

CLINAMEN

Clinamen is the word that Lucretius, in his 2nd century book, *The Nature of Things*, used to describe how the world works. Today, people are not inclined to read a physics book that is 2000 years old, but it is not the particular beliefs that Lucretius may have held that interest us but, rather, the way he used inversion to uncover a key truth that is just as true in the world of particle colliders and Hibbs' Fields as ever.

Instead of describing solid things as fixed and resting in space, he got his readers to imagine that the whole solid spatial world was moving along in the same direction. Our analogy would be a 12-lane highway where commuter traffic is all moving along at exactly the same speed. In terms of the cars and trucks on the highway, there is no apparent motion, although they are all traveling, if they are lucky, at 60 mph. What creates a sensation, however, is when something swerves. He called this a "clinamen," and we can imagine how velocity — a car shooting forward or one slowing down — creates an issue.

Think of architecture in terms of speed. When a city is functioning well, when people arrive at work more or less on time, packages get delivered, meetings get held, people can meet for lunch, etc., we can imagine that things are moving forward in time all at the same pace. Throw in something exceptional, like a 9/11, and you see clinamen in action. One site is rushed forward. It meets a premature end. The wobbling of this site sends shock waves throughout the city. Or, imagine a less dramatic case: a building gradually becomes obsolescent. It falls behind in the even pace forward.

Because clinamen turns our usual view of the world upside down but then makes it acceptable and thinkable, it has accomplished a particularly great thing. It has pulled its audience over to its side, gotten it to see things in a new way, and in the new way, the flow model is the mental "optic" that opens up new views. The flow doesn't have to exist. We only need to imagine that it exists. It makes some things that had been complex quite easy to explain.

It is easy to see how clinamen arises out of askesis. In fact, it seems that askesis was, from the beginning, a swerve that created a turbulence. For the monastery example, we see how the turbulence was mostly internal, how the "new vibes" of prayer, ritual observances, and contemplation were set up like a magic echo chamber. In fact, the idea of the choir as a place was thought of as a place, a mouth, directed toward the heavens, and the music was conceived mathematically and theologically as the voice of that music. Serious! Now, the distance separating the monastery from the even flow of atoms, every day life, makes more sense. It can be something that is a literal distance, away from the city, or it can be internal within the city. With Lucretius's idea of clinamen, we have a new way of conceiving dimension.

1. **“Starting with a clean slate.”** Every project is an opportunity to start over, to re-think one’s relationship to architecture, adopt new positions to try out. Like a new sheet of paper, the four edges define an inside, entry to which is conditional. Anything on the sheet is now a part of the drawing, a record of the progress of thinking.
 - a. **Isolation = thought.** The “inner speech” that is used to describe thinking (not quite accurately); this model raises questions (to whom is the speech addressed? where does it come from?); what value does uniqueness or difference have — or is it simply an illusion?
 - b. **Places of isolation:** monasteries, cloisters, retreats, ashrams — the key common factor is the idea of a pilgrimage that sets one apart, and is both a temporal process as well as a defense from distraction.
 - c. **Internal vs. external exile:** we know about models of utopias that are distant from settled places, but are there interior locations that accomplish the same effects of isolation? The image of the lonely crowd, etc.

2. **Microcosm of genesis.** With the initiation of a new project through isolation, there is the opportunity to think of how sequences work. Is there a logic that leads organically from first steps to the last? Clearly steps are not simply the unfolding of something already known but rather an enactment of discovery, which involves learning that builds on itself, learns from mistakes, develops internal rhythms.
 - a. **Mechanical vs. organic.** No one in their right mind would hope for a mechanical set of steps mindlessly generated, with no new discoveries at any point. But, what does “organic” mean? At every level, from molecules to cells to complex animals and plants, to ecosystems, to the idea of life in general, we have to revise our idea of “the big picture.”
 - b. **An organ is a transaction.** In the human body, organs mediate from an “outside” to an “inside,” but what these mean is fluid and mostly defined by the organ itself. There is no functional mapping — i.e. the heart is not just a pump, the kidney is not just a filter, etc. The organ is a mapping function, a way of re-locating functions throughout the body and even beyond.
 - c. **Askesis and growth** means that as the project grows so does the knower (maker) and his/her knowledge; part of this is public and sharable, but other parts, true to the logic of askesis, are “idiotic” (= “private”). What is the value of a subjectively good thing that cannot be shared directly?

3. **Askesis as a global-cosmic positioning system.** Like a GPS, askesis works through a mental/spiritual location protocol. “Where” takes on more abstract, deeper meaning, in terms of personal development, which is more than an accomplishment of pre-set goals.
 - a. **Like the monastery ...** askesis’s GPS focuses on the function of exception and the exceptional. The “unsharable” private component of the project becomes, like other forms of secret knowledge, a source of strength without “market value.” Yet, it is the thing that identifies the artist as unique, that *je ne sais quoi* quality — what is called the “unary trait” (what makes you you).
 - b. **The martial arts analogy of “qi” (氣/气)** compares the unary trait to balance, or the resistance to being thrown off balance. Its “inner” nature is also an “outer” relationship to things and other people. It is calm in a storm.

- c. **Without askisis** there can be no personal progress or learning; it is both a basis for getting work done as well as doing something of value.