



An Introduction to Prior Identity

"What do you tell students?"

Two years ago, I was at the house of one of my colleagues who was celebrating her husband's birthday. We'll call him Stephen. I was standing on the deck with Stephen, who then was in the middle of his PhD, and one of their friends. Their friend, who we'll call Paul, was an engineer, well-known for his scepticism of anything that couldn't be logically demonstrated, or was in the least bit, 'woo woo.'

Discussing my role at the university to help students who have lost their way, Paul simply asked me, "What do you tell students?" And so, I told them both about Prior Identity. When I got to the point where I gave the four reasons that Prior Identity is so hard to see, but so obvious once it is seen, Stephen said to me with a sort of bewildered look, "I'm feeling a bit overwhelmed and I need to go take a walk."

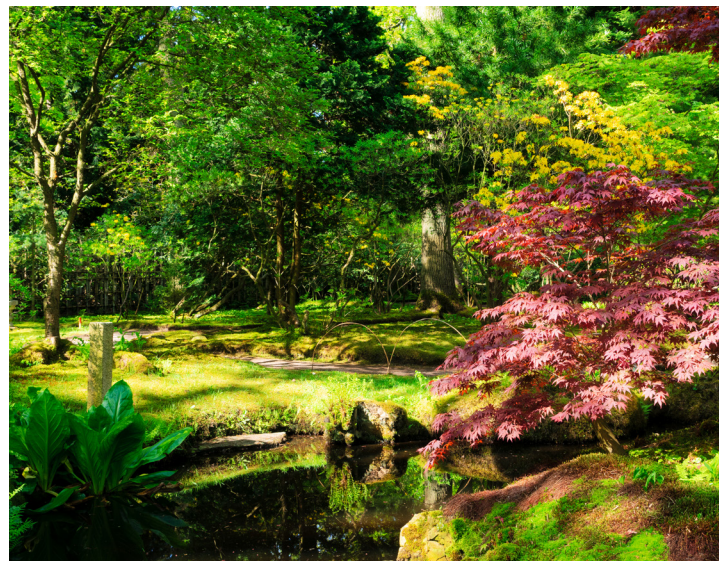
I was assuming he'd found it all a bit too strange, and wanted to get away from having to listen to it. He walked down the stairs from the deck to the back garden, and for about 10 minutes or so, wandered

around the lawn and trees.

He came back up to the deck where I was still discussing it with Paul and said, "I've been walking around trying to come up with something that could counter what you've said, and I can't think of anything."

At that point, Paul replied matter-of-factly, "It makes perfect sense, and it's a radically different view of reality." No woo woo here.

For the rest of the evening, Stephen would occasionally look over at me with a sense of wonder and curiosity on his face. The world suddenly looked very different to him.



So, here's what I tell students, but in a much longer format and in more detail than I would actually throw at a student in one sitting. And although I will do it here, I only very briefly speak to them of the implications of Prior Identity for Humanity itself. Rather, I mostly speak to them about the implications for their own lives.

First, I tell them that they're inconceivably older than they think.

That there isn't an atom in their bodies that isn't billions of years old. Ancient hydrogen, formed shortly after the beginning of the Big Bang, with the rest of their atoms forged in the furnaces of giant exploding stars billions of years ago, from which all the elements of which the students are made, were thrown into space, where they eventually coalesced into our star, our planet, and then them.

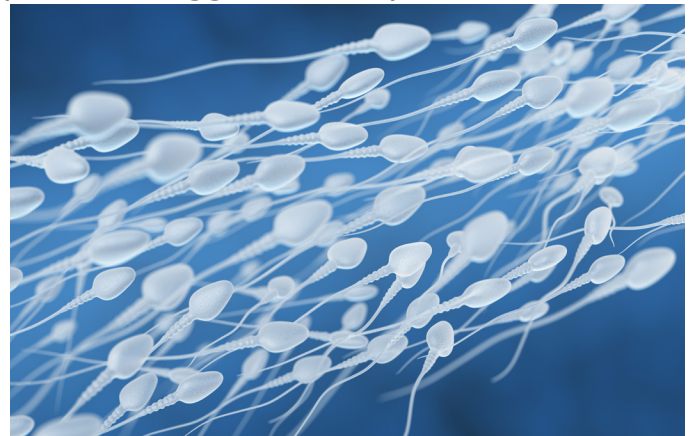
The only thing 18 to 20-something years old about them, is when their particular collection of ancient atoms started to take the shape of them. I tell them they're essentially 'talking stars.'



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Second, I tell them they're inconceivably improbable, with the odds against their particular collection of ancient atoms coming together as them, astronomical - around 1 in $10^{2,500,000}$.

Compare that to the number of *atoms* in the visible universe, which is only 10^{80} . **Think about it.** First, they had to win a roughly 200 million-to-one lottery of being the particular sperm that won the race to a particular egg when they were conceived.



If any of the other 199,999,999 sperm had fertilised it first, they would never have come into existence at all. It would be a different human, akin to a sibling – but not them.

And each of their parents had to win the same 200 million-to-one lottery of being the sperm that won the race to their own mothers' eggs. Now three different things have had to happen at 200 million-to-one each, for them to exist.

And they can't stop there, because each of their parents' parents also had to win against the same odds to come into existence. For millions and millions and millions of years, if everything hadn't happened precisely the way it did to bring about each coupling in their entire genetic history, they simply couldn't exist, and yet here they are, sitting in an office with an-

other inconceivably improbable collection of ancient atoms that had become a human brain.

And if everything through the entire history of the cosmos for almost 14 billion years hadn't happened exactly the way it did to produce this astoundingly perfect planet for life, so that a genetic history could happen in the first place, they couldn't exist. And yet, there they are.

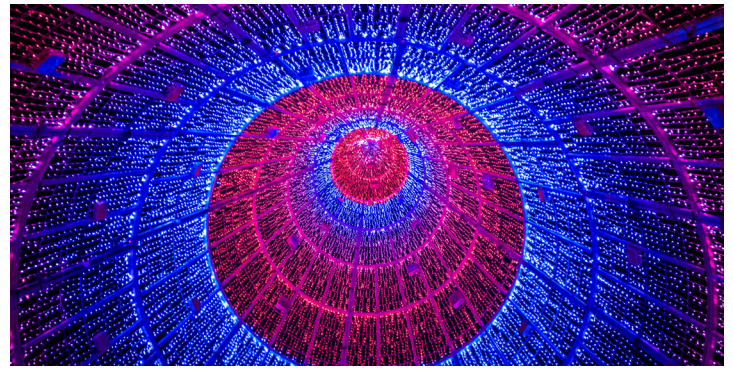
What an inconceivably unlikely event Humanity is, and each human brain is. And we mostly just take our existence for granted. When someone says, "I never win anything," it betrays a profound ignorance of what we are. The profound conceptual prison in which Einstein says we are caught - unable to see what we are.

