

Prairie Memories:
A Synthesis of Philosophy, Art, and Science

by

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Prairie Memories

I was born just south of the Sand Hills in Nebraska—the prairie. It is a hard place. You have to ask yourself: Why *don't* trees grow there? But standing alone in the middle of the endless prairie, with the bowl of the sky surrounding you, one can begin to think clearly. Looking back now that I'm older, what would my life have been like if I could change anything I wanted? What would I be, what would I have done, if I could do it over?

All of this comes down to defining an optimal human life. What defines an optimal human life history? Longevity? Health? Security? Fulfillment? What does "fulfillment" mean? And therein lies one of life's most difficult questions.

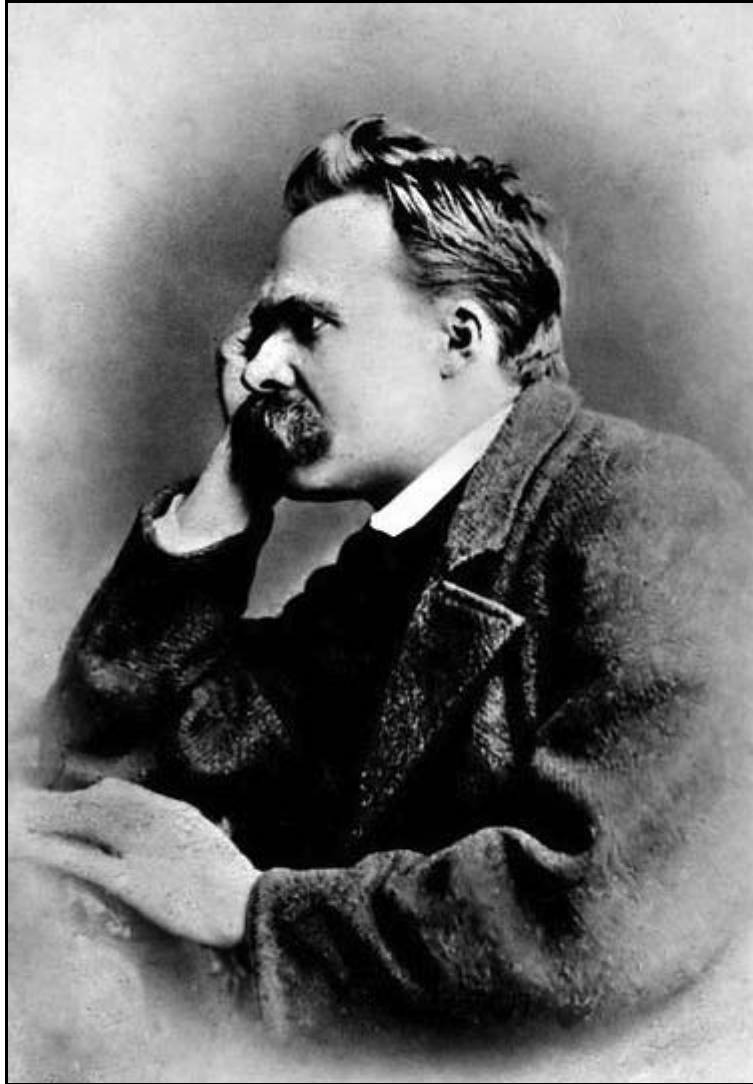


Power

There is a powerful fact behind these ideas.

It is a self evident truth that I bear no responsibility, ethical or otherwise, for being alive. No one gets to pick whether, where, or when they are born. Because of this fact, I may choose to live my life anyway I wish. I didn't ask to be here. In point of fact, others forced existence upon me, so I owe no one anything. *Life is not a gift.*

Condorcet's Obligation— "Men will know, then, that, if they have obligations towards beings who are yet to come into the world, they do not consist in giving to them existence only, but happiness." — *Sketch for an Historical Picture of the Progress of the Human Mind* by Antoine-Nicolas de Condorcet, 1795 (in Hardin, 1993, 24)



Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 -1900) in 1882

"What alone can *our* teaching be?—That no one *gives* a human being his qualities: not God, not society, not his parents or ancestors, not *he himself*. No one is accountable for existing at all, or for being constituted as he is, or for living in the circumstances and surroundings in which he lives. The fatality of his nature cannot be disentangled from the fatality of all that which has been and will be."—Nietzsche from *Twilight of the Idols* (in Hollingdale, 1990)

"According to nature you want to *live*? O you noble Stoics, what deceptive words these are! Imagine a being like nature, wasteful beyond measure, indifferent beyond measure, without purposes and consideration, without mercy and justice, fertile and desolate and uncertain at the same time; imagine indifference itself as a power—how *could* you live according to this indifference?"—Nietzsche from *Beyond Good and Evil* (in Hollingdale, 2003)



The Maelström

"At first the narrator only saw hideous terror in the spectacle, and felt helpless. Then, as a moment of revelation, he saw that the Maelström is a beautiful and awesome creation." — from *A Descent into the Maelström* by Edgar Allan Poe



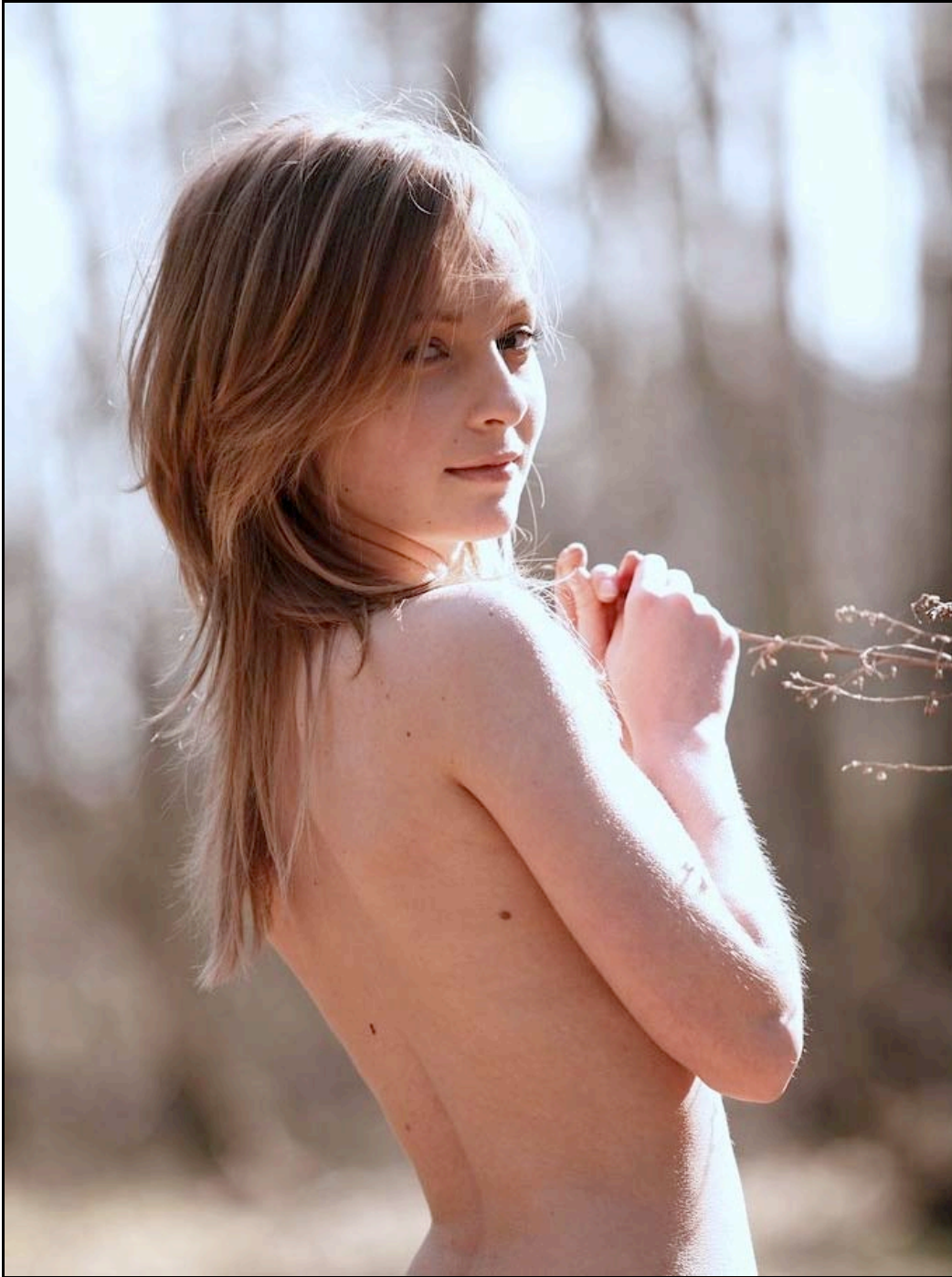
The Moskstraumen, shown above, and commonly known as the **Maelström**, is a system of tidal eddies and whirlpools, one of the strongest in the world, that forms in a strait adjacent to the Lofoten archipelago, Norway. Whirlpools are just one of many types of vortex found throughout the natural world.

