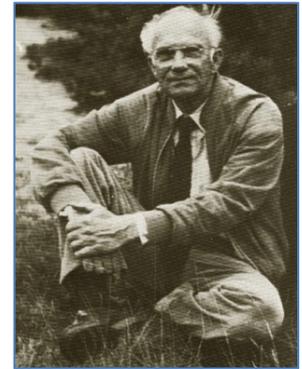




Jan Hendrik van den Berg (1914-2012)

“One should always be a little improbable”, said Oscar Wilde and this applies most aptly to Jan Hendrik van den Berg, whom one could characterize as a true *homo universalis*. Not only was he a medical doctor, a psychiatrist and a teacher of mathematics, but he would go well beyond the usual paths of such professionals. On the shelves in his own library there were the books of great mathematicians which he would not only enjoy reading, but would integrate into his major works on metabletics (especially in his studies of the metabletics of matter, about which more later on). There were thousands of books in his library, ranging from history, philosophy, psychiatry and art to mathematics, physics, entomology, literature, and sundry other subjects. He was not only the most translated Dutch scholar, but among the most widely translated authors in the Netherlands. Yet, unfortunately, his major works have not been translated.



Born in Deventer in the Netherlands on June 11, 1914, Jan Hendrik van den Berg died in Gorinchem on September 22, 2012. He thus lived for just twenty-and-a-half months short of a full century.

In the 1930s he initially qualified as a teacher before embarking on his medical studies and subsequent specialization in psychiatry and neurology at the University of Utrecht, where in 1946 he completed a doctoral dissertation under Professor H. C. Rümke, the Dutch phenomenological psychiatrist. In addition to his academic studies, van den Berg also underwent brief but intensive training in psychoanalysis, cycling to his analyst four times a week during war time. While still a medical student, he married Louise van Everdingen in 1942 and they had four children.

Already deeply influenced by thinkers in the field of phenomenology, such as his teacher Rümke and other Dutch phenomenologists in various fields, such as Buytendijk and Langeveld, van den Berg went on to study for a year in France (1946-1947). At the Sorbonne he studied the works of Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, and was particularly impressed by the thinker Gaston Bachelard. This period was followed by some months of study in Switzerland. During this time he also spent three days visiting Martin Heidegger in his abode in the Black Forest, which experience, in his own words, made an “onuitwisbare indruk” [indelible impression] on him, and greatly enriched his understanding and studies of not only Heidegger but also Husserl.

On returning to the Netherlands, van den Berg served as Clinical Head of the Psychiatric Clinic at the University of Utrecht before being appointed lecturer in Psychopathology at the university in 1948. In 1951, he was appointed Professor of Pastoral Psychology at the University of Utrecht. Most of his academic career was, however, based at the University of Leiden, where, for the twenty-five year period from 1954 until his retirement in 1979, he was Professor in Conflict Psychology and Phenomenological Method.



The IPJP is sponsored by the University of Johannesburg
in South Africa and Edith Cowan University's Faculty of
Regional Professional Studies in Australia





From 1967 onwards, the influence of van den Berg's scholarship was extended beyond the Netherlands by both lecture tours and more extensive periods as a Visiting Professor in several countries, including South Africa, the USA, Belgium, England and Japan (Kruger, 1984). In his *An Introduction to Phenomenological Psychology* (1979/1988), Dreyer Kruger – who later edited the *Festschrift for J H van den Berg* (1984) – states that “In South Africa, the visits of J. H. van den Berg ... made a considerable impact” (p. 220).

Van den Berg's three-month lecture tour in South Africa in 1969 was followed in 1971-1972 by a one-year sojourn as Visiting Professor at the University of South Africa (UNISA) in Pretoria. Two years later, he spent three months in 1974 as a Visiting Professor at the historically black University of the North in Sovenga, Limpopo. After his retirement from the University of Leiden in 1979, Van den Berg returned to South Africa in 1980 for a two-month lecture tour, and in 1982 he spent a month as Visiting Professor at the Medical University of South Africa (MEDUNSA). In recognition of the excellence of his contribution to scholarship, he was awarded an Honorary Doctorate – MD (*honoris causa*) – by the University of the Orange Free State, Bloemfontein, in 1984.

During the final three decades of van den Berg's life he continued to publish prolifically. His first wife, Louise, having died in 1980 – shortly after his retirement – he married Alieda de Gier in 1987. Until three years before his death, when frailty forced him to lay down his pen, he was, at Alieda's urging, working on his Memoires, which are due to be published shortly by Pelckmans. “Tot het eind”, according to his wife, “is hij helder gebleven” [To the end, he retained his mental faculties].

