Adversus Mathematicos

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It stands to reason once you’ve got the gist
And figured why, as life goes on, its rate
Of passage speeds up and it seems you missed
Some annual fixture just because the date

Came round so quickly that the old check-list
Of jobs to do or days to celebrate
Was finally unable to assist
Your effort to prevent things running late.

The answer’s one our number-theorist
Has got off pat: the ratios dictate
That an inverse proportion must exist
Between the sum of years you’ve had to wait

From birth till now and the contractile tryst
Of time with life that sets life’s quickening gait
From now on. Hence the chronotropic twist
That thwarts all vain attempts to correlate

Your own time-consciousness with what they say,
Those back-to-Newton clock-watch types who think
Its flow’s so smooth and equable that they
Can accurately gauge from link to link

Its chronometric rate. A simpler way
Of putting it’s the fact that time-scales shrink
(It seems) in keeping with the day-to-day
Expanding ratios now required to sync

Time further-back with time not so passé
Or time right now. This feels too like the brink
Of some catastrophe you’d kept at bay,
If not by ministry of drugs or drink,
Then by some trick of thought that might defray
   The cost by making out that there’s a chink
In that proportion-scheme so things obey
   Sir Isaac’s second law and, in a blink,
   Accelerate so fast you’ll never know
   What happened at the close. So they compute
Quite logically, those speed-ups in the flow
   Of human time whose rate turns out to suit

The number-crunchers who purport to show
   How everything’s numerical at root,
Or how those mid-to-late-life crises go
   Directly into mathemes that commute

Life-sentences to short-term. These bestow
   The Pythagorean leisure to impute
All such small upsets to the quid pro quo
   Of time and number that the more astute

Or numerate among us reckon no
   Great cause for mental anguish so acute
Since merely products of a ratio
   Whose shortening odds no life-hope could refute.

Yet it’s by just their method to explain
   That hope’s eclipse (they say) that we may find
More adequate resources to maintain
   Some equipoise once sensibly resigned

To overtaking in an outside lane
   Marked ‘Pile-Up Just Ahead’, while way behind
There fades from view our last hope to regain
   That old co-temporality of mind

And world inhabiting the one domain
   Of a life-time that let them both unwind
At their accustomed pace. If we refrain
   From all vain efforts later on to bind

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The time-scales so they synchronize again,
   Or do the sums until we’re disinclined
To find a cause of existential pain
   In functions mathematically defined,

Then (they propose) we’ll emulate the best
   Of Pascal’s thinking. These are not the bits
About how small he felt or how depressed
   By sheer immensities or infinites,

But more the thought-experiments that test
   Just how those intuitions fare when it’s
A matter for math-specialists possessed
   Of some technique that more exactly fits

Our need to steer well clear of such distressed
   Mind-zones and so make sure the thing submits
To problem-solving powers beyond what messed
   With Pascal’s *autre soi*. This then permits

(They’d have us think) the well-schooled mind to wrest
   Some glimpse of truth and order from the pits
Of inchoate emotion that expressed
   No more than our desire to call it quits

With time’s fast-forward. Granted, they’ve a fair
   Entitlement, those thinkers, to proclaim
By dint of proof demonstrative that their
   Procedure’s what most best justifies the name

Of truth and best equips us to prepare
   For moves in the timescale-adjustment game
Whose mounting odds would otherwise so scare
   Our mortal selves that we’d be prone to blame

The very powers of thought that did their share
   To quiet our fears for putting us to shame
By showing how we lacked the strength to bear
   Such undeluding truths. Yet, if we came
Up against some mémoire involontaire,
   Perhaps some near-death flashback that could frame
And shrink our lifetime to an instant where
   The ratios went sky-high, then all the same,

Despite our having taken full on board
   All that the mathematikoi had taught
Our time-sick souls, their cure might not afford
   Us mental strength enough to face the sort

Of panic-state that used to have us floored
   And does right now. Then we perceive how short
Such mind-games fall of finding some accord
   Between that old, inconsolable thought

Of temps too soon perdu and tricks that scored
   Top points for puzzle-solving though they brought
No sense of kairos gratefully restored
   Or gift to heal the damage kronos wrought

When clock-time calibrated. This ignored
   Its finely gauged potential to distort
Whatever our life-histories have shored
   Against time’s shrewd contrivances to thwart

The time-shaped craving that time should reward
   Us tempus-fugitives with times less fraught
Since amply sutured by the triple cord
   Of body, mind and world that time holds taut.