Legend has it that ships that past too near to the horror of the Maelström would be sucked down into oblivion. The Moskstraumen has featured in many historical accounts, generally exaggerated. It was described more than 1500 years ago, and marked on many ancient maps with dramatic descriptions of terror and death. (For more on *A Descent into the Maelström* by Edgar Allan Poe, Maelström, and vortices see web references.)



The Whirlpool Galaxy M51

Make no mistake, when I speak of a maelström, I speak of a vortex from the smallest to the largest of scales. Similar in grand design to our own Milky Way, spiral galaxy M51 is a spinning vortex with a "black hole" (the ultimate maelström) at its center that lies 23 million light-years away from us. 23 million light-years—our insignificance has become more and more apparent with the passage of time from Copernicus to the present, as we shrink further into oblivion with each new scientific discovery about our world.



Elle

So why do we go on living? Why do we strive? Why does "beauty" exist?

Answer: So there will be a next generation—period—end of story.



Digging for water in Darfur

But can we ever know this reality? Evolution has programmed us to act, but can we experience any awareness of why we act? Do we have a choice in whether to act or not? Or are we just meat machines programmed to make more meat machines no matter how tenuous life is, helpless as we're pulled into the maelström?

We must remember that in this life to "go to hell" is a very short trip.

"Most of the poorest of the poor suffer silently, too weak for activism or too busy raising the next generation of hungry. In the sprawling slum of Haiti's Cité Soleil, Placide Simone, 29, offered one of her five offspring to a stranger. 'Take one,' she said, cradling a listless baby and motioning toward four rail-thin toddlers, none of whom had eaten that day. 'You pick. Just feed them.'"—Lacey, 2008

(Keep in mind that the quote above was published April 18, 2008,
almost 2 years before the Haitian earthquake of 2010.)



Mother and Child

Emotional Hedonism

"In the absence of rational thought our behaviors are motivated by emotional hedonism; that which makes us feel emotionally good. Emotional hedonism is controlled by physiological mechanisms that are in place as a result of natural selection. The reason that behaviors driven by emotional hedonism exist is that they contribute to the imperative of biological continuity. **Emotional hedonism is the automatic pilot that nature has put in place to make sure there is a next generation.** Emotional hedonism can give rise to egoism or self-love, but is also responsible for nurturing behaviors, kinship selection, and reciprocal altruism, in other words, all of the 'moral sentiments' (Ruse, 1986; Hume, 1739)." —(see web reference Alles, D. L. (1997). *Ethical Naturalism: A Normative Analysis*)

Human beings have grossly under-estimated the extent and strength of our instinctual behaviors. And we will only begin to achieve optimal human life histories when we begin to understand our instincts clearly.



Supercell Thunderstorm

On the prairie one is defenseless against the destructive force of a vortex.

The very hard part is that the more we learn scientifically about our world, the more baffling our existence becomes, and yet at the same time the less recourse we have to myths and delusion. What is the proper term for rejecting a belief in a supernatural realm to reality? The supernatural is what I mean when I speak of myths and delusion.

