

# How Prior Identity Came to Be



**Prior  
identities  
Lost;**

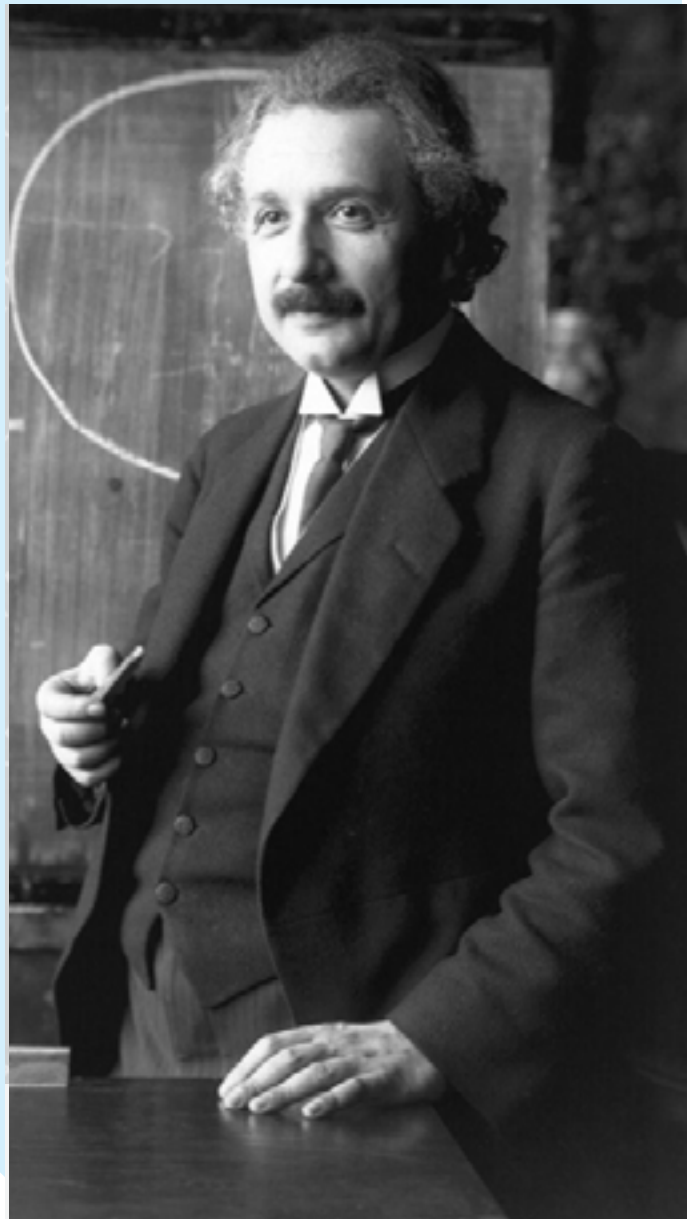
**Prior Identity  
Found**

“A human being is part of a whole, called by us the “Universe.” He experiences himself and his feelings as separate from the rest; this is an optical illusion of his consciousness. The quest for liberation from this prison is the only objective...”

Albert Einstein

“We are stardust brought to life, then empowered by the universe to figure itself out...”<sup>1</sup>

Neil deGrasse Tyson



# Human Identity & The Great Improv

This is a story about human identity. This identity one moment and that identity the next.

In the end as ephemeral as clouds, impossible to ever pin down.

And it's a story about the stage on which those identities are played out: The Great Improvisational Theatre - "**The Great Improv**" as I'll refer to it in this story - that is human society. For just like in an improvisational theatre, where the actors have no idea of what story they will play out as the audience provides them with the concepts with which to work, this is precisely what human society has always been.

Concepts have produced all of human innovations, philosophies, religions, ways of living and identities - so many identities - that we ascribe



to human beings and to Humanity itself. Just like in an improvisational theatre, we live in world that is all made up out of concepts. A world that is being improvised every second of every day.

