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ABSTRACT

There are two views of the rhetorical principle of "kairos," or timeliness: first, the deterministic notion of "kairos" as a preordained "right" time in which certain activities are appropriate, and second, the relativistic notion of "kairos" as an exercise "in the nick of time." A satisfactory definition of "kairos" must acknowledge that some well-timed rhetorical effects (humor, for example) cannot be determined by strict rules, but rather are relative to context and situation. The relativistic dimension of "kairos" also explains how rhetorical truth relies not on the representation of objective facts, but on the terms of what is understood and accepted at a particular time. Moreover, this sense of "kairos" explains how identical acts can appear just or good at one time, unjust or evil at another. On a moral level, the absence of absolute standards by which to hold speakers accountable for their acts actually invests speakers with greater moral responsibility to discern when to act and what act to perform. The recognition of these two counterpoised views of "kairos" implies that rhetoric involves combining the prudence to judge the proper time to speak with the courage to speak at the precise moment one's rhetorical contribution will be most fitting. (JG)

A Re-examination of Kairos: Implications for Moral Accountability and Rhetorical Criticism

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Implications for Moral Accountability and Rhetorical Criticism

> USA Today: "Oh, come on, it was the timing, and the way you said it."
>
> George Burns: "...You don't have to have talent to do that. What's so great about timing?"
>
> (USA Today, 13 March 1987, 15A)

It could be argued that kairos, or timeliness, particularly as it applies to rhetoric, has not received scholarly attention proportionate to its importance. L'annee Philologique lists no publications dealing specifically with the topic, and rarely does literature in communication studies address timeliness. This lack of attention causes consternation, especially in light of Kennedy's remark: "It has been claimed that the ethics, aesthetics and rhetoric of Gorgias are all based on kairos" (66). Untersteiner (161, 197) agrees on the centrality of kairos, asserting that Gorgias' inclusion of the concept in epistemology causes kairos to permeate all activity, including rhetoric. Isocrates concludes that good oratory must be fit for the occasion (Against the Sophists 13), and the ability to use facts "at the appropriate time...is the peculiar gift of the wise" (Panegyricus 9). Plato contends that speakers have not finished or perfected the ability to speak until they have judged "the right time for beginning to speak and pausing" (Phaedrus 272a-b). The centrality of rhetorical timing to

oratorical skill warrants further examination of kairos.

My attempt to clarify kairos proceeds in three steps. First, I attempt to define the term and demonstrate its place in a relativistic perspective on rhetorical timing. This relativistic perspective contrasts with the view that the degree to which rhetoric fits a given situation can be determined by appealing to definite, specifiable criteria for proper timing. Second, I examine the implications of a relativistic sense of timing for holding rhetors morally accountable for their discourse. Finally, I propose that the recognition of two counterpoised views of kairos facilitates a solution to the charge that Lloyd Bitzer's treatment of timing is deterministic. If Bitzer's concept of fittingness is re-examined in terms of the more relativistic sense of kairos, situational criticism escapes charges of historical determinism and inflexibility.

Toward a Clearer Conception of "Kairos"

Before proceeding, it is necessary to formulate a more precise definition of kairos. Timeliness should not be confused with the related notion to prepon, or appropriateness of expression (Untersteiner 198). The timeliness of a rhetorical act is logically prior to whether the particular words chosen are appropriate. Prepon, therefore, "represents the formal aspect of the epistemological content expressed in kairos. Before speaking, a speaker must decide whether or not 'it is the right time to persuade'" (Poulakos, "Gorgias" 98). After deciding to speak, the arrangement of the speech itself (logos) can exert its influence.

What, then, is kairos? Gronbeck defines the term as "the right message at the right time and place" ("Timing" 86). This definition fails to capture the essence of kairos for two reasons. First, kairos need carry no implication of whether the rhetorical action is fitting or not. The sense of kairos as the right time frequently appears after sophistic rhetoric in the form of a designated time for particular activities deemed timely because they fit a stipulated temporal structure (Kittel 389). The times ordained by God, for example, are ipso facto right (cf. Job 39:18; Num. 23:23; Eccl. 3:10-11; Dan. 2:21; Eccl. 7:17; Lam. 1:21). For example, we are told that there is a time to sow and a time to reap. A second problem in Gronbeck's definition is the apparent conflation of kairos with its cognate eukairos, which does carry the normative overtones of performing the right act at the right moment, as in Psalms 104:27, when acts are to be performed in their "due season." (Kittel 390).