Third, I tell them to imagine a bottle of ink, thrown against my wall as a metaphor for the Big Bang.

When the bottle hits and breaks, an amorphous blob of ink would appear at the breaking point, and ink would extend in all directions and with finer and finer lines of ink as the event unfolds further away from the breaking-point, forming interesting designs and shapes, some maybe quite complex, out toward the fringes.



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I ask them, "Are those complex designs and shapes out on the fringes, 'new and separate events,' or are they a continuation of the event of the breaking of the bottle?" Almost always they answer immediately that of course, the complex designs are a continuation of the same event; just showing up a fraction of a second later. Simple.

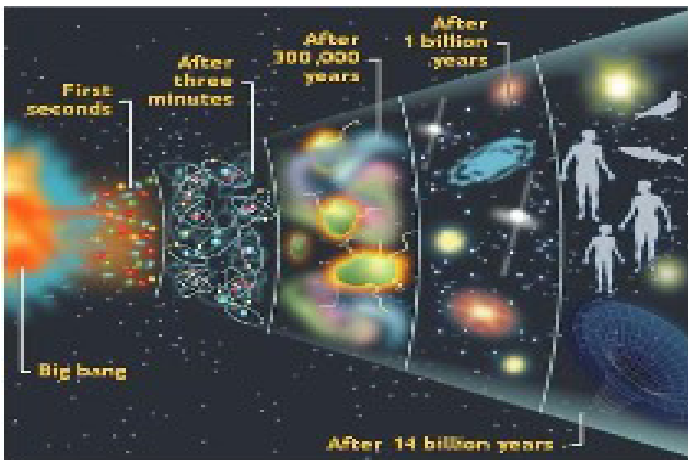
Now, let's move from the metaphor, and think about the Big Bang that for 13.8 billion years, has expanded from its 'amorphous blob' into an increasing complexity of atoms, stars, planets, black holes, nebulae, galaxies, and at least once that we know of, a very, very complex design we call, "life."

And then I ask them, "What is *the* most complex structure of the universe that we know of?" And the answer of course is, it's a human brain. And just like the complex designs of ink on the wall, a human brain is not a new and separate event. It's a continuation of the same event as the Big Bang, just showing up billions of years later.

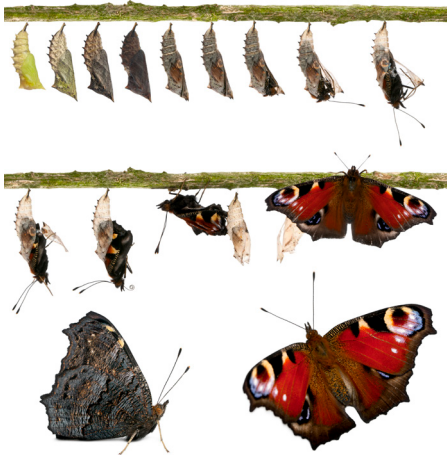
But we tend to *feel*, and most importantly, *tend to talk* - to conceptualise - as if each of us is a new and separate event, in a subject-object relationship with an external environment into which we only very recently entered called 'the universe' - that we're looking 'out' at, and existing within, something that isn't 'me.'

We're not.

You, I and everything else is one continuing event – the Big Bang Event (BBE). (No matter what or 'Who' one might believe may have 'caused' the BBE.) The universe as it is now, is simply what the BBE looks like now. The BBE is still banging – it's still 'eventing.' And so, all the seemingly 'new and separate' events of this continuous BBE are one and the same event – it just takes time for the BBE to manifest itself in various forms. A human brain is one of those forms.



Whatever started banging, has always been a shapeshifter at every scale.



Let's Talk...

So, since it's the way we usually talk – the words we use – that creates the feeling that we are new and separate events in a subject-object relationship with a universe that isn't us, let's talk – let's conceptualise – differently, and see if we can see things and feel things differently.

Let's talk about those events within the unfolding BBE called "life," "intelligent brains" and "human brains," in a different way than what we are used to, and see if things don't look and feel different.

...lifeforms

First, it's obvious that we live in a universe that 'events' lifeforms, in varying forms and varying degrees of complexity. It's also obvious that these lifeforms 'experience' the universe in varying ways and in varying degrees of complexity, be that lifeform a mushroom, a sunflower or a giraffe.



So, to what conclusion does this lead?

To this:

That lifeforms are the event of the universe experiencing itself, in whatever way any particular lifeform experiences its environment.

...conscious, intelligent brains

Second, when the complexity of a lifeform reaches a degree of complexity that we label as a "conscious, intelligent brain," we can see that it's obvious that we live in a universe that events conscious, intelligent brains – brains that are able to know and learn - whether they be cat brains, bird brains or ape brains.



So, to what conclusion does this lead?

To this:

That conscious intelligent brains are the event of the universe learning and knowing about itself, in whatever way and to whatever degree any particular conscious intelligent brain is capable of learning and knowing about its environment, and whether it has the capacity to be conceptually-aware that this is what is happening, or not.

...human brains

And occasionally – at least once that we know of – the universe has evented a brain that is so complex, that it has been able to event complex conceptual language, for complex conceptual thinking, that enables profoundly deep conceptual learning and knowing.

A brain so profoundly conceptual, that it has conceived that the universe itself exists, and that the universe can be understood using conceptual thinking, and which it has demonstrated by its innate curiosity, that it wants to understand. Or as Neil de-Grasse Tyson puts it, "...to figure itself out."

So, to what conclusion does this lead?

To this:

*That a human brain is the event of the universe conceiving of itself, and which **has** the capacity to be conceptually-aware that this is what is happening, but is mostly not aware at all, and even when it is, the implication is normally not grasped for the profound reality that it reveals. Of what this is really saying about human brains. Of the Big Concept that could change the way we see what we really are.*

So, what is the Big Concept?