"Naturalism or metaphysical naturalism is any worldview in which the world is amenable to a unified study that includes the natural sciences and in this sense the world is a unity. According to such a view, nature is all there is, and all things supernatural (which stipulatively includes gods, spirits, souls, and non-natural values) do not exist." (see web references for these terms.) This makes the most important question we must answer—

Will we be able to put our anxieties and fears aside and face into the maelström of existence, or are we genetically doomed to forever seek myth and delusion to quiet our fears?



A Tornado in North Dakota

"A **vortex**—a whirling mass of something, especially water or air that draws everything near its center, or a situation or feeling that seems to swamp or engulf everything else."—MSN Encarta

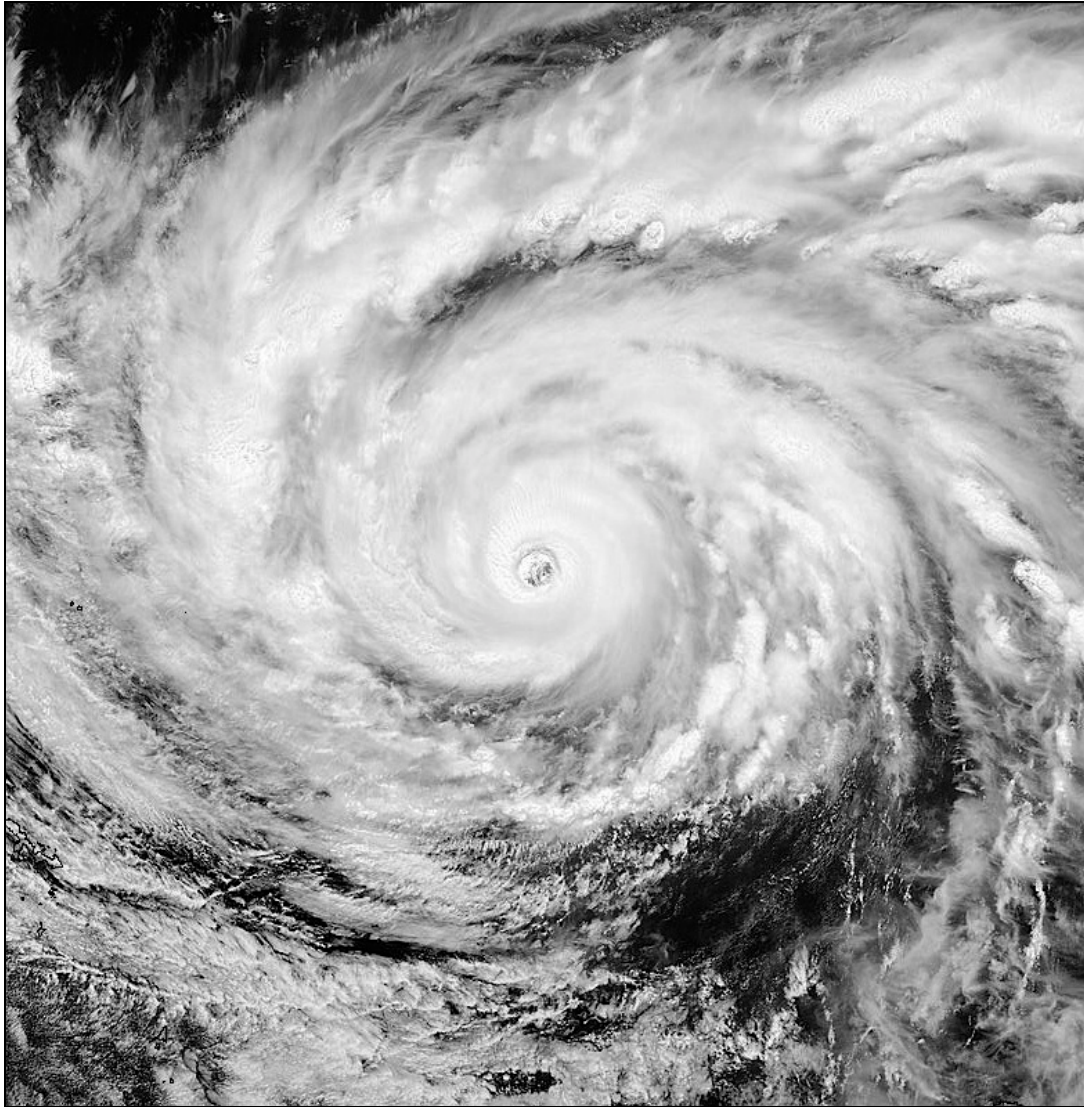
I choose to stand and see the maelström of existence with defiance. What did I expect besides blind, indifferent terror in this morass forced upon me. Better to cry out my defiance; and better still is to live my life for others in defiance of this indifferent cosmic order.