This ambivalence of kairos is critical in assessing different views of timeliness. In everyday conversation, we vacillate between relativistic and deterministic understandings of timing. Often we employ terminology invoking the idea of kairos as a predetermined time set aside for certain activities. This sense emerges in the grammatical construction "It is time for x to be done." Action obeys the dictates of time, a phenomenon familiar to dieters who become aware that their hunger frequently obeys the clock instead of the physiological appetite. The counterpoised perspective on kairos appears when

we understand timing as an exercise of under-determined, but not wholly random, human intervention. Acting "in the nick of time" expresses a human imprint left on the otherwise indistinguishable linear progression or cyclical onslaught of temporality. Time is marked by human activity, and this human action can itself become fixed as an insertion into temporality which "marks" the beginning of time. Later generations, through ritualizing these acts, can convert what was an under-determined exercise of human judgment into a directive for future action, thereby transforming relativistic kairos into its deterministic counterpoise (cf. Eliade 394-397).

The oscillation between relativistic and determinstic kairos deserves attention, particularly because these senses are not maintained in many uses or definitions of the term. Untersteiner defines kairos as a rhetorical skill involving "'that which is fitting in time, place and circumstance', which means the adaptation of the speech to the manifold variety of life, to the psychology of speaker and hearer: variegated, not absolute unity of tone" (197). Simply put, rhetorical timeliness involves proper fit between the spoken word or the chosen silence and the temporal environment in which it is delivered. This definition might raise some objections. The definition, after all, is not stipulative; it does not indicate what constitutes timeliness, only that it encompasses adaptation. This non-stipulative definition, however, is justified to preserve the under-determined nature of acts performed "just in time" without specific direction from a

higher authority such as the Biblical voice of God. The reasons for defining kairos formally and not materially stem from the general nature of rhetoric and from Gorgias' rhetorical theories specifically.

Generally, rhetoric is not amenable to precise rules for effective performance. Poulakos ("Sophistic" 42) contends that rhetorical skill cannot be learned formulaically. Kennedy (67) places kairos in the domain of artistic rhetorical elements, since timeliness, like rhetoric itself, can be used or misused according to a speaker's individual talents. Isocrates attacks teachers of rhetoric who propose that speaking can be learned by applying "hard and fast rules to a creative process" (Against the Sophists 12).

The evanescence of kairos becomes especially pronounced in the realm of humor. Someone with a sense of humor seems to know when to interject a remark into a conversation, yet this talent for proper timing proves elusive when we make attempts to explain it in terms of rule-following behavior. Cicero attributes the vice of tactlessness to orators who do not "realize the demands of the occasion" (De Oratore II.17), yet these demands are not amenable to analysis in the case of humor. Jokes fail to amuse when they seem contrived. The most successful humor is "brilliant and spontaneous" (De Oratore II.246) because the speaker utilizes the resources available at the moment.

For Gorgias, kairos assumes a relativistic character. There are no strict rules for determining when would be the best

time to speak. The proper time for utterance is "relative to the context and situation, and therefore cannot be defined materially" (Versenyi 42). Gorgias applies kairos to ethics and epistemology, believing that what is known or good depends on the context in which the assertion of knowledge or goodness is made (Versenyi 42). Gorgias would argue that what is morally good at one point in time might be reprehensible at another, since the circumstances have changed. If I apprehend a murderer after I have seen him or her kill several people, my conduct would be reprehensible because I did not act immediately after seeing the murderer attack the first victim. Had I acted sooner, my deed would have been praiseworthy because it occurred "just in time" to save the lives of potential victims.