Simply this:

Since a human brain is the event of the universe conceiving of 'itself,' then the 'itself' which has the brain that's doing the conceiving, must be the universe.

So, a human brain is not just a conceptual brain IN the universe, it's a conceptual brain OF the universe. It's the universe's conceptual brain. Any conceptual brain anywhere in the universe is also a conceptual brain OF the universe. And all brains of any kind are equally brains OF the universe – but human brains have the superpower of highly-complex conceptual thought, with the ability to communicate those thoughts with each other using conceptual language, which makes the superpower exponentially greater than the sum of its parts. Those parts, all seen together, we call "Humanity."¹



Little-self, meet your Big Self – Your Prior Identity.

So, to what conclusion does this lead?

To this:

That Humanity¹ is a conceptual brain of the universe, whose life-support system is Earth. This is Humanity's Prior Identity.



This is our place in the universe. This is who we have always been, whether we've conceived of it, or not.

"It looks so clear now."



Once students see this, they often can't believe they didn't see it before. That it now just seems so obvious. Then I tell them why it's so hard to see our Prior Identity, when it's so obvious once we do see it. And it's for at least four reasons. What I call, the Four Obstacles.



The 4 Obstacles

1. The Great Case of Cosmic Identity Theft (and Stockholm Syndrome)

The first obstacle to seeing one's Prior Identity is because someone gave each of our brains a name, and a name is the shortest spell ever cast. A brain belonging to the universe itself, has been bewitched into thinking that it's a brain belonging to the name it was given by other brains with names.

It's almost comical if it weren't so tragic: the universe evented its own conceptual brains over nearly 14 billion years of cosmic and biological evolution, involving inconceivable synchronicities and serendipitous cosmic, geological and biological events, and what do those brains do? They give each other names! And the brains become convinced that they 'belong' to the names they were given, as in.....



... "Hi, my name is John and I have a brain."

No...John doesn't have a brain; the universe has a brain, that someone named, 'John.'

And so a great injustice is done. This is a clear case of cosmic identity theft. And Stockholm Syndrome as well, since the brain that has been taken captive by its name, identifies with its captor, and forgets whose brain it really is.

But the brain is both perpetrator and victim in this injustice. For in identifying with the names that they are given, and not with the universe that crafted them, human brains cheat themselves out of the grand vision of what they fundamentally are – the very self-awareness of existence itself.

Imagine the James Webb space telescope spotting a giant conceptual brain, identical in form and function to a human brain, including the eyes, looking around the universe, but the size of a whole galaxy.

And even if someone at NASA named the giant brain 'Jimmy,' we'd never be so silly as to then believe that it's 'Jimmy's' brain, because it would be obvious that we've simply called a brain of the universe, Jimmy. We'd know that there is no 'Jimmy' that has a brain. We'd easily see this, because we would be a disinterested third-party observer.

But a human brain is infinitesimal in comparison, and is stuck in a little body with a name and a face, amidst a social environment with lots of other brains with names, who tell each other that the brains belong to the names.

And so, we view the human brain completely differently than we would if a galaxy-size brained showed up someday in the lens of a space telescope. And for no good reason.



A perfectly rational response would be,

"OMG, look at this! The universe has fashioned a giant conceptual brain **out of** itself, that is looking **out at** itself."

Most people just don't expect that if the cosmos 'has' conceptual consciousness, it could be in the form of conceptual brains.

2.The Brain 'Selfs.'

The second reason it's so hard to see what we really are, is because the human brain does something called "selfing."² In order to stay alive in a dangerous world, the brain must protect itself from any 'other' that may harm it, whether living or inanimate. And the toddler's brain first creates this concept of 'other' at around 18 to 24 months old, and when it does, the concept of 'self' is also created in that same moment, because you can't have a concept of 'other' without having a concept of 'self.'

The brain has 'selfed' – it has invented the concept of 'I' and 'me' in order to stay alive. And there are various parts of the brain that contribute to this selfing. The brain then becomes convinced that this 'self' it has invented, and that goes by the name it was given, is intrinsically real.



And this invented 'self' becomes more and more convinced that it's really there when we think and feel. Because the more we think and feel, the more it seems that there is a 'thinker' having the thoughts and a 'feeler' having the feelings. That 'I' am essentially an invisible entity living in a material body, somewhere behind the eyes and between the ears, since this is where everything seems to be happening. But

as neuroscience is showing us, the concept that there is a thinker having thoughts, is just another thought. There's really no one home. The self is real, in that it is real neurons doing their thing in a very convincing way and giving the sense of a self, but it's not a real entity.

The self as we tend to think of it, isn't really there except as a concept – but a very, very powerful one. The 'thinker' having thoughts is a very convincing illusion within the brain that invented it. It's not that this self doesn't exist – it does – as a conceptual invention of the brain. A self-concept that is necessary for survival in a dangerous and extremely social world. Humans are the most social of all animals. It's no wonder that we've developed a complex concept of self and other, in the evolutionary process of becoming human.

I sometimes ask students, "Which statement would you normally say? 'I have a brain;' or, 'I am a brain?'" Most answer, "I have a brain." When I then ask them, "Where is the 'I' that has the brain?," they are usually lost for an answer, until they suggest that the 'I' that has the brain must be somehow in the brain.

And they're right. The 'little-self' that goes by their name, thinks it has a brain. But truth is, the brain has a 'little-self'...the one it invented as a toddler, and that goes by the name someone gave it at birth.

Or to go back to our friend John who thinks he has a brain, there is no 'John' that has a brain; there is a brain that has a 'John.'

However, as we've seen, there **is** a 'self' – an entity - that does have a brain – the Big Self – whatever it was that started banging so long ago.

And so, we can see that both statements

are true: “I *have* a brain and I also *am* a brain.” I, the universe, have a brain; and I, the named self, am that brain. The universe *evented* its own material conceptual brain. That conceptual brain then *invented* its own immaterial self.

In short, from the event of the ‘little bang’ of human reproduction, comes a conceptual brain, that after a period of time (around 18 to 24 months), suddenly conceives of itself as belonging to the ‘self’ that it (the brain) has invented.

And from the event of the ‘Big Bang’ of the universe, comes a conceptual brain, that after a period of time (in Humanity’s case around 13.8 billion years), suddenly conceives of itself as belonging to the self (the universe) that has evented it.