## Conceptual Language: A Human Superpower

And we do this with the most amazing and important invention ever made by human brains that - like fish don't notice water - we never really notice it because it surrounds our every waking moment: **conceptual language**. That which you and I are doing right now - using squig-

gles (or sounds if we were talking) in billions of combinations to mean billions of different things, whether those things are concrete or abstract. Whether we're making sounds and squiggles that refer to a chair, to a way to make iron, to directions to the corner shop, or that refer to the meaning of life.

We take conceptual language for granted, since we do it from the time we're a couple of years old, engage in it constantly in our waking hours through speaking, listening, reading or thinking, and don't see it for the superpower that it is. Other animals do it. Dolphins and whales use conceptual language.

But we humans are on another level altogether. Highly conceptual brains can conceive of that which doesn't yet exist and then invent it, like a spear, a village or a space telescope; or they can conceive of that which already does exist, like gravity, microbes or black holes, and thus bring it into their conscious awareness.

## Arising together

**A**nd human society – The Great Improv – has been both the creator and the outcome of this amazing invention. Human interaction created conceptual language in the first place, and conceptual language has created human society based on a myriad of concepts. Conceptual language and The Great Improv co-arose. But as I'll attempt to show, they have each been both our vision and freedom, and our blindness and prison.

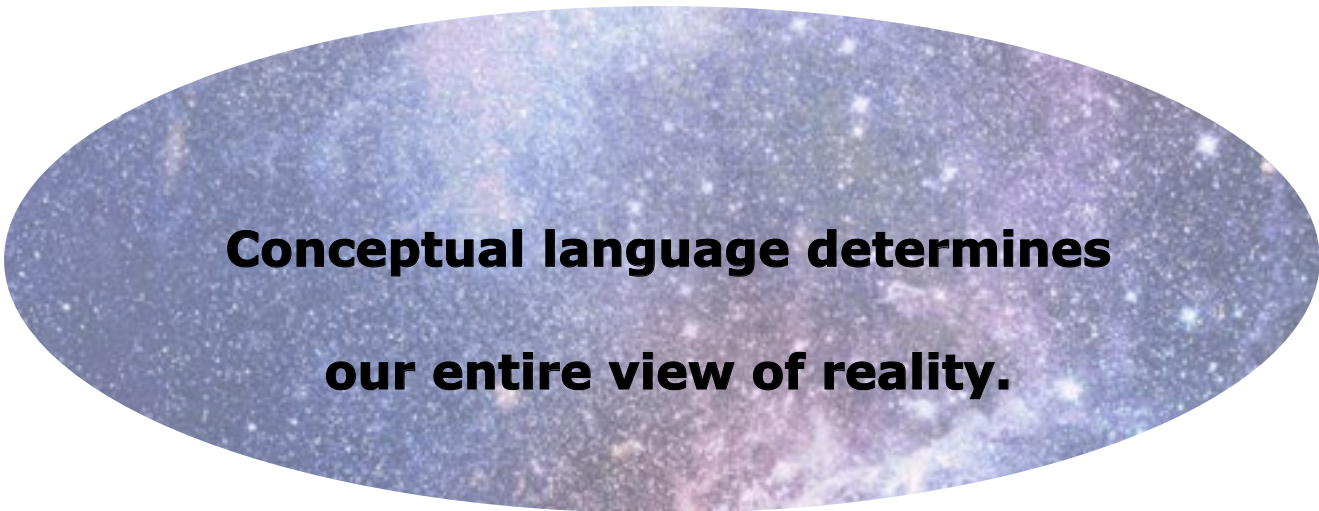
Conceptual language is the means of escape from the iron cage that it has created. I once had a student who had been expelled from his aerospace engineering course for failing too much, brought to my office in tears.

**"My dream of being an astronaut is over,"** he sobbed. I leaned forward, **"But you're already an astronaut."** *With a look of puzzlement and a bit of irritation, he replied, "What!?"* **I said, "You live on a self-contained biosphere, travelling through space at 67,000 miles per hour, orbiting a star so closely that you can feel its heat. You've made 22 orbits around a star and you haven't noticed that makes you an astronaut?"**

His eyes widened, a smile arose, and despair turned to wonder. "Why haven't I ever seen this," he asked. It's because of conceptual language. The word "astronaut" had been much too narrowly conceived as a person in a white suit in a small metal capsule.







