

## Conceptions of Temporality: Reconsidering Time in an Age of Impending Emergency

by

KRISTIN SAMPSON 

University of Bergen, Norway

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*Abstract:* The predominant contemporary concept of time is arguably measurable time, promoted as being in accordance with science. This is commonly understood as the time of physics, as, for instance, E. A. Milne claims in an article from 1950 on the modern conception of time, contrasting this with Plato's description of time as the "moving image of eternity". The prevalence of an emphasis on measurability within such a conception of time is hard to avoid, although this can be nuanced somewhat. In this article I turn to the ancient Greek notion of *kairos* in order to find another approach to the question of conceptions of temporality. A main objective is to indicate what this concept signifies in terms of adjusting to circumstances, catching the right moment and paying attention to due measure. I also briefly consider Baltasar Gracián's notions of *festina lente* and *détencion* in an attempt to show how this suggests a way in which we may be able to develop the ability to do the right thing at the right moment.

*Keywords:* temporality, time, kairos, hubris, festina lente, détencion

WHY RAISE THE QUESTION about temporality? It has been claimed that whereas time is an issue discussed within modernity, it is rather space that has been the centre of attention within its critique, whether this is in what is named post-modernity, late modernity or the Neo-Baroque. According to Fredric Jameson (2003, p. 697), "[t]he moderns were obsessed with the secret of time, the postmoderns with that of space".<sup>1</sup> One could, of course, raise the question of whether such a description of the lack of interest in the secret of time, in a setting that may be termed late modernity, is really justified. Nonetheless, even if topology rather than chronology has been the predominant topic within the setting of late modernity, perhaps this can be understood in terms of the kind of temporality that is evoked within modernity. The predominant contemporary concept of time is arguably measurable time, promoted as being in accordance with science. This is

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1 Characteristically, the Yale French Studies edition from 1991 was named *Baroque Topographies*, and in his introduction to this volume Timothy Hampton (1991, p. 1) comments on this "dual concern for the Baroque and for problems of space", something which he calls "topography". Hampton (1991, p. 9) here also refers to "the thematics of temporality so dear to high modernism". And, as Jacques Derrida (1972, p. 47) has put it: "D'une certaine manière, il est toujours trop tard pour poser la question du temps".

commonly understood as the time of physics. As, for instance, E. A. Milne claims in an article from 1950 on the modern conception of time, “[i]nstead of trying to say what time is (e.g. Plato’s description of it as the ‘moving image of eternity’) we try to find a way of measuring it” (Milne, 1950, p. 68). The prevalence of an emphasis on measurability within such a conception of time is hard to avoid, although this can of course be nuanced somewhat.<sup>2</sup> According to Henri Bergson, a modern understanding of time in terms of physics inclines towards comprehending temporality in terms of spatiality – time in terms of space.<sup>3</sup> Within the phenomenological tradition, for instance by Martin Heidegger, the notion of time as a measurable quantity has also been subjected to critical scrutiny (Heidegger, 1988, esp. “Division Two: Dasein and Temporality”, pp. 274 ff.). In the present context I will not, however, proceed to examine the thinking of Bergson, with his concept of duration, nor that of Heidegger, with his emphasis on time as founded upon a subjective experience of time. Instead I will turn to the ancient Greek notion of *kairos* in order to find another approach to the question of conceptions of temporality. A main objective is to indicate what this concept signifies in terms of adjusting to circumstances, catching the right moment and paying attention to due measure. I will also briefly consider Baltasar Gracián’s notions of *festina lente* and *détencion* in an attempt to show how these suggest a way in which we may be able to develop the ability to do the right thing at the right moment. Although Gracián belongs to the historical period that is named Baroque, the purpose here is neither to go into the Baroque as an historical period, nor to focus on Gracián as a Baroque thinker in this sense. Rather, the aim is to put the conceptual constructs of *festina lente* and *détencion* to work.