Since Gorgias' epistemology denies the existence and comprehensibility of a universal logos, the only knowledge possible is opinion. The same situation holds in rhetoric. Since the speaker cannot either logically or in practice make objective truth intelligible, speech involves communication of truth only in terms of what is understood and accepted at a particular time. Rhetoric, like ethics and epistemology, remains subject to kairos, since the quality of any attempt at persuasion is judged with reference to the circumstances in which it occurs (Untersteiner 197). Truth in any given case, for Gorgias, depends on whether speakers take advantage of the situations in which they speak to create artifacts which will be interpreted as true (Poulakos, "Gorgias" 97).

Gorgias rejects the notion of truth as accurate

representation. Instead, he insists that the truth of all thought relies on its appropriateness for the particular case (Versenyi 48). Gorgias recognizes that omniscience would guarantee freedom from error, but humans, being fallible and limited by their sense perceptions, make mistakes (Encomium on Helen B11(11)). This concession to human limitations, while fueling the notion that knowledge has a tragic aspect (Gronbeck, "Gorgias" 31), does not reduce the power of rhetoric. The denial of a supreme logos underscores the importance of rhetoric as a means of creating, not discovering, truth. In the absence of a metaphysical teleology, persuasion lacks the force of necessity, but can make audiences act on a matter just as efficiently as if they were driven by necessity (Encomium on Helen B11(12)). The lack of "absolute standards of knowledge or conduct" requires that the speaker "take into account the temporal and situational constraints as they impose themselves" before deciding to engage in speech (Poulakos, "Gorgias" 100-101).

Besides extending the idea of temporality from epistemology and ethics to rhetoric, kairos helps to explain how the same logos can appear just or good one time and unjust or evil at another (Poulakos, "Gorgias" 95). Without a notion of timeliness to distinguish among identical acts performed at different times, distinctions such as the one between the apprehension of a murderer before and after multiple crimes are difficult. A relativistic sense of kairos counterbalances the absolutism of universals. Universals help to explain the

resemblances among similar phenomena, such as the common elements shared by objects having the same taste or color (cf. Theaetetus 185). Since universals are predicated on the assumption of similarities, they are ineffective in explaining differences. A relativistic sense of timeliness, while perhaps not as antithetical to universals as Gorgias presumes, does account for the fact that the same phenomenon can have one attribute at one moment (e.g., moral goodness) and another attribute the next (e.g., moral evil).

In rhetorical contexts, the introduction of kairos gives some insight as to how evaluations of the same rhetorical artifact can change over time. The relation of rhetoric to the circumstances in which it was delivered could account for the same artifact being "good" and "bad" at different times to different evaluators without assuming that some of the evaluators had been deceived or were ignorant. The relationship of a speech to the time of its delivery and to the time of its interpretation constitutes a ground for determining truth or falsity, goodness or evil (Poulakos, "Gorgias" 96). Timeliness accounts for why persuasion can "mould the soul in the way it wants" (B11(13)). The moulding, like drugs, can prove beneficial or harmful, but only when related to the reasons for which words are administered and when they are used (B11(14)). Medicine, although normally beneficial, can cause illness if given to someone before the onset of sickness.

The relativity of kairos indicates that a circumstantial change can alter the evaluation of a rhetorical act. Isocrates

claims that a trial offers an accuser the opportunity to denounce a defendant. This opportunity to speak provides the accuser with a forum in which denunciations become fitting. A plaintiff "would not have neglected the present opportunity <kairon>, but would have come forward to denounce me or bear witness against me" (Antidosis 33). Similarly, defendants in court have an opportunity to justify their actions, although such self-praise would not merit approval outside the forensic arena. Gorgias makes this point in his Defence of Palamedes: "But indeed it is not my own doing to praise myself, but the present time has forced me, and that when I am being accused, to make my defence in every way" (B11a(32)).

A contemporary analog to this sort of timeliness appears in the Book of Common Prayer, where objectors to the union of bride and groom are asked to "speak now or forever hold their peace." Presumably, the ceremony offers the fitting moment for objections to be voiced, although an actual voicing of objections would be deemed inappropriate. Once the fitting time for speech has past, that unique moment cannot be reclaimed; the objectors must refrain forever from speaking against the nuptial union.

