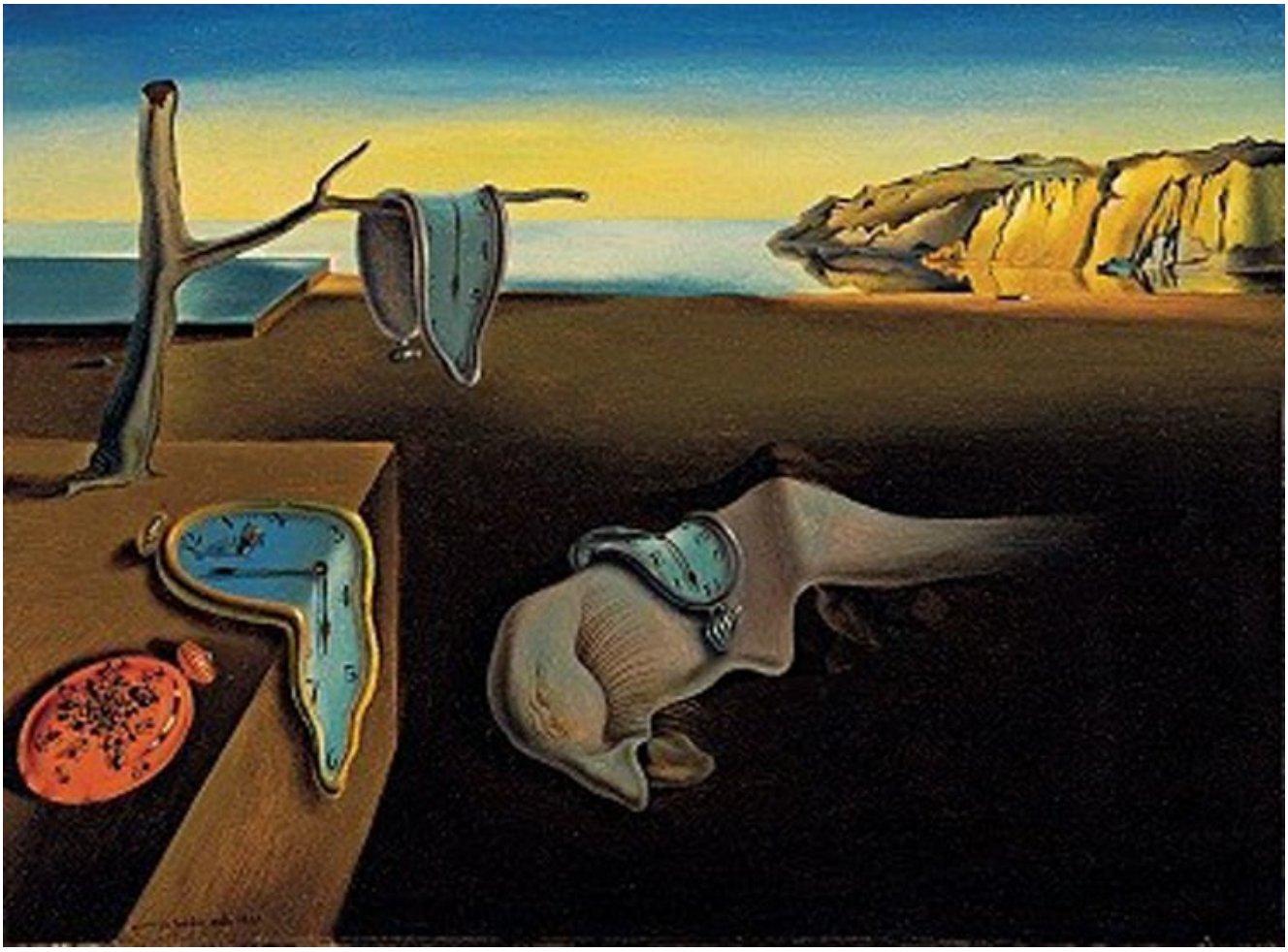
The Origins of Rot

by Christopher Ormell (September 2024)



The Persistence of Memory (Salvador Dalí, 1931)

The social, ethical and political rot which has affected virtually the whole of Western civilisation is a dangerous condition. It is destroying Western civilisation, and it won't go away of its own accord. Its danger stems to a large degree from the fact that we only poorly understand it. We need to focus more sharply onto what it is, and how it came about. We also need practical interventions to reduce its most corrosive effects. But we won't find these until we've got its measure.