Still, why raise the question of conceptions of time now? We live in an age that has been characterized as Neo-Baroque. This relates to the notion that we stand before an impending emergency. In this context the notion of the Baroque, which is evoked in the concept of the Neo-Baroque, indicates less of a delimited

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2 As early as in Isaac Newton’s *Principia* there is a distinction made between what he calls “[a]bsolute, true, and mathematical time” which is “without reference to anything external” and the “relative, apparent, and common time” accessible by “external measure ... by means of motion” (Newton, 1999, p. 54). I will not here go further into the nuances of the modern conceptions of time that can be found in physics.

3 In 1922 Bergson famously engaged with the physicist Albert Einstein in a debate about time. As Jimena Canales (2015, p. 21) points out in her extensive exposition of the debate between Einstein and Bergson, “Einstein obsessively searched for unity in the universe believing that science could reveal its immutable laws and describe them in the simplest possible way. Bergson, in contrast, claimed that the ultimate mark of the universe was just the opposite: never-ending change ... While Einstein searched for consistency and simplicity, Bergson focused on inconsistencies and complexities”. According to Bergson, the problem with Einstein’s theory of time is that it prevents us from recognizing, as Bergson (1965, p. 145) writes, that “the future is really open, unforeseen, indeterminate”.

historical period than a condition.<sup>4</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche speaks of the Baroque as a style that is not connected to a specific historical period. According to him, “a baroque style has already existed many times from the age of the Greeks onwards”. Nietzsche associates this with “a natural event which one may well behold with sorrow – for it means night is coming” (Nietzsche, 1996, “On the Baroque Style”, pp. 245–246). Walter Moser (2008, p. 22) elaborates on the difference between conceptualizing the Baroque in terms of periodization versus typology, and describes how the Baroque can be understood as a condition or type that applies to “a certain type of historical situation characterized by crisis and/or by transition”, both of which create some form of instability. Historical circumstances of this type will generate similar kinds of culture: “in the seventeenth century it is the Baroque; in the twentieth, the Neo-Baroque” (Moser, 2008, p. 22).<sup>5</sup> Granted that such a description is suitable, one could describe our contemporary historical context as Neo-Baroque in the sense that it is enveloped in a shroud characterized by some of the themes that according to this view are considered as proper to the Baroque, namely change, inconstancy, the world’s instability and crisis.<sup>6</sup> If this is true and we do indeed live in an age of impending emergency – and I am thinking specifically of the looming threat towards the environment — and if night is coming, to use the words of Nietzsche, it may be worth reconsidering once again basic notions such as time.

By considering the ancient Greek notion of *kairos*, this article evokes a context that both constitutes the place where the tradition of Western thinking can be said to begin, as well as a world that differs in vital ways from our own. *Kairos* illustrates this last aspect not least by constituting a concept that we do not have a clear parallel for in modern languages, such as English, or the Scandinavian languages. Let me begin by taking a closer look at some of the meanings that are woven together and expressed through this word.

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4 The Baroque can certainly be discussed both from a typological and from a historiographic approach, or be considered from a combination of the two, as, for instance, Eugenio D’Ors (1964) does in *Lo barroco* and José Antonio Maravall (1975) does in *La cultura del barroco*, respectively.

5 Moser mentions Angela Ndaliansis’s book *Neo-Baroque Aesthetic and Contemporary Entertainment* as an example of where such an argument can be found. Moser also points to Walter Benjamin as one who articulated the transfer from the seventeenth to the twentieth century. Hampton (1991, p. 4) points to how this historical disunity of the Baroque is matched by “a geographical paradox”, which relates to the Baroque as being “both pan-European and ‘exclusively Roman’. The Baroque is both one and many, both everywhere and only in Rome. As an object of study it is a monstrosity ...”.

6 See, for instance, Hampton’ (1991, p. 5), who quotes Rousset when he gives the following list of characteristics of the Baroque: “... ‘change, inconstancy, the trompe-l’oeil and decoration, the funerary spectacle, the flight of time and the world’s instability’ ...”.

