rescuing it from oblivion. This becomes possible through evocative description, as Jan Hendrik van den Berg so skillfully shows within the context of narrative phenomenology. What we need now are restorative and civilizing stories like the ones Van den Berg tells us.*

Notes

¹ *Het onderste kakebeen. Een metabletische les. Afscheidscollege.* Nijkerk, Callenbach, 1979; reprinted in: *De uil van Minerva*, volume 6, nr. 1, 1989, pp. 11-35; also in: *De dingen.* Kapellen, Pelckmans, 1994, pp. 99-123.

² In: *Gedane zaken. Twee omwentelingen in de westerse geestesgeschiedenis (Metabletica van den materie II)*, Nijkerk, Callenbach, 1977, p. 116ff.

³ *Things: Four Metabletic Reflections.* Pittsburgh, Duquesne University Press, 1970, p. 117.

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *La poétique de l'espace.* Paris, FUF., 1983(11), p. 11.

⁵ *Things*, p. 10.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method.* New York, The Seabury Press, 1975, p. 273.

⁷ *Things*, pp. 37-38.

⁸ *Metabletica van de materie. Meetkundige beschouwingen.* Nijkerk, Callenbach, 1968, p. 103.

⁹ *Things*, p. 37-38.

¹⁰ *Things*, p. 38.

¹¹ *Things*, p. 38.

¹² *Things*, p. 38.

¹³ *Things*, p. 39.

¹⁴ *Things*, p. 39.

¹⁵ *Things*, p. 43.

¹⁶ *Things*, p. 14.

¹⁷ *Metabletica van de materie*, p. 101.

¹⁸ *Medical Power and Medical Ethics.* New York, Norton & Com., 1978, p. 56.

¹⁹ "The Thing," in: Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought.* New York, Harper, 1975, p. 170 (translation by Albert Hofstadter).

²⁰ "The Thing," p. 181.

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