But the mystery of mysteries is that we, all of us, exist as a vortex, a maelström of flesh and blood.



Winona, my granddaughter

This is not a peripheral problem in modern biology as evidenced by John Maynard Smith's question in his book *The Problems of Biology*: "To what extent are living organisms dissipative structures?" (Maynard Smith, 1986). The term "dissipative structure" is from the language of non-linear thermodynamics. It refers to objects that exist by virtue of a constant source of energy flowing into a structure and, in turn, being dissipated out of the structure. The classic example of a dissipative structure is a vortex forming in either water or air.



Typhoon Rammasun in the Western Pacific

T. H. Huxley used the analogy of a whirlpool in a river to describe the life process. "Living bodies," he said in 1884, "are just such whirlpools. Matter sets into them in the shape of food, sets out of them in the shape of waste products. Their individuality lies in the constant maintenance of a characteristic form, not in the preservation of material identity. If you dam the stream ... the whirlpool dies." (Huxley, 1967)

But it is not just an analogy.

"... each living thing is a dissipative structure, that is, it does not endure in and of itself, but only as a result of the continual flow of energy in the system.... " "From this point of view, **the reality of individuals is problematic because they do not exist per se but only as local perturbations in this universal energy flow.**" —Harold J. Morowitz (in Callicott, 1989; see also Morowitz, 2002)



From Dust unto Dust

**Are we then just local perturbations in the flow of energy
toward universal entropy?**

(Carroll, 2010)



A Sahara Dust Storm

I watch as the deserts engulf the world (see web reference Alles, D. L., *Global Ecology and Remote Sensing*). But I see it and ponder, *what difference in meaning* does it make to realize the unimaginable differences in scale of both time and magnitude in *the* Universe? We are at only the beginning of understanding the true nature of our world. What will we know a hundred years from now, when you understand that it was only in 1998 that we began to realize that "our universe" is expanding at an ever accelerating pace? As a result, today it is a very plausible hypothesis that *the real* Universe, that is to say *everything that exists*, is infinite in time and space (see Alles, 2010; Carroll, 2010).

What then is the meaning of our temporal existence in an infinite Universe? Perhaps Stanley Kubrick was right in saying—

"The most terrifying fact about the Universe is not that it is hostile but that it is indifferent, but if we can come to terms with this indifference, then our existence as a species can have genuine meaning. **However vast the darkness—we must supply our own light.**" (see web reference for Kubrick, S.)



A Requiem

But if in our passions we obsess,
then we should know the world will end in fire not ice,
leaving no trace of us.



A Buddhist Prayer

No, I will not leave the problem here. Right or wrong, rational or irrational, to live is to act in the present. In this there is a power, a beauty, an exhilarating freedom from the totalitarian oppression of matter. We are free to destroy ourselves. We are free to defy matter, if only in our imaginations, and create real meaning in our lives.

“The true dignity and courage of mankind lies in its ability to face the reality of its universe with all its meaninglessness.”

—Martin Esslin

(see web reference for Martin Esslin)

"The World is my country, all mankind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion."

Thomas Paine *The Rights of Man* (1791)

May your journey be filled with happiness and peace.

David Leon Alles

June 30, 2011

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<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Maelstrom> , and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vortex>

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Fire and Ice

Some say the world will end in fire,
Some say in ice.
From what I've tasted of desire
I hold with those who favor fire.
But if it had to perish twice,
I think I know enough of hate
To say that for destruction ice
Is also great
And would suffice.

Robert Frost (1874–1963), from *Miscellaneous Poems to 1920* #2. *Fire and Ice*,
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