**Conceptual language determines  
our entire view of reality.**

All I did was widen the concept with the same tool - conceptual language - that had previously blinded him to what he'd been from the moment he was born.

Tweak it just a little bit, and like the Hubble Space Telescope that at first was seeing blurred images of the cosmos because of a mistake in the mirror less than 1/50th the thickness of a human hair that was then fixed, things suddenly come into view with pristine clarity.

The young astronaut walked into my office in tears, and walked out with a spring in his step and a smile on his face. The world looked different because of conceptual language.

It was one small step to re-conceptualise one word - "astronaut;" but one giant leap in his perception of what he'd always been, but had never seen.

But mostly, this is a story of how the evaporation of my prior identities



within The Great Improv, led finally to the realisation of a Prior Identity that isn't ephemeral. It's an identity that was prior to any of those identities that a sociocultural world would offer to me, but unseen until my prior identities had dissolved and I could see clearly with no clouds in the way. It's an identity that isn't a conceptual invention, but rather a conceptual realisation, and which has produced the often-dramatic epiphanies experienced by so many of the university students with whom I've shared this vision of themselves – this vision of Humanity itself – over the last 7 years.

According to Experimental Existential Psychology<sup>2</sup> (XXP), human beings have five major existential concerns: Identity, death, isolation, control and freedom, and meaning.<sup>3</sup>

## Or to pose these concerns as a single question:

***Who is this 'me' that has come into existence for only a few short years before I die; who feels ultimately alone in my internal world of thought and emotion; who is supposedly making 'free' choices for which I'm held responsible, while being influenced in the choices I make by social forces and mental activity that I may not even be consciously aware of; and what's the meaning of this 'me'?***



And of these five, which are linked in a myriad of ways, I have found that “Who am I?” and “How can I find meaning in who I am?”, stand out as preeminent within the minds of the roughly 13,000+ students who have walked into my office over the years.

But as Einstein wrote, we are in a prison of illusion, unable to see – to be conscious – of what and ‘who’ a human being really is in the cosmic scheme of things. And so, we seek identity and meaning within our social and cultural worlds. Because we are so involved in our identities in those worlds, we have difficulty seeing our place – our Prior Identity – in the vastness of an inconceivably old universe, 90 billion light years across; tiny organisms on a pale blue dot amongst at least 2,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (sextillion) stars.

**We're always more open to the big questions of existence when things aren't going so well in The Great Improv in which we are always playing the starring role.**

**A** situation similar to the students with whom I've shared this vision. For 16 years they've come to my office facing problems that they fear could damage or dash their dreams of that all-important sense of identity that they have come to university to find, secure or maintain.

And so, they are open to a concept that turns their reality upside down and offers a vision that was inconceivable when they walked into my office. But it was around eight or nine years ago that what I now call Prior Identity first started to develop as a way of seeing reality within my own mind. And then I started

to occasionally share it with students. It isn't a new concept – but an old one said in a new way that seems to resonate with people, and often quite quickly.

And as time went on, and I could see that the responses from the students were becoming increasingly profound and sometimes dramatic, slowly but surely Prior Identity became something that I would share as often as I could.

These students have served as both an experiment and my training ground of sorts, in how to best communicate the concept in the most simple, understandable and effective language, practicing on students from a variety of cultural, national and academic identities and worldviews, discovering the most fundamental points to make in the shortest period of time.

In fact, very recently after addressing a student's immediate problem, I sensed that he would be open to hearing about who he really is, but I only had 9 minutes before my next appointment. I decided to give it a go. I'd never tried to share Prior Identity in 9 minutes. His head began shaking back and forth as he was suddenly hit by the magnitude of the seismic shift in his view, once I helped him jump down from the improvisational stage on which he was born, and which he'd assumed to be the 'real world,' and to sit instead in the front row and see that world stage for what it is. And himself for what he is. And Humanity for what it is.