The main symptom of the rot seems to be that former (unspoken)

commonly agreed standards of "how to make good sense" seem to have caved-in. Logic, sound reasoning, rigour and rationality are no longer being applied to public conversation with the consistency, force and discipline which was generally seen in the past to be needed to prevent serious lapses of judgment and credibility. Any sense that there is an hierarchy of voices of increasing rigour and veracity, with *truth* as the much-admired final objective, seems to have evaporated. Across the globe today there are more universities, more professors, more graduates than ever before. But they can't agree. Every specialism has its bitter controversies, and there seems to be a lack of underlying consensus wherever one turns.

While the cat's away, the mice can play. We now seem to be in an era of assertimania, where anyone can, it appears, articulate anything online, however daft. And if someone has the temerity to criticise what has been asserted, the speaker can claim that they are being *victimised* and their "right to free speech" is being denied. This is a 21st century version of Babel.

One would expect the amount of argument, discussion and debate which modern IT facilitates, to create a knowledgescape somewhat similar to a river basin, where ditches combine to form streams, and streams combine to form rivers which feed into waterways and estuaries. Ideas which point towards approaches or policies should, surely, spread and consolidate in a similar way. But, this taken-for-granted natural tendency towards consensus seems to have gone AWOL.

What has happened seems to be a virtual collapse of the morale of the 'intellectual class'; or to be more specific, a collapse of the 'Oakeshottian Conversation.' (Michael Oakeshott famously identified this historic 'Conversation' as the basis of elite liberal education in the 1930s.) Today scholars in almost every specialism are at sixes and sevens. They can no longer relate to the touchstone of the

Oakeshottian Conversation, which has long since melted away. This turbulence and disagreement may be traced back to the end of the 1960s, a decade which started with Kennedy's lofty optimistic rhetoric, but ended up with the demise of New Math for schools and the disgrace of Progressivism in schools, not to mention the slightly later loss of political faith, which millions of reflective people around the world had invested in socialism.

It is probably the collapse of New Math for Schools which finally triggered this avalanche of cave-ins. New Math for Schools was an academic revolution which had been backed to the hilt by the most august members of the (then) most authoritative of the academic elites, the 'modern mathematicians.' They boldly launched a school revolution which was hyped, much like today's AI, as an unstoppable force. It was driven by a body of formidable ideologues encompassing most of the leading math figures in the top US universities—though a few brave critics, such as Davis, Hersh, Polya, Kline and Sawyer did dissent. Quietly, 'Modern Mathematics' had been getting more and more aggressive, more and more abstract, more and more artificial, more and more airless, for decades. At the time its academic superstars were being especially lionised, because the public—reasonably—imagined that these gurus were ushering-in a computer revolution which would enrich the world, much like the industrial revolution. Then it transpired that these 'higher' mathematic gurus didn't like computers one little bit. Their project, New Math for Schools, turned out to be a disguised (stealthy) ploy, to try to turn school math away from a coming surge—something the math gurus dreaded—a flood of basically numerical (computerised) math. The gurus wished *sets* to take over and become the prime focus of school math instead. So they peddled these sets strongly, as being, they imagined, the natural, inevitable, invincible, paradigm.

But the ploy didn't work.

It was, rather, a psychological misjudgment of the greatest magnitude. Abstract sets were not the kind of thing which would cut any kind of ice with the average youngster. Trying to impose sets onto ordinary schools across the globe became a top-down, 20th century Children's Crusade … doomed to failure. In the USA it had already hit the dust before the end of the 1960s. This was pretty demoralising. It said, unmistakably, that the leading math figures, the most elite of the academic elites, were out to lunch.

But the superstars of math were not only the most elite (and most arrogant) of the academic elites, they were also considered to be the most accredited, authoritative circle of brains on the planet … Math was the most cut-and-dried of all the disciplines—it was generally supposed. Its main job was, surely, to judge what was objectively *right* from what was objectively *wrong*. That was what it was all about. Hence its leaders were the ones most likely to get their answers right.

But they got them hopelessly wrong! Nothing could be more brutally demoralising than this sickening let-down. This was a blunder of the most embarrassing kind.

It was, though—the gurus ensured—considerably under-played in the media. The leading gurus of math never publicly got round to admitting that they had made a howling mistake. That would have been too embarrassing by half. But in the long run, trying to whitewash the blunder didn't help. It seemed to carry the implicit message that there was no intellectual authority anywhere which could be trusted. The credibility of any kind of "theory" —of intellectuals affecting social practice—took a fall. It meant that henceforwards "*anything was going to go*!" This soon became the chief mantra of a post-modern pandemonium which had unquestionably settled in.