That is, if it can awaken from the dream of the self-illusion that is so overwhelmingly convincing.⁴ And that illusion is bolstered by the next obstacle...

3. Human Society “The Great Improv”

The third reason it’s so hard to see what we are, is because the brain-invented ‘self’ that goes by the name it was given, is dropped at birth onto the stage of the worldwide improvisational theatre called human society, where this little-self-identity plays out its characters, roles and storylines based on concepts suggested by the audience in that particular improvisational theatre.

As noted in the previous PDF, “How Prior Identity Came to Be,” improvisational theatre creates or ‘simulates’ a world on the stage, made solely from concepts. Like the world-famous Groundlings Theatre and School in Los Angeles. But the audience sitting in the Groundlings Theatre are aware that it’s a conceptually-simulated re-

ality. They realise that there is a different reality outside on Melrose Ave.



In the movie, The Matrix, humans are imprisoned inside a simulated reality, made by the machines human brains have created. But most people living within The Great Improv don’t notice that they’re also trapped inside a sort of conceptually-simulated reality, not made by machines invented by human brains, but by human brains themselves. It’s not that the simulation we live in is an imitation of a real world, but that what we define as the real world is really all made up from concepts - just like on the stage of The Groundlings Theatre.

Human society is made from concepts that produce the material world of that society through inventions such as housing, commerce, transportation and government; and concepts that produce the immaterial world such as values, ways of living and worldviews.

And The Great Improv of which we have conceived, is so all-embracing, encompassing and convincing, we don’t notice that we’re living in a conceptually made-up world; that there is a different conceptual reality outside the stage door.

And no wonder! Social communication in the social world is how human brains became so conceptual in the first place. Not

having very good bodily defences, humans developed conceptual language that allowed us to conceptualise tools, weapons, fortresses and social organisation that allowed us to survive. And the same Great Improv that created such a complex conceptual brain in order to survive in the first place, keeps the brain caught in the all-encompassing conceptual reality we've created. And so, we are unable to see past the congestion to our Prior Identity outside of the theatre.

So, that complex world we've created from concepts is real; and it's not. Consider the national identity we call, "Italy," which is just a concept with which most people currently go along. And on that conceptual foundation people build physical structures like government buildings, hoist a flag, gather armies and write a name on a map. And *presto chango*, Italy is pulled out of a hat.

This all makes the identity called 'Italy' seem intrinsically real. It's no more intrinsically real than the Roman Empire, which is just a concept no one (except for some monks on Mt Athos) goes along with anymore, and so now only exists as a concept, with just a few of the old snapshots strung together into a seemingly cohesive history, and some of the old buildings left behind. It was always only apparently real, not really real. As has been said, "Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn't go away." In 476CE, the Western Roman Empire went away when no one believed in it anymore.

But during that Great Improv we called "The Roman Empire," it all seemed so intrinsically real, with fancy red capes and funny hats with red brushes on top, and titles and an emperor worshiped as a god. The only difference between a child playing at being a Roman emperor, and a 'real' Roman emperor,

or, is the number of people who go along with the concept, and the lengths they go to make it seem 'real.' Like whether either of the made-up emperors is obeyed when they order slaves to be tortured to death for entertainment.

And since my own identity that goes by my name is just as much a concept as a country is, upon which I string together arbitrary snapshots of my life that I run as a movie at 29 frames per second, building the illusion of a coherent self, I can't clearly see that my 'little-self' is all made up. And because I don't see society and my little-self as all made up, I only know 'me' as the identities I play in The Great Improv in which I'm always starring, and taking so seriously, and I don't know 'me' as the actor behind the identities.

The gift of Gary Austin, founder of the Groundlings and called the father of modern American comedy at his death - serendipitously on April Fool's Day 2017 - was in his ability to help actors know themselves - 'the way they are' - their 'personality' - their 'prior identity' you could say - in order to bring those aspects of themselves to the identities they improvise on stage and screen. When asked by a news reporter in 1980, "How do you get the best out of an actor?" he said, "You get them to do things they do well." He got them to be themselves, in the roles they play as someone else.

Besides rummaging through his closet and finding an old suit to give to Paul Reubens which became the trademark look for the outward identity of Pee Wee Herman, Gary helped Paul find within Paul's personality, the inward identity of Pee Wee Herman. Anyone could have worn Gary's suit, but only Paul could be Pee Wee.



Paul¹ and Gary

Gary was my older brother (born Gary Moore), and as it turns out, we ended up being mirror images in a way. Gary worked with students who know they're playing characters in an improvisational theatre production, built on nothing but created concepts, making everything up as they go along. They know it's not the 'intrinsically real world.' And by helping students know themselves, Gary helped them play their invented personalities, and create their invented worlds, in the conscious awareness of who they are beneath the roles they play, thus making the show in which they are starring much better and more fun.

Conversely....

I work with students who don't know they're playing characters in The Great Improv that is equally built on nothing but created concepts. They think it's the 'intrinsically real world.' They think that it's not all made up based on concepts suggested by millions of people over thousands of years. And by helping students know themselves - their Prior Identity - I'm helping them play their invented characters, and create their invented worlds within The Great Improv in the conscious awareness of who they really are beneath the roles they play, thus making the show in which they are starring, much better and more fun.

The Real World of Disneyland



I grew up not far from Disneyland in Southern California. When I was a small boy, the highlight of Summer vacation was when my dad would take me to Disneyland, drop me off when it opened, and pick me up when it closed at midnight. In those days a small child alone was not a cause to stop me from buying my own tickets and entering alone, or calling child protective services to report my father. There was no sense then, that there was any danger that some stranger disguised as a large mouse might sneak in and take a small child into a dark corner to do unspeakable things. Being completely alone, I was free to do exactly what I wanted, when I wanted to do it. Eight-year-olds alone weren't odd in the conceptual reality of 1960s America.

¹ JRussell123, CC BY-SA 3.0 <<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>>, via Wikimedia Commons
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And it was at Disneyland that I learned a valuable lesson about conceptual reality - the nature of what we normally regard as 'the real world,' that I didn't fully appreciate when I was eight.

I learned that the worst ride at Disneyland is the monorail.