Van den Berg is buried in the cemetery of St Laurentius Roman Catholic Church in Kekerdom, Gelderland.

Jan Hendrik van den Berg's original contribution to knowledge and thought was the study of scientific and other revolutionary ideas or inventions, which show a more general change in the experience of man and his world. He coined the term *metabolics*, the study of changes (well before other thinkers began investigating such transversal shifts in thought and perception).

His first work with this title (*Metabologica*, 1956) dealt with the completely different ways we currently experience and think about childhood and adolescence in comparison with other historical periods, where the period of adolescence was mainly absent. This work was a great success and was followed by two volumes on The Human Body (*Het Menselijke Lichaam*, deel 1 & deel 2). This is where van den Berg illustrated, in a masterly way, how the principles of metabolics can be applied to increase our understanding of the historical shifts we so often see. He describes in his works how certain events, seemingly unconnected, make up a revolutionary change in the experience and perception of our world. For instance, he shows how in the year 1543 there was a major shift in perspective on the universe (as this was the year of the publication of the major work of Copernicus). That same year saw the emergence of a similar change with respect to the human body: in this year Andreas Vesalius published his work on human anatomy, which changed medicine for good and led the



The IPJP is sponsored by the University of Johannesburg
in South Africa and Edith Cowan University's Faculty of
Regional Professional Studies in Australia





way to discoveries such as the circulation of the blood by Harvey around 1628 (which in turn coincided with the devotion of the Sacred Heart in religious life). Van den Berg proceeded to illustrate how these revolutionary shifts go hand in hand with other major changes in our world, such as a new church style, fashion or music, all the while remaining true to the phenomenological principles of describing the world as it appears to us (without imposing models or looking for causes).

The other two major volumes on the metabletics of matter, *Metabletica van de Materie*, were published many years apart – part 1 in 1968, and part 2 only in 1977 – with the second volume a more socially and politically inspired work. At the centre was the question of the changing nature of matter and how this was expressed through sudden new insights in mathematics and revolutionary new church styles. Van den Berg, as mathematician, is at his strongest here, where the works of Euclid, and subsequent doubts about Euclidian geometry, were to coincide with other major changes. Volume 1 deals mainly with geometry and architecture, whereas the focus of volume 2 is related to algebra and music. This latter volume – subtitled *Gedane Zaken* [Finished Business] – was controversial because it included his critique of the, in his eyes, false premise of the French Revolution which states that all human beings are equal. Van den Berg never tired of pointing out the dangers of such assumptions inspired by ideals. He was, at times, cast in the role of a conservative professor, but being “a little improbable” he was also a leading thinker of what became a movement in the Netherlands on voluntary euthanasia. His book on *Medische Macht en Medische Ethiek* [Medical Power and Medical Ethics] (1969) was revolutionary at the time, when he would also argue strongly against the medical model in psychiatry. He was improbable in the sense that he could appear a conservative thinker, whereas he was also accused of being the opposite, a free-thinker and non-conformist. No matter on what subject he lectured, the audience would react strongly, whether for or against him.

Van den Berg was passionate about his work and was often well ahead of his time. He also wrote a study on Darwin’s theory of evolution which is highly nuanced in its argumentation, and years later the debate about such issues would be present in society. He wrote on terrorism in his book *Hooligans* (1989) well before it became a major theme in society, and similar examples can be found in his writing on psychology, psychoanalysis, education and politics.

Van den Berg was an original, creative thinker with an inordinate ability to teach and tell stories which inspired his readers and listeners. His books in the field of psychology, psychiatry and biology, his cultural-historical studies, as well as his metabletical studies, constitute a great and original contribution to knowledge and thought.

Indeed, as Jan-Kees Karels put it in his *In Memoriam*, “Van den Berg laat een panoramisch oeuvre na”: Van den Berg has left the world a panoramic body of work.

Andreas de Koning (with editorial elaboration)



The IPJP is sponsored by the University of Johannesburg
in South Africa and Edith Cowan University's Faculty of
Regional Professional Studies in Australia





Also:

<http://mythosandlogos.com/vandenBerg.html>

www.janushead.org/10-2

<http://www.digibron.nl> [Interview with J. H. van den Berg by Jan-Kees Karels, 7 June 2004]

http://www.refdag.nl/achtergrond/geschiedenis-cultuur/in_memoriam_jan_hendrik_van_den_berg_1914_2012_1_677181

[*In Memoriam* by Jan-Kees Karels, 24 September 2012]

=====



The *IPJP* is sponsored by the University of Johannesburg
in South Africa and Edith Cowan University's Faculty of
Regional Professional Studies in Australia