### 1. *Kairos*

*Kairos*, in an ancient Greek context, carries two main meanings, one temporal and one non-temporal.<sup>7</sup> Both are of interest here. Let us start by looking at the temporal meaning of the word, before turning to the non-temporal one. In its temporal meaning, *kairos*, which denotes the right moment for an event, an opportunity or a critical time, can be contrasted with *chronos*, which expresses time in a more general sense, and can be used of time as a measurable entity. This is something which, for example, John E. Smith points to when he claims that: “In *chronos* we have the fundamental conception of time as measure, the *quantity* of duration”. *Kairos*, by contrast, “points to a *qualitative* character of time, to the special position an event or action occupies in a series, to a season when something appropriately happens that cannot happen just at ‘any time,’ but only at *that* time, to a time that marks an opportunity which may not recur” (Smith, 2002, p. 47).<sup>8</sup> In Homer, *kairos*, in its adjectival form *kairos*, is, for instance, used in the eighth book of the *Illiad*, to designate “a point and time at which an arrow strikes its target” delivering a mortal wound (Shew, 2013, p. 47; see Homer, *Illiad* VIII, ll. 83–86, VIII, ll. 326–330). *Kairos* here marks a critical time, something that is extraordinary and resides outside of ordinary events and the regular flow of time: it marks the significant and particular moment of a deadly blow. This instance specifies a point in time that is exceptional and unique. According to Phillip Sipiora and James S. Baumlin (2002, p. xiii), *kairos* represents the uniquely timely, the radically particular.

*Kairos*, as signifying an exceptional time, has been discussed by contemporary thinkers such as Heidegger and Julia Kristeva. Heidegger ascribes the notion of an exceptional temporality to philosophy. According to him, philosophy is “essentially untimely” in the sense that “it is one of those few things whose fate it remains never to be able to find a direct resonance in their own time, and never to be permitted to find such a resonance” (Heidegger, 2000, p. 9).<sup>9</sup> Kristeva (2009, p. 30) relates *kairos* to what she describes as a coming to Earth of the divine that is “vested in a specific temporality: it cuts through the homogenous flow of time, it breaks up the usual chronological experience”,<sup>10</sup> There are, of course, obvious

7 I have also previously written about *kairos* in Sampson (2018).

8 Smith here is not in agreement with John R. Wilson (1980, p. 180) who, in his article “*Kairos* as ‘Due Measure’”, argues that in these examples from Homer *kairos* should be understood in a strictly concrete spatial way.

9 According to Shew, this time of philosophy is inherently related to *kairos*. As she claims: “If philosophy is to have a time or a place, it must do so in the sense of *kairos*, which stands outside and perhaps measures chronological time” (Shew, 2013, p. 53).

10 This has also been pointed out by Shew (2013, p. 48). Kristeva also connects the exceptional temporality expressed through *kairos* to the divine, and there is probably an implicit reference to Paul Tillich, as well, and his understanding of *kairos* as the opportune moment that creates a division in history between past and future, with the coming of Christ on Earth as “the kairotic moment par excellence” (Verdicchio, 2001, pp. 28–29).

and vital differences between the ancient Greek notion of *kairos* and those that are informed by Christianity.<sup>11</sup> However, a connection between the divine and *kairos* is not foreign to at least some of the thinkers of ancient Greece. Such a view can be found, for instance, in Plato. In the fourth book of the *Laws*, the Athenian stranger declares that “chance (*tyche*) and occasion (*kairos*) cooperate with god in the control of all human affairs” (Plato, 1926, *Laws* 709b).<sup>12</sup> Together with chance (*tyche*) *kairos* literally is said to cooperate with god, and the extraordinary quality that is involved in the temporality of *kairos* is here displayed in connection with the divine. Related to the divine, *kairos* can be said to represent an outside to human affairs, and thereby an ability to “control all human affairs”. This also includes imposing due measure, and thus relates to the non-temporal meaning of *kairos*, which we shall consider shortly. The role of the divine in an ancient Greek context appears, at least in part, to work as a reminder and enhancement of the uniqueness of the specific right moment: the particular occasion. This is something that is important for human beings to remember in order to avoid a hubristic danger that hangs over us mortals: namely the one that lies embedded in the possibility of forgetting the transience inherent to life and the limits of our capacities.