That's because it broke the spell that overtook me as soon as I walked under the railroad bridge to enter the Magic Kingdom. Walking into Main St, I was suddenly transported into another conceptual reality - a world conceived by a creative genius who had complete control over how his conceptual reality would be built into the brick and mortar of what he called Disneyland. (It seems that his name was serendipitous for a Magic Kingdom. 'Smithland' just wouldn't sound so magical).

He conceived of and created a world where everything fit together seamlessly and flowed from one invented conceptual reality to the next. I walked through an idealised vision of small-town America, and then could choose at my own discretion to either go straight through a castle into a Fantasyland of fairy-tale rides, or turn left and enter Frontierland where I could ride pack mules, and where Tom Sawyer's Island beckoned a little boy and his imagination to run wild. Or I could have chosen to head

to Tomorrowland and take a trip to the moon, to the bottom of the sea, drive my own car, or go to Adventureland and take a dangerous trip down a river infested with angry hippos who were continually being shot at.

But the monorail broke the spell of the Magic Kingdom. It left Disney's conceptually-invented world and went outside of it and into Anaheim - dull, drab Anaheim - to head to the Disneyland Hotel before it returned to the Magic Kingdom with more paying customers.

At the moment it left the park and entered the parking lot, there was almost an audible, "*Ughh, the real world*" feeling that everyone on the ride would have felt at that moment. I sure did.

But really, Anaheim is no more 'the real world' than is Disneyland, and neither is it any less a conceptual invention than is Disneyland. The only difference between the places is that one conceptually-invented world was controlled by a creative genius surrounded by others of like mind, while the conceptually-invented world of the other was a hodgepodge of disjointed concepts from the minds of thousands of people over many years without magic or beauty being high on the list of governing principles. The moral to the story? We live in a made-up world living made-up identities, which makes it hard to see our Prior Identity.

4. A conceptual blindspot both caused by, and cured by, words.

The fourth reason it's so hard for a human brain to see what it really is, is because human brains are essentially a conceptual 'eye' with which the universe sees and tries to understand itself. And what is the one thing that any eye can't see? Itself. Unless it looks in a mirror.

All I've done with the students I see,
is hold up a conceptual mirror of language
that makes sense to a conceptual brain,
enabling the 'eye' of the universe to see
itself – to see what it is.

And the moment that this happens, the
'eye' of the universe suddenly sees that it is
in fact the 'I' of the universe - its conscious
self-aware brain. That it is the universe's
structure that enables the universe to
know it exists. And that is an epiphany
that can change everything for them.

And all it takes to see this, is words. Eyes
suddenly opened with no 'spiritual' exercises
or years of mediation or study. Just the
Yellow Brick Road of conceptual language
that leads to an Anti-Wizard of Oz, where
the little-self, hiding behind the curtain, is
revealed as the illusion, and the "great and
wonderful" Big Self, as the reality.

The students see that their little-self
identities are conceptual inventions, and
their Big Self, a sudden and amazing
conceptual realisation of a Prior Identity
that had been there all along.

And once they realise this, their entire
view of their relationship with all existence
transforms. No longer in a subject-object
relationship with a universe that isn't them,
they can see the wonder of what they are,
and can start to see the Great Improv for
the made-up world that it is.

And that brings us to the implications for
such a monumental shift in one's sense of
reality.



The Implications

So, what does all of this mean for the students who have had this realisation?

There is an immediate change in their countenance. They appear different, and talk about how they feel as if their eyes have opened. One said, "It's not too much for me to say that I feel enlightened." There is an immediate sense that whatever it was that had been weighing so heavily on them is suddenly lifted from their shoulders even though nothing has changed in their circumstances. And more often than not, they say that whatever trouble brought them into my office, it was well worth this discovery. One student who had been through an especially awful experience with the university that extended over several months of grinding anxiety, wrote this to me. "I'm so glad I went through this entire process. That everything that happened took place because I would've never have met you and I would never have gone through this life changing experience."

Another of the immediate effects is that it helps them to not take their degree less seriously, and to take it sincerely instead. That is, with less fear. So many students are so desperate to 'be someone.' To find an identity that 'means something.' An identity that is acceptable to whoever is important to them in the Great Improv.

And the primary reason that the question of 'what will I be?' is so powerful and can cause so much anxiety for them, is that the little-self identity is all they know. So, they worry themselves sick over what they may or may not become. And it's so ephemeral, vague and dependent on so many factors that can change in a heartbeat, that it's seldom 'good enough;' at least for long.

Seeing their Prior Identity doesn't cause them to lose their determination to get a degree and be whatever invented little identity they want to be in the Great Improv – but the grimness – the fear – is lessened or is gone. They suddenly see human society for what it is, and can play the game knowing it's a game that's being made up as it goes along, which is the only way a game is any fun.

I ask them if they've ever played Monopoly with someone who takes it seriously. Who forgets that it's a made-up world of concepts. Who gets mad if someone doesn't land on Boardwalk when they own it. For the ones who have played with someone like that, they agree that it takes all the joy out of the game. It's no fun. And that's how they've been playing the game of life prior to realising their Prior Identity.

Most of the students I see who are struggling, aren't struggling because they aren't taking their degree seriously – it's because they are! Fear is the very foundation of their degree. If they don't get it or do well enough in it, then everything that they've been counting on for their identity and meaning is at risk. So studying is done in fear that they might fail, which leads to finding distractions because studying is so miserable, which then leads to bad grades or even cheating when they've procrastinated too long, which then leads to failure. I see students who think they don't enjoy the subject itself anymore, when it is actually their fear that is making the subject unenjoyable. But were their little-self identity to always be mindful of their Prior Identity, it would enable peace of mind in their little-self, because it would allow them to approach their degree sincerely instead of seriously.

Why? Because realising that they are the cosmic structure that is the conceptual

intelligence of the universe, puts everything in perspective. Many of them simply start laughing when I bend forward in my chair, look them in their eyes and ask, "You're the self-awareness of the cosmos, and you're worried about a university degree?"

More than a few have simply replied to me with variations on a theme of, "It sounds so stupid now." Once they realise what they actually are, the need to become something of importance within The Great Improv loses its neediness, and transforms into a desire just for the sake of playing whatever role they play for whatever reason they want.