Kairos and Moral Relativism

The relativity of kairos raises some problems. If there exists no absolute standard for rhetorical timeliness, how can speakers be held accountable for their acts? Without clear standards for determining when to say what, there seems no way to judge a speech-act as just, unjust, appropriate,

inappropriate, etc. Lacking such standards, rhetoric would seem to degenerate into a Thucydidean practice of the stronger usurping the weaker.

This ethical question deserves further analysis. To what extent does kairos absolve a speaker from ethical responsibility? Absence of absolute standards actually invests a speaker with great moral responsibility. Since the speaker cannot rely on atemporal rules governing when to speak, "one needs to make the crucial decision whether or not the time he is about to fill with his words is opportune" (Poulakos, "Gorgias" 102-103). Rhetors must depend on their personal judgment to discern whether or not to attempt persuasion. The concept of kairos is closely allied to the rhetor's "strategic decisions" as to when and whether to manipulate rhetorical variables such as audience expectations, speaker characteristics, and the form and substance of the message (Gronbeck, "Timing" 86).

Kairos, when understood relativistically, implies the individual's responsibility to meet the demands of a decisive moment (Kittel 389). When we say that an heroic act was committed "just in time" or "not a moment too soon," the phrase retains the sense of an action being performed at the exact moment it was needed. The heroism of performing an act "in the nick of time" involves the actor's ability to discern when to act (kairos) and the further judgment of what action to perform (prepon). If the moral agent can be deemed morally responsible, he or she at least logically must be able to act otherwise. In this case, the ability to act otherwise implies the possibility

that the time was not ripe for the particular act. Such fallibility, which amounts to a freedom to act in several ways (including refraining from action), implies that timeliness relies on personal judgment. Despite frequent references to individuals as "responsive" to particular situations, responsibility involves more than an automatic, reflexive response.

Nietzsche is perhaps the foremost proponent of this relativistic view of timing. Zarathustra declares that he obeys no external signals which might serve as action guides; he has learned to wait only for himself and not for signs from above (Zarathustra 307). Such freedom is, according to Nietzsche, morally significant since the essence of freedom--as well as the basis for all ethical action--is the assumption of responsibility for one's own acts (Twilight of the Idols #38). The Übermenschen are precisely those people who are not bound by tradition or authority.

In a passage strikingly similar to the introductory paragraphs of Bitzer's "The Rhetorical Situation," Nietzsche claims that we often fail to act when the time to act has come (Beyond Good & Evil #274). This plea for timely action echoes Cicero, who implores orators not to forego making "a telling point at the right moment <tempus apte>" (De Partitione 30). Nietzsche, however, draws a different conclusion from Bitzer. While Bitzer argues that the failure to act at the proper time reflects improper awareness of what the situation calls for, Nietzsche asserts that such failures result from waiting

passively for permission to act. Nietzsche adds that genius can be attributed to those who "tyrannize the kairos, 'the right time,' seizing chance by its forelock" (Beyond Good & Evil #274). Nietzsche's allusion to the appearance of the god Kairos recovers the sense of a call to action, with the god's forelock summoning hands to brush the stray hairs (cf. Kittel 389).

According to Philostratus, Gorgias relies on the "inspiration of the moment" <kairos> to deliver impromptu speeches (Wheelwright 255). This inspiration contrasts sharply with the daemon who inspires Socrates. An external inspiration, or a warning such as the Socratic daemon (cf. Phaedrus 242b-c), requires only a response, as shown when Socrates delivers his inspired second oration on love in the Phaedrus. This daemon also guides the individual after death (Phaedo 107e-108b, 113d). Gorgias internalizes timeliness, so speakers must rely on their personal talents and the resources of the moment. This emphasis on personal skill coupled with Gorgias' relativism indicate why Gorgias never claims to teach arete. Isocrates agrees that kairos can be encouraged, but not guaranteed, through teaching. For this reason, Isocrates describes timeliness as "the peculiar gift of the wise" (Panegyricus 9) and claims that the "opportune use" of discourse "is hard to learn" (Helen 11).