The right opportune moment, or the right season for an action, may also be named *kairos*. In Thucydides (*The Peloponnesian War* 1. 42), we find the expression *he gar teleutaia charis kairon echousa*, which can be translated “the last good turn done in season”, “the later kindness done in season”, “kindness opportunely shown” or “the favour which comes last, if conferred at the right moment”.<sup>13</sup> In these various translations *kairos* is rendered as “season”, as what is “opportune” and as “right moment”. Translations of *kairos* as “season” display how this word points to the importance of making adjustments according to the

11 What is named god – *theos* – in pre-Christian Greece is obviously not the God of Christianity, nor that of Neo-Platonism, and, correspondingly, meanings of *kairos* influenced by the New Testament senses of *kairos* differ from the pre-Christian Greek ones. Mario Perniola (2001, p. 221) points to a similar difference between New Testament *kairos* and the Stoic notion of *euchairia*: “The conception of occasion, understood as permanent opportunity, has Stoic origins. Defined by the Stoics as *euchairia*, it is diametrically opposed, for its constant stability and availability, to the lightning and dramatic character of New-Testament *kairos*”.

12 As Smith (2002, p. 55) points out: “In the fourth book of the *Laws* (709b ff.), Plato discusses the different factors that govern human life in connection with the question whether laws are explicitly and designedly made by man or whether external factors are involved. He declares, ‘Chance [*tyche*] and occasion [*kairos*] cooperate with God in the control of all human affairs.’ These two mundane factors are said to condition human action and also to be in harmony with each other”.

13 For the first three translations (by Thomas Hobbes in 1843, by Benjamin Jowett in 1881, and one listed simply as from 1910), see the *Perseus Digital Library* edition of *The Peloponnesian War*, book 1, 42 (Thucydides, 1942). The fourth translation belongs to Charles Forster Smith in the Loeb edition (Thucydides, 1956).

changing seasons of the year. This is vital in, for instance, farming. To recognize the right seasonal moment for sowing, pruning, fertilizing and harvesting is imperative to the cultivator of the land. Adjusting to the changing weather conditions is an inherent part of being able to catch these seasonal instants. Interestingly, as Emile Benveniste (1940, p. 13) has pointed out, the Latin word *tempus* can be considered to correspond, in its various meanings, to *kairos*. And *tempus* can be understood in its etymology to relate to both time and the weather (see Marramao, 2007, pp. 69–71). A crucial characteristic of the weather, which is becoming increasingly noticeable to us, is its inherently fluctuating and potentially unstable power. Correspondingly, the ability to adapt and respond appropriately – in accordance with *kairos*, one might say – to the particularity of changing climatic conditions becomes more and more urgent.

There is a difference between acting in accordance with time as a measurable entity that can be designated by clocks, and acting in agreement with the conditions of the circumstances. When people make appointments to meet at a specific point in time assigned by measurement expressed through the numbers of dates, hours and minutes, they act in accordance with a fairly formalized and fixed structure.<sup>14</sup> This form of measured time does not change in relation to the circumstances of, for example, the weather. If the sun shines and the snow melts, our clocks do not begin to move faster, and if winter lingers, they do not slow down. When making use of the measurement of clock-time in order to make an appointment to meet someone at a conference at a certain date and hour, this regularity of the time of our clocks is both necessary and useful. Nonetheless, there are occasions where this form of measured temporality falls short. A farmer cannot sow and harvest in accordance with a strict schedule planned merely in keeping with the measurement of calendars and clocks, taking heed of nothing but the scheduled date and hour. When tending the land one needs to consider the specific circumstances of that particular season and the distinctive conditions of the specific terroir. The melting of the snow, the thawing of the frost in the ground, the ripening of the barley and fruit, the lambing: none of these events occur in accordance with the regularity of specific dates and hours, but vary from one year to another. The farmer thus represents an example of the importance of acting in agreement with the specificity of the environment. This does not, of course, mean that he or she does not also act in accordance with the measurement of the numbered time of clocks. The point is that the farmer in addition, of necessity, pays quite a lot of attention to, and adapts to, the particular circumstances; to what

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14 Even though physicists are able to measure differences in time in relation to, for instance, altitude, for most practical purposes concerning human daily life these are too small to make a difference. We act and make appointments with each other as if we all measure time in accordance with the same numbers.