That is, they can play whatever identity they are playing at any moment, give it all the sincere dedication, love and attention they want, but in the realisation that it's just a role in a conceptually made-up world – not their fundamental self as the actor – and not let fear of what they might or might not become in that world be their constant companion, making studying miserable, which as I've said is usually what is behind the reason they're in trouble in the first place.

I ask them, what could they possibly become within this conceptually-constructed reality, that is anything remotely akin to what they already are, simply by virtue of having come into existence as a conceptual brain of the universe, against odds of 1 in $10^{2,500,000}$?

Inconceivable odds that every human being that's ever existed has beaten. But that few have realised on either a cognitive or an experiential level. When I was browsing through the comments of people who had read Neil deGrasse Tyson's book, a few mentioned that it made human beings seem tiny and insignificant when compared to the incomprehensible vastness of the

universe. But of course, 'tiny' is relative. Our sun is tiny compared to the star, UY Scuti, which could contain five billion suns. 5,000,000,000! So, I'd agree that we're tiny in size, but I would disagree that we're insignificant, because if Prof Tyson is right about us being "...stardust brought to life, and then empowered by the universe to figure itself out," which we obviously are, then the implications for our significance and for our meaning in the universe can't possibly be overstated.

In a million ways, students express the same existential concerns: "Who am I, and what's the point of my life?" I essentially give them all the same answer: "You seek identity? You're whatever started banging. You seek meaning? You're its self-aware brain. And if that's not enough, a degree won't help. And if that is enough, a degree isn't necessary. So either way, don't worry about the degree." And when they stop worrying, the degree is so much easier to get; or, to give up.

So, what could all of this mean for individuals who realise their Prior Identity?



What would happen if the 'little-self' that has existential concerns, were to meet the Big Self that doesn't, and unite in a way that enabled the little-self identities that we improvise as individuals, to experience life according to the nature of our Prior Identity?

That depends entirely on how much effort a person puts into making this a daily reality rather than a one-off realisation. The Great Improv is incredibly powerful, all-encompassing and overwhelmingly convincing. It's easy to get caught up and sucked into it again and forget what it really is, and what we really are. It takes determined, consistent, focused attention on a daily basis – just like anything that's worth changing about how we live, whether it's our diet, the amount of exercise we do, the amount of love we show, or any other practice that gives us a better life within The Great Improv. Prior Identity is a radically different view of reality, and as such it takes time for the brain that's been taken in for so long, to really see and experience that radically different view.

I've been contemplating and meditating on this concept for years now, and it's resulted in a lasting daily change in the way I see and relate with the world around me. It creates a sense of wonder that I experience every day. When I arise in the morning, I meditate for around an hour, and for a substantial part of that, I focus on my Prior Identity. And in doing that, I create an ever-deepening sense of who and what I really am. When I then get up from the cushion and walk across the street to the gym, I consciously look at the world around me – the plants; the birds; our star – not as a separate entity looking at 'other' entities, but as the self-awareness

of everything I'm seeing. If this structure of the universe that we call a brain and that goes by my name, is the conceptual self-awareness of the cosmos, then it's the conceptual self-awareness of the trees I walk past, the animals flying overhead and every insect crawling on the grass, and the Sun. When I look at the Sun, I realise that I'm it, looking at itself. That this amazing star has evented its own brain – Humanity – that not only perceives its own light, but conceives its own existence. And that is an amazing thing to know, feel and experience on a daily basis. I'm no longer living in a subject-object relationship with nature. And that's not a conceptual invention; it's a conceptual realisation that grows stronger with every day I make the effort to contemplate it. Understanding something is not enough – it needs to be experienced at a fundamental level. And that comes from effort to see the reality that has been there forever, but clouded by The Great Improv in which we are lost.

As I watch everyone furiously running around on the stage of The Great Improv, consumed with its millions of concepts that have been cobbled together, thinking that this conceptual reality is all there is to who they are, and the only place where meaning can be found, with no idea of their majesty and their oneness with all existence, I feel a sadness, because I've experienced what human life can feel like when the reality of what and who we are is realised.

It changes so many things. In big ways and small ways. Seemingly small that is, because it's the small ways that have a big impact on our experience of life, because the small things are where we mostly live. I used to get angry at other drivers on the road. I'd feel some kind of personal hurt and resentment when another driver tried to get past me in order to get to the next stoplight first. And feeling hurt and resentment are both examples of human

suffering. What a waste of the precious time we have to be a human brain. No more. Knowing and feeling that I am this amazing part of the universe that is its own conceptual brain, it appears obviously stupid and petty to be upset over such minutia as being a car-length further from a traffic light. I don't have to try to not be upset anymore; I'm just not. And it's because I know what I am. And I know that the little-self who used to get upset at such trivialities is just an invention of the brain that used to be fooled about whose brain it is. That the identity that goes by my name is just an illusion. That there is no Eugene to be upset. **That there is no feeler having feelings, sitting somewhere in this brain, behind its eyes and between its ears.**



But on a much deeper and foundational level, Experimental Existential Psychology (XXP) establishes the case for existential concerns being absolutely fundamental to human psychological states, both conscious and unconscious, and to the behaviour of individuals and groups, up to and including nations.

The 5 major existential concerns of: who and what I am; the sense of isolation from everyone and everything else; the sense of being tossed around by impersonal forces; the spectre of death; and a sense that we must find some meaning in all of this chaos through whatever means possible, are addressed by XXP, but only in relation to the little-self identity - the invented and

ever-elusive 'me' that is limited to an "ego wrapped in a bag of skin"⁵ that goes by the name I was given.

And the irony is that the existential concerns that XXP is attempting to alleviate, are by its own admission, concerns of a self that is only a conceptual mirage. That is, XXP recognises that this self is built on the shifting sands of individual, group and cultural conceptual subjectivity. As the Handbook of XXP states,

*"People's understanding of who they are emerges out of a complex interaction of genetic, social, and cultural influences. The self changes throughout life, and is both one thing and many things. We each have private identities, relational identities, occupational identities, recreational identities, spiritual identities, age, ethnicity, and gender-based identities, and other group-based identities. Our identities affect every significant thing we do."*⁶

So there we have it. The identities on which XXP experiments, and for which it attempts to find psychological wellbeing, are illusory in the final analysis, yet those identities affect "every significant thing we do." The Big Self simply doesn't exist in XXP. It's the elephant that's not in the room, but should be. There should be experimentation into how a person's self-awareness as the universe's self-awareness, truly experienced and made into one's primary sense of self and identity, might affect one's whole life – how one feels, thinks and acts – in "every significant thing we do."