This general pandemonium, though, had been set in motion by an unexpected accident, the implosion of a half-baked school experiment. How could it have this effect? It could only

create the massive waves it did, because there was a lot of hidden social and intellectual instability in the system. It had been there for quite a while.

There was also another wave of wholly unexpected, disconcerting news which was breaking at the same time. Between 1945 and the end of the 1960s, the Four Whammies arrived. They were biblical-like, world-changing events—the inventions of the computer, atomic energy, space exploration and the discovery of DNA—none of which were mentioned, even hinted, in the Bible. This was deeply, socially destabilising. It upset the unconscious moral foundations of Western culture, which had been firmly based for two millennia on a range of angles on Christianity.

But the preconditions for the rot had actually started many years before. For the first sign of the dreadful despair which would engulf Western civilisation, we have to go back to the 1920s. The terrible death-roll, massacre and dereliction of WWI had shaken the daylight out of the European intellectual class. The social foundations of continental Europe were in ruins. But at this moment, in this state of exceptionally low morale, two urgent intellectual roadblocks needed to be sorted out. One was the extraordinary *relativity* implicit in the behaviour of light, which had been discovered by Mitchelson and Morley. The other was a contradiction at the core of mathematical set theory—this had been discovered by Bertrand Russell. In both cases it seemed that cool, confident Western logic had suddenly hit a brick wall. There was not even the slightest sign of a simple explanation … of either of these mind-boggling, unpalatably awkward, facts. The elites of physics and math were at their wits' end. They could hardly show the public the full extent of their despair, their total failure to understand … still less the outcome, that 'The Enlightenment' had, in effect, come to an end.

Something had to give. Eventually two slick, unconvincing fudges emerged, and they were each wearily given the official

primatur of their demoralised elites. In physics the explanation of this extraordinary relativity would be that time is another spacelike dimension, and the future is already there.

It was official: the universe is a *timeless block* of infinitely static, infinitely rigid spacetime!

It would be difficult to think of a more "absolutist solution" than this—i.e. less relativistic. Taken seriously (and it had to be taken seriously), it undermined most of Western culture. It meant that freewill was an illusion, creativity was an illusion, morality and justice were illusions. How could any political campaigning make a difference, if everything which was going to happen was already set in stone? It was a theory which should have prompted mass unrest and angry street demonstrations but morale was low—and there was little stomach to make a fuss.

In math, the establishment found a slick pack of Zermelo-Fraenkel (ZF) axioms which would, they insisted, *define* set theory. They were imposed onto math as *mandatory* guidelines. Their mode of operation was simple: they declared (on the authority of the chief gurus of math) that a set could no longer legitimately be regarded as a member of itself.

But … can an elite, however clever, make water run uphill? There are lots of sets which are palpably members of themselves, for example, the set of all the sets mentioned in this essay. To deny this truism was the most brazen of brazen fudges. (There is nothing fanciful about a set being a member of itself, because the membership criterion decides. Gottlob Frege, the German disciplinarian, fully accepted that Russell's contradiction—which included the concept that a set could be a member of itself—was valid.)

ZF axioms were obviously an attempt to define the problem out of existence. They were pronouncing with sick authority, in

effect, *that you must believe* that 1=0. But here too, debilitating post-WWI weariness came to bear, and there was little dissent. There was no stomach to make a fuss. Russell himself had already given up math in despair. Probably no one at the time had the *slightest inkling* that these pathetic, sticking-plaster type "solutions" would eventually do so much harm.

[We have since learnt that no elite can operate indefinitely on the basis of a palpable fudge, once the public has rumbled this intention. Slowly, fudges undermine and wash-away the trust of the masses in the elites.]

We need to re-visit these problems and get them right. The fudges with which we were fobbed-off in the 1920s have turned out to be rotten. The most urgent immediate reform is a new way of teaching math in schools. The need for most people to understand math has become a superordinate priority, because modern society is dependent on computerised, hidden math at every turn: and if almost no one understands math—in a world utterly dependent on math—we are in a very parlous situation. We need a new way to teach math which makes obvious sense to children and genuinely interests them.

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Christopher Ormell has posted more than a hundred essays on his websites since 2021 (philosophyforrenewingreason.com, and mathsforrenewingreason.com), outlining a revolutionary new philosophy for the 21st century. It shows, using lucid logic, why there is a universe at all, why nothing can ever go faster than the speed of light, why space is three dimensional, and how every human being can have freewill … things which math based modelling can never hope to match. It

pivots on the wholly unexpected discovery of anti-math, the new 100% abstract, 100% rational discipline which studies the logic of transient reality… and incidentally demolishes the seductive (Platonic) illusion *that only the timeless is real*.

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