Sipiora and Baumlin (2002) speak of as the uniquely timely and radically particular which is expressed through *kairos*.

Paying attention to the signs offered by nature in one's surroundings, in order to recognize when the right moment arises to sow and harvest, for example, involves a form of careful listening to the messages from the environment one inhabits. This attentiveness and readiness to adjust to the signals given by the milieu contains an element of modesty in the sense that it displays a willingness to modify one's actions in accordance with the specificity of the occasion. Such a form of humility indicates, at least to a certain degree, another aspect of *kairos*: due measure.

As previously mentioned, *kairos* also contains non-temporal meanings, such as, for instance, "due measure". This notion of "due measure" should not be confused with quantitative measurement. The "due measure" involved in *kairos* instead signifies the qualitative measure of something that is "just right". This due measure thus stands in contrast to a purely quantitative measurement that makes no qualitative distinctions or suggests what is due. There is thus a difference between the measurement involved in counting and the due measure that is expressed through the notion of *kairos*. If one considers the measurement involved in the calculations of time expressed through clocks, for instance, this involves comprehending all the counted moments as equivalent in the sense that one second is not considered qualitatively different from another. They may all be subjected to counting in the same way. This conception of time also renders time an entity that in principle it is possible to quantitatively extend ad infinitum. It opens up for a potentially immeasurable measurability that is purely quantitative. This is not the measurement of due measure.

To uphold due measure involves not going to extremes and avoiding the dangers of excess. We find this sense of the word, for instance, in the expression, attributed to Pittacus, *kairon gnôthi*: "recognize moderation".<sup>15</sup> One way of exhibiting an ability to recognize moderation is by showing a capacity for being able to modify one's actions in accordance with the circumstances. To a certain degree there is a connection between the ability to catch the right opportune moment and to manage to proceed with due measure. If a farmer, to consider this example once again, fails to pay sufficient attention to the specific situation of the surrounding environment, and does not manage to seize the right moment, he or she will probably also not succeed in acting with the moderation of due measure that is appropriate to the conditions he or she faces.

In the sense of due measure, *kairos* is the opposite of *hubris*. *Hubris* involves going to extremes, not avoiding the dangers of excess and not recognizing due

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<sup>15</sup> This is also in accordance with what can be found in, for instance, Hesiod and Theognis, something that is pointed out by, e.g., Wilson (1980, p. 179).

measure. In Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, for example, the *hubris* associated with the creation of the tyrant is associated with lack of *kairos* (in this instance the lack of *epikairos*) (Wilson, 1980, pp. 192–193). *Kairos* in this sense, as something the lack of which leads to *hubris*, speaks to the border between mortals and immortals. The excess involved in *hubris* involves not recognizing or having true knowledge of one's own due measure as a mortal. Failure to respect the boundaries that are involved in due measure – failure to acknowledge the importance of *kairos* – is perilous for human beings.

To disregard the specificity of the unique moment constitutes being somewhat blind to a condition of life within which all mortals are immersed. In this sense it involves a lack of awareness of the limits of mortal living existence. If one puts too much emphasis on time as something measured quantitatively at the expense of paying proper attention to the specificity of the conditions of the unique instant, this may be considered as an instance of a form of *hubris* involving a lack of recognition of these limits and the specificity they impose. This stands in danger of becoming measurability without measure, where an understanding of the concrete, specific, of the uniquely timely, the radically particular, becomes overshadowed, somewhat forgotten, and not recognized sufficiently. The problem with a conception of time too strongly or exclusively focused on measurability is not the quantitative aspect as such, but too strong a predominance of this one aspect of temporality. To measure time quantitatively is necessary and useful, and something that we cannot do without. It is when it becomes too pervasive that attention to the particularity of the occasion and concern for the specific conditions of the environment may suffer.