How would such a huge shift in conscious self-awareness impact on all of the human states of mind and behavioural tendencies that XXP identifies, either conscious or unconscious? XXP has established the impact of existential concerns on some of

the greatest challenges facing the planet, and the overwhelming positive changes that the nurturing of what they refer to as the Authentic Self can bring. But their Authentic Self is limited to the social self; the named self; the invented self. The self that is in the end, a misty mental invention.

Imagine a whole approach to psychology that had at its core, the simple fact of what a human brain actually is: a material structure of the universe that is the universe's own self-awareness – its own brain. And you can't be something's brain and not be that something. So since we're the brain of whatever started banging, then that is what we are.

Now there is an identity that is not dependent on an unstable and conceptually diverse social world; a self that is not isolated from anything because it's everything; a self that can see the made-up concepts of The Great Improv for what they are, and that isn't controlled by them; and finally and perhaps most importantly, a self that can find intrinsic meaning in simply being as a verb, what we are as a noun: which is being understanding. Now wouldn't that create a different improv than the mess we have made through ignorance of our true nature as a structure of the cosmos that is understanding, itself.

This is such a life-changing concept, full of profound implications for each of us, easily communicated to children through creative conceptual language, but entirely ignored in our educational systems. Including at universities, where this 'ignor-ance' continues, and where I have seen thousands of students suffer terrible depression and anxiety as they live in fear of what may become of their little-self – the only self-awareness they've ever been taught. Prior Identity should be the first thing we teach our children – who and what they actually

are – long before they get to university and worry themselves sick over what they may or may not become within The Great Improv that they don't know they're in.

And the irony of this being ignored in educational institutions, is that since a human brain is the universe trying to understand itself, then educational institutions, especially universities, are a focal point of that attempt. A collection of thousands of highly intelligent conceptual brains of the cosmos learning, researching and teaching in an attempt to increase understanding of the cosmos in every faculty from arts to social sciences, science, engineering, IT, medicine – everything. But mostly never actually realising the wonder of what is happening – of whose brain it is that is doing the learning, researching and teaching – because just like most human brains, they also have been fooled into believing that their brain belongs to the name someone gave it, and which is so proudly displayed on their research papers and books. Just like the young aerospace student, who was not only blind to the fact that he had been an astronaut from the day he was born, but who also couldn't see that the universe he wanted to explore, was actually himself. Imagine a university that realised that it is a collective attempt by the cosmos itself to, in the words of Neil Degrasse Tyson, "...figure itself out...." A university aware of its universality. Now that would be a university worthy of the title.



And finally, what could it mean for Humanity itself, if we could see that we are the conceptual brain of the cosmos, and that Earth is the life-support system of that brain?

Prior Identity isn't just a personal awakening that has had such huge implications for me, for the students that walk into my office and for anyone else who sees it. It has huge implications for Humanity, where existential concerns are fast becoming existential terrors. In the Handbook of XXP, death is the first of the five major existential concerns to be discussed, and within that discussion, the ways that humans manage our fear around the fact that we conceive that we are going to die, is central. Terror Management Theory (TMT) tells us that mortality salience – the awareness of the inevitability of our own death – affects the way people think and act in profoundly important ways.

One of those ways, and central to the question of identity and especially to the concept of Prior Identity, is that mortality salience causes people to gather evermore tightly with those who share their identity and accompanying worldview, and with evermore hostility toward those who don't. Comfort comes from being in the group that sees things 'correctly.' Something to hold onto in a world falling apart, with death from climate catastrophe, pandemics, political instability and war, flooding our minds at every turn. There has never been a time when worldwide mortality salience is so much a part of our daily lives because of the internet, and never a time when opposing identities are meeting head-on with such increasing ferocity, also because of the internet and increasingly, because people are on the move due to all of the above. East vs West; left vs right; this culture vs that culture; this ideology vs that ideology;

this definition of gender vs that definition of gender; this version of sexuality vs that version of sexuality; this religion vs that religion vs secularism; *et cetera* and *ad nauseum*. And it seems that not only are identities increasingly coming into contact and conflict with each other, but it seems that they are multiplying like rabbits. And so many of them are based on criticism of the way that some other identity is using words, which of course as we know, are the building blocks of whatever conceptual reality the users of those words want to build, leading to mutual-cancelling by the concept police within each camp. And related to this rise in conceptual conflict and toxic tribalism, TMT explains the current rise of demagogues. "People... minimize existential fear by investing in exalted leaders....the person merges himself with a revered leader who affirms the meanings, values, and positive identity of the group."

And so, like a bunch of 'Karens' and 'Kevins' we simply stand there with our mouths open, screaming our opposing worldviews at each other from our respective improvisational stages, playing out opposing concepts, our ears tightly shut, lest we hear something that makes us doubt the correctness of the way we see things.

This essentially describes our social and political world at this very moment – increasingly fractured by opposing identities that foster hatred toward each other and that is seemingly getting worse by the week. Cocooned in our information bubbles, hearing only those concepts we already agree with, we often have no idea what the other concepts actually are. And because everyone is so angry, even a reasonable concept sounds unreasonable. Understanding is fast becoming extinct among a species whose brain is understanding, itself. Identity politics is a toxic brew that is poisoning the very self-

awareness of the universe, itself. Ignorant of these predicted dynamics when mortality salience is afoot, leading to no effective antidote being sought for the toxicity, Humanity is proving itself incapable of the unity needed to save the life support system of the universe's brain, while making conventional and nuclear war increasingly likely, by which much of life will perish in mushroom clouds of ignorance of the true nature of what and who Humanity is.

If ever Humanity needed a paradigm shift in how it sees itself, that could deliver us from our deadly tribal short-sightedness, it's now. We need an overriding sense of human macro-identity that can counter the increasing flood of micro-identities in which the word is awash, because a house divided against itself will not stand. Humanity and its life support system is one house, and when you light a fire in one room, you light it in every room.

Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) is the strategy we developed for not using nuclear weapons, and so far, it has worked. What's the point of destroying the other guy if in doing so, you destroy yourself, not simply because the other guy is shooting missiles back at you, but because those kinds of weapons spread deadly poison that ignores the conceptual borders between the invented and illusory identities we call 'nations.' That it destroys the biosphere upon which every living thing depends. But we've been short-sighted in thinking that MAD should only apply to nuclear weapons. I think we need to apply MAD to everything we do against any perceived 'other,' or for any perceived 'self,' because the insanity of MAD is also its sanity – and that is, its foundation in reality: that everything is really one thing.

Anyone who thinks that they can put other

countries 'second' and not do themselves harm, doesn't understand the basic truth upon which MAD rests – that what we do to anyone, we do to ourselves. We need to see what Adi Da called Prior Unity in his book, "Not Two Is Peace" – that everything is really one thing. We all know that in nature everything is necessarily interconnected, but what is the difference between everything being "necessarily interconnected," and everything being "one thing?" Nothing. Except the words we use. Are hearts and lungs separate things that are necessarily interconnected, or are they one thing we call the cardiovascular system? Words – conceptual language – create our entire sense of reality. And our sense of reality creates the way we live.

But this Prior Unity is hard to see, and not only because we are raised in Einstein's illusory conceptual prison where the way we say things causes us to view ourselves as new and separate events in a universe that isn't us. It is also hard to want to see Prior Unity, because of those conceptually invented identities within the Great Improv onto which we cling for a sense of security, and which we see as often irreconcilable and not possible nor desirable to unite.

Prior Identity offers an identity that is supra-cultural, supra-social and supra-national; a super-identity that can provide the self-esteem and meaning that XXP shows is needed by humans, above the variations that invented identities provide, and over which we're willing to bomb each other out of existence, and which keep us from joining forces to stop the destruction of the life-support system on which this amazing conceptual brain of the cosmos depends.

Once a person sees Prior Identity, then their ability and desire to see Prior Unity is a piece of cake, because seeing our Prior

Identity, easily reveals the oneness of our own existence with the rest of creation. In short, I've found that it is easier to get people to want to see themselves as this amazing, grand and majestic structure of the cosmos in the first instance, than it is to first get them to want to lessen the inviolability of the only identities they know, for the sake of unity.

That is, identity is a huge existential concern for most people, not unity. So, offering them Prior Identity is the easiest first step to guide them to see their Prior Unity. From the reports I've received from students who have had dramatic responses upon realising their Prior Identity, it would seem that a prominent theme is the sudden disappearance of the illusion of separation between themselves and everything else. The sudden disappearance of 'other.' As my colleague at the university said once, "This seems to have an effect on people similar to psychedelic drugs like psilocybin."

Our Prior Identity could trump all other invented identities to which we cling and attach symbols of separation. Prior identity trumps even the staunchest nationalist's obsessive need to gaze in the magic mirror and ask, "Who's the greatest of them all?". The conceptual realisation of Prior Identity trumps the temporary conceptual inventions we currently call Russia, Ukraine, China, Taiwan and America. Yet for those invented and transient geopolitical identities, upon which we plant little flags and build forts like little boys at play, we are willing to end the very existence of the self-awareness of existence itself. The fact that we have nuclear weapons of mass destruction aimed at each other over these transient identities, demonstrates the profound ignorance in which we live; the ignorance of our Prior Identity.

An identity that if realised and shared

by enough people, could create a new paradigm to understand Humanity's place in the universe. That's an audacious proposal, but if we're going to commit humanicide, and it's obvious that this is precisely the path we are on, we need to know who and what we are killing. And maybe that will be enough to stop us. Like the student sitting in my office who had been tormented by suicidal ideation for a very long time, said to me, "I'll never be able to kill myself now. Not after knowing what I am." We need to know what we are.

According to the Handbook of XXP, "...a sense of common Humanity...can reverse the violence-promoting effects of existential threat..."⁷ There it is. The antidote to the violence is a sense of common Humanity. If we can conceive the almost inconceivable thing that Humanity is – if we can conceive of Humanity's Prior Identity; of what this brain actually is - we might step back from the brink and do things differently.

If other conceptual brains like ours have come and gone by their own hands in other corners of the cosmos, it's most likely because they got so caught up in the plethora of identities, worldviews and associated dramas that their conceptual brains had invented within their own Great Improvs, that their Prior Identity was hidden from their view, and they killed each other and their planets, never realising what they actually were.

It would be inconceivable to believe that if they did know, that they still would act as if they didn't. Maybe Humanity can be different. Maybe we can experience a conceptual realisation that wakes us up from the nightmare that's been dreamed up by brains that haven't known who they are.

Endnotes

1 It is not an assertion of a collective consciousness, collective unconscious, or any form of invisible human consciousness that transcends individual human minds. Rather, this idea employs the word "Humanity" in its conventional sense, referring to human beings as a species, collectively.

We are referring to the verifiable, empirical fact that individual human brains collectively share concepts through conceptual language. Through collaboration and conceptual language, the total sum of human knowledge and capability grows exponentially beyond what any individual could achieve on their own. This is observable in various domains, such as the development of the internet, scientific collaboration, and technological progress, where the collective intelligence of humanity has led to remarkable achievements. In this sense, Humanity can be thought of as 'a brain.' Prior Identity does not support or challenge any of the many theories related to this idea, such as the noosphere or the global brain. Prior Identity is only concerned with seeing Humanity, whether as its parts or as a whole, as being a brain "of the universe" in the sense that it is the universe conceiving of itself, as opposed to it being simply a brain "in the universe" conceiving of something that isn't it. That is, as if it were in a subject-object relationship with the rest of the universe.

2 "Buddha's Brain: the practical neuroscience of happiness, love, and wisdom," by Rick Hanson with Richard Mendius. New Harbinger Publications, Inc., 2009, p.213

3 This has nothing to do with any concept of a soul or spirit. That is another matter entirely and not within the scope of this discussion.

4 For more on this, read, *The Self Illusion: How the Social Brain Creates Identity* by Bruce Hood, Oxford University Press, 2013.

5 Alan Watts

6 "Handbook of Experimental Existential Psychology," Edited by Jeff Greenberg, Sander L. Koole, and Tom Pyszczynski, May 26, 2004 p. 36

7 Ibid, p.30, citing Motyl, M., Pyszczynski, T., Cox, C., Siedel, A., & Maxfield, M. (2007). One big family: The effects of mortality salience and a sense of common humanity on prejudice.