According to Gorgias, rhetors incur risk whenever they enter discourse. First, the rhetor risks responding inappropriately to the situation, so a decision to speak demands courage that writing, operating less within temporal constraints, does not require (Poulakos, "Sophistic" 40). The

speaker also must act on the basis of incomplete information. Since, in the Gorgian scheme of things, the judgment of kairos is not rational because the world lacks a rational governing principle, the speaker cannot rely on teleological criteria that would justify the choice of speech or silence (Untersteiner 199). Finally, rhetors face the practical complication of failing to satisfy the psychological needs of the audience by not speaking at an opportune time (Untersteiner 197).

As to whether kairos encourages moral relativism and immorality, timeliness certainly offers no definite, invariant criteria for judging the merits of particular discursive acts. The criticism of kairos on this ground, however, presumes that atemporal rules for evaluating conduct constitute the only means for arriving at moral, aesthetic, or epistemological decisions. Gorgias indicates that such judgments remain possible, but are temporized by kairos (Poulakos, "Gorgias" 98). Properly speaking, kairos offers no "standard of the value of speech" (Poulakos, "Sophistic" 41), but makes standards relevant to a particular time frame. On the basis of judgments whether utterance would be timely, an evaluator can decide on the desirability of speech at a given moment (Poulakos, "Gorgias" 96). Orators especially must rely on such evaluations, since speakers deal with concrete situations at specific times (Poulakos, "Sophistic" 42).

Kairos and the Rhetorical Situation

Kennedy claims that kairos "as a rhetorical term is largely restricted to the classical period. To prepon is more

persistent and is the only provision for latitude and taste which found a permanent place in traditional rhetoric" (67). If Kennedy means that kairos as rhetorical terminology recedes from the forefront of rhetoric, he is correct. The notion of kairos, however, relates closely to an important modern approach to rhetorical criticism: Lloyd Bitzer's analysis of the rhetorical situation.

I do not contend that Bitzer appropriates kairos from Gorgias. On the other hand, Bitzer's characterization of rhetoric as fitting the situation blends well with the terms in which kairos can be said to enter the rhetorical picture. Gronbeck ("Timing" 84) speaks of proper timing as "determined by categorizable, real exigencies impinging upon a rhetorical situation." Gronbeck's phraseology represents not only the ease with which kairos can be framed in Bitzer's terms, but also the tendency to treat kairos as determinable in any given situation.

Bitzer defines exigence as "an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be" ("Rhetorical Situation" 6). An important aspect of judging the merits of a rhetorical artifact is ascertaining its "fit" with what the situation seems to require (Bitzer, "Rhetorical Situation" 10; "Functional Communication" 36). A critic can judge fittingness by what the situation apparently demands. One way of approaching judgments of fittingness might be to decide whether the rhetorical act is timely. Timing has been treated as the "life-blood" of Bitzer's analytical framework (Gronbeck,

"Timing" 93). It is plausible to contend that on a larger scale, the movers and shakers in history "required the great moment or the right moment" for their actions to have a significant impact (Muller 48).

The pertinent question regarding timing is, did the rhetor, given the circumstances, make a wise decision to speak at all? If we maintain a relativistic sense of kairos, this decision remains a judgment, not a determination. The decision as to whether the speaker's choice to speak at that time was wise is more easily judged post hoc, but such evaluations are never final. A critic can never make a final evaluation, because the time may never arise when we can proclaim "All the evidence is in" and render a definitive verdict.

Inserting kairos into an analysis of the rhetorical situation could create problems similar to the relativistic objections forwarded in the preceding section. Bitzer's tendencies toward realism, however, engender the opposite criticism. One of the major objections to situational theory focuses on Bitzer's "supposedly minimized role of the agent, especially in terms of perception and creativity in rhetorical action" (Patton 37). Vatz (154-162), for example, attacks what he interprets as historical determinism inherent to Bitzer's approach. Bitzer does use deterministic language: a situation "calls the discourse into existence," rhetorical works represent "a response to a situation of a certain kind," situations dictate responses, some situations persist indefinitely ("Rhetorical Situation" 2, 3, 5, 12-13).