To measure time in terms of dates, hours, minutes and seconds is a human affair. Chronometers are human inventions. Part of the usefulness of clocks is that they contribute to opening up the world as a mathematically structured entity that is conceived of as attainable by human reasoning, and something that can be subjected to human control and management. There is also a potential for excess embedded in the belief in our human capacity for controlling and managing the world through knowledge, rationality and technical skill. Both the prevalence of a purely quantitative conception of temporality and an attempt to manage the world within the framework of human rationality can be taken too far. If they are left too unrestrained by other considerations, such as attention to the particularity of the specific moment and context of the occasion, they may become disproportionate. There is a possibility for undue reach in both: in the first case the excess of measureless measurability; and in the second the excessive use of, and belief in, the unrestrained capacity of human rationality and knowledge. The ancient Greeks knew about the dangers of *hubris* as something that is punished by the gods. One might well wonder how the ancient Greeks would view the way that nature today is beginning to make its forces evident against human action.

*Kairos*, with its dual meanings of both due measure and qualitative specificity of the right moment, offers another way of conceptualizing temporality. In its temporal sense *kairos* points to a conception of time that stands as an alternative to a chronology of quantitative measurement, and in its non-temporal meaning *kairos*, as due measure, implicitly points to the dangers of *hubris*. *Kairos* points to the importance of doing the right thing in the proper manner, acting in accordance with due measure, and this involves catching the right moment. But how can we do this? Let us now turn to the question of how to develop our ability to seize the right moment.

## 2. The Value of Delay

In order to be able to catch the right moment and do the right thing in the right manner, in accordance with the specificity of the surrounding circumstances at a particular instant, one needs to understand the conditions of the situation. This necessitates that we are properly perceptive to the messages of our environment, which again requires attentiveness and an ability to take in, and listen to, the signals that surround us. Such an ability requires a certain amount of quietude. The quietness of listening attentively could be understood as a passive form of activity, where one pauses so as to take in one's surroundings, and halts one's own acting and speaking. There is a form of similar quietness that is needed for us to take in and recognize the specificity of the particular circumstances of a specific occasion. In order to illustrate this form of listening attitude – where one waits, and delays one's activities, until one can act in accordance with the particularity of the occasion – it may be useful to consider Gracián's notion of *festina lente*, and also, relatedly, his concept of *détencion*.

As stated above, the aim here is neither to give an extensive nor an exhaustive presentation of Gracián, nor to focus on him as a Baroque thinker, but merely to consider how these concepts exemplify some of what is required in order to better perceive the specificity of the circumstances of a given situation. Gracián's *The Art of Worldly Wisdom* is useful to consider in this regard.<sup>16</sup> This book consists of 300 maxims, or fragments, and has been praised by, for instance, Arthur Schopenhauer, who translated it into German, and also by Nietzsche, who wrote of

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16 This work was first published in 1647 under the title *Oráculo manual y arte de prudencia*. If we consider Baltasar Gracián in light of the two meanings of the Baroque, both in terms of a historical period and as a condition or a type, one could argue that he is Baroque in both senses. Gracián was born in 1601 and died in 1658 and was thus a contemporary of, for example, René Descartes. Although both belong to the historical period called the Baroque, one could argue that only one of them is a Baroque thinker, in the typological sense. Descartes, famously called the father of modern philosophy, is a modern rather than a Baroque thinker, whereas Gracián is, as can be argued, a Baroque thinker also in the typological sense (Gracián, 1994).

this book that “Europe has never produced anything finer or more complicated in matters of moral subtlety” (see, e.g., Maurer, 1994, p. vi). Within the fragments of this book there are expressions that resonate with the ancient Greek *kairos*, namely a focus on the right occasion or opportunity, on adapting to the situation, and on quality rather than quantity.<sup>17</sup>

Let us consider some examples of an emphasis on the right moment, occasion and opportunity, that brings *kairos* to mind.<sup>18</sup> In fragment 139, Gracián states that “All perfection depends upon the right moment”. According to him, the difference between wise men and fools has to do with insight into this right moment, and as stated in fragment 268: “The wise do sooner what fools do later. Both do the same; all that differs is the when. The former act at the right moment, the latter at the wrong”. So how do the wise find the right moment? There are no general rules for what counts as a right moment. Instead it depends on the situation, which, of course, is inherently specific. A crucial part in the ability of the wise to find the right moment is the ability to adjust to the circumstances. As Gracián famously puts it in fragment 288: “Adapt yourself to circumstance. Governing, reasoning, and everything else must be done at the right moment ... time and opportunity wait for no one”. A vital element in being able to be pragmatic in this way, and managing to adjust to the specific situation, is to be capable of waiting. As Gracián says in fragment 55: “Know how to wait ... Stroll through the open spaces of time to the centre of opportunity”. The conception of temporality indicated in these fragments is not one of uniform, measurable quantitative extension. The open spaces of time and the opportune moment differ qualitatively in crucial ways. Without a recognition of these qualitative differences, one will not be able to find the opportune moment.

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17 The Baroque is often characterized as excessive and without measure. Such an assessment is something that has been said to reach a climax in Burckhardt’s famous statement “that the Baroque is a sick dialect of the Classic”. Moser (2008, p. 30) refers to Burckhardt’s *Der Cicerone*. On page 23 Moser speaks about the dichotomy where the Baroque and the Classic are placed in opposition to each other. See also Brown’s (1982) article on this subject: “The Classic Is the Baroque”. This aspect of excess and lack of due measure associated with the Baroque appears to be in sharp contrast to *kairos* understood as due measure, that is, the non-temporal meaning of *kairos*. In a certain sense this dissimilarity between the kairoic due measure and the Baroque excess is surely meaningful. However, I wish to point to another form of excess than that of the Baroque, as something which *kairos* stands in opposition to, and against which *kairos* can work as a critique, namely an excess embedded within taking a conception of time as measurable and quantitative too far.

18 A discussion of *kairos* within in connection with Gracián is not without precedent. Mario Perniola, in his book *Ritual Thinking*, considers both *kairos* and the thinking of Baltasar Gracián in several of the chapters. See, for example, Perniola (2001, pp. 118–119, 126, 150, 99, 220–222). Here Perniola also mentions Gracián as the great teacher of a certain form of temporality, namely one where, as he writes, “[t]emporality is not the foundation of historicity, rather, history is the foundation of temporality” (Perniola, 2001, p. 150). This conception of temporality, which Perniola attributes to the Jesuitic-Baroque tradition, he places as diametrically opposed to that of Heidegger.

Gracián speaks explicitly about the importance of quality, as opposed to quantity. As he states in fragment 27: “Better to be intensive than extensive. Perfection isn’t quantity, but quality”. And in fragment 14 he says that “[t]he ‘how’ of things is very important”. This focus on the quality and the “how” of things extends to life and longevity, which is also said to depend on the quality of the life that one lives. In fragment 90 Gracián puts it this way: “The art of living long: live well”. An integral part of living well is not to be rushed, not to hurry, but to take one’s time. This applies to the way one should do things. To do something well is the important thing. As Gracián claims in fragment 57: “Do something well, and that is quick enough”. This applies to the way we should live our whole lives: “Don’t live in a hurry”, Gracián says in fragment 174.<sup>19</sup> Waiting and leaving things be are part of what is required in order to live well and make room for unhurried delay. Sometimes the way to act well is by not acting, but instead by leaving things alone – or, as Massimo Verdicchio (2001, p. 33) puts it, with reference to Gracián: “The true man of action rarely acts”. This is embedded in the concept of *détencion*: postponement, delay. Gracián speaks beautifully of this act of not acting in fragment 138: “Leave things alone. Especially when the sea – people, your friends, your acquaintances – is stirred up ... It takes little to muddy a stream. You can’t make it grow clear by trying to, only by leaving it alone. There is no better remedy for disorder than to leave it alone to correct itself”. The circumstances that surround us are sometimes comparable to a muddied river, in the sense that the more we try to amend things, the worse our contribution makes it. Occasionally the better approach is to be able to leave things be, to stop hurrying around and instead stay quiet and wait for more information about the specific circumstances of a particular moment.