The different senses of fittingness exemplified by the viewpoints of Vatz and Bitzer are summarized well in Gronbeck's characterization of rhetorical timing. According to Gronbeck, for timing to assume rhetorical significance, it "must be controlled by the rhetor or represent a cultural tradition demanding a particular message at a particular time..." ("Timing" 85, emphasis in original). Bitzer seems to treat timeliness as a product of the situations themselves. Vatz prefers to understand fitting responses as determined by the rhetor.

The insertion, or perhaps reinsertion, of kairos into the rhetorical situation offers a way to avoid deterministic and relativistic extremes. Bitzer's example from Malinowski ("Rhetorical Situation" 4) indicates that a "ripe time for discourse" simply invites utterance. Situations and speakers interact. Situations offer chances to speak, and the rhetor makes the decision when or whether to speak. If the critic remembers that kairos offers an opportunity for the speaker to speak, situational analysis escapes from determinism. This opportunity is simultaneously a responsibility to risk saying something at the wrong time. Even if we agree with Vatz that situations are constructed by rhetors, the rhetors still judge the appropriate time for utterance at least partially on the basis of cultural traditions, including previous discourse (cf. Gronbeck, "Timing" 93).

Gorgias' relativism would prevent him from agreeing that certain situations inevitably call forth discourse. According

to Gorgias, no speaker can rest assured that now is the best time to speak. Such assurances result from hindsight, and even then remain fallible. The rhetor must act on whatever information is available at the time. Reintroduction of kairos would place greater focus on the speaker's responsibility and role in rhetoric, an amendment suggested by Vatz (158).

A dose of Gorgian relativism might help allay deterministic objections to Bitzer's theories. One result of relativizing the fitting response called forth by rhetorical situations is that critics need not agree with Bitzer's assertion that situations recur. Such disagreement reaffirms the uniqueness of each rhetorical circumstance without disavowing the existence of situations. Gorgias would approve of Bitzer's comment that "Every rhetorical situation in principle evolves to a propitious moment for the fitting rhetorical response" ("Rhetorical Situation" 13), but Gorgias would contend that such evolution is not inevitable or predictable. The recognition that situations mature and decay over time would also appeal to Gorgias, who would concur that some rhetorical responses happen "when it is too late to make <them> public" (Bitzer, "Rhetorical Situation" 13).

If Bitzer were to recognize the uniqueness of each rhetorical situation, and if he held a more relativistic epistemology, he might search for how "speakers or writers create rhetorical discourse" more in terms of how rhetors face unpredicted and perhaps unpredictable situations instead of searching for "the nature of those contexts" (Bitzer,

"Rhetorical Situation" 1). Gorgias would claim that the search for a nature of rhetorical contexts is bound to fail, if for no other reasons than lack of a complete inventory of specific rhetorical situations and the absence of a scheme for applying rules to determine rhetorical timeliness (cf. Gronbeck, "Timing" 93).

Conclusion

If kairos can prove useful as a basis for criticism, critics and rhetors must prepare themselves to accept the fact that timeliness renders their conclusions less than certain and eternal. On the other hand, the conviction that we cannot know in advance when we have seized the opportune moment for entering discourse makes rhetorical activity a risk and a responsibility not to be taken lightly. The apposition of relativistic and deterministic senses of kairos implies that rhetoric involves combining the prudence to judge the proper time to speak with the courage to speak at the precise moment one's rhetorical contribution will be most fitting.

Neither reticence nor recklessness need emerge from juxtaposing the two senses of kairos, for these vices occur when rhetors are treated as imprisoned by time or victimized by caprice. These fatalistic extremes do not account sufficiently for the positive aspect of how kairos invests human decision-makers with responsibility for taking part in shaping their own futures. Exercising such responsibility demands courage and foresight. If these sorts of qualities are encouraged by focusing more attention on timeliness, then

perhaps it is a "fitting" moment for kairos to find its way back into the rhetorical canon. This concept, so crucial for Gorgias and for rhetoric in general, deserves to be treated as a challenge to rhetors and critics to examine and bear the responsibilities for speaking at a particular time.

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