This emphasis on leaving things be, on the act of not acting, of waiting, delaying and not living in a hurry, does not mean that one should never act. On the contrary, this is inherently connected to the ability to act resolutely. In fragment 72 Gracián tells us to: “Be resolute. Faulty execution does less harm than a lack of resolution”. This mixture of waiting, delay and resolute action is expressed in the phrase *festina lente*: to make haste slowly.<sup>20</sup> In order to be able to act resolutely, we need the postponement involved in the ability to wait. Like a

19 Gracián even describes an entity such as truth in terms of the time it takes for it to emerge. Truth is not easily or quickly obtained, but appears in a shroud of slowness. According to Gracián in fragment 146, “[t]ruth is always late, always last to arrive, limping along with Time”.

20 *Festina lente* is an expression that has a long history previous to Gracián. According to Suetonius, Caesar Augustus frequently uttered this proverb. In his *The Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, in the section on “Augustus”, ch. 25, Suetonius refers to *festina lente* in Greek – *speude bradeôs* – which indicates that it dates back to Classical Greece as well. Aulus Gellius (1927, *The Attic Nights*, 10.11) also refers to Suetonius for this Greek expression used by Augustus (Suetonius, 1889). In the present context I will not go further into the history of *festina lente*, but focus on the use of it in Gracián.

cat catching a mouse, we must have the ability to stay still and wait in order to move at the right moment, with resoluteness. If the cat is unable to keep calm, and instead moves restlessly all the time, the mouse will never appear. And also, if the cat hesitates and fails to act decisively when the right moment arises, the mouse will get away. In fragment 53 Gracián speaks of the hurriedness of fools and the hesitancy of the wise: “Fools are fond of hurry: they take no heed of obstacles and act incautiously. The wise usually fail through hesitation. Fools stop at nothing, the wise at everything”. In this same fragment he also concludes with *festina lente*, when he states that: “Readiness is the mother of luck. It is a great deed to leave nothing for the morrow. A lofty motto: make haste slowly”. To make haste slowly involves both the waiting involved in delay, and resoluteness of action. Waiting and delay are what opens up the possibility of grasping the moment with resoluteness, and provides the ability to recognize the uniquely timeliness of a particular instant and to adapt to the specificity of the situation. Gracián’s notion of *festina lente* is noteworthy not least on account of how it highlights the importance of recognizing the right occasion or opportunity, and the value of being able to adapt to the specificity of a particular situation, as well as the significance of the qualitative aspects connected to this specificity of the singular occasion.

Turning to Gracián and the notion of *festina lente*, a number of the characteristics belonging to *kairos* can be found, as we have seen. Gracián’s notion opens up for a form of action that is resolute, which displays an ability to recognize and seize the specific, unique, right moment. *Kairos* points to the significance of catching the right moment with attention to due measure, something that implies a warning against the dangers of *hubris*. In Gracián there seems to also lie embedded a problematization of how we can succeed in doing the right thing at the right moment. His answer is connected to the ability to wait, to delay: *détencion*. In the notion of *festina lente*, there is an emphasis on waiting, delay, postponement: on the act of not acting.

The resolute action that is inherently bound to waiting constitutes something more than starting to perform different actions. If we are going to be better at listening to the circumstances – to the specificity of the situation and the particularity of the instances – of the earth we inhabit, and seize the moment in the right way and with due measure, perhaps what is indeed needed is not merely to try out new actions but to rethink what it is to act. The reconsideration of action in terms of waiting and delay (*détencion*), the act of not acting, while opening our senses more to the circumstances that surround us in order to catch the right moment in the right manner when it arises (*kairos*), may constitute a possible path given such a project. If we do indeed live in an age of impending emergency, where the environment makes its forces increasingly evident to us through,

for instance, climatic changes and increasing threats to biodiversity and ecosystems, reconsideration of the way we relate to the Earth we inhabit may prove to be of vital importance. Looking again at the ancient Greek notion of *kairos*, as well as *festina lente* and *détencion*, may be valuable in our endeavour to rethink the conceptual background to the ways in which we relate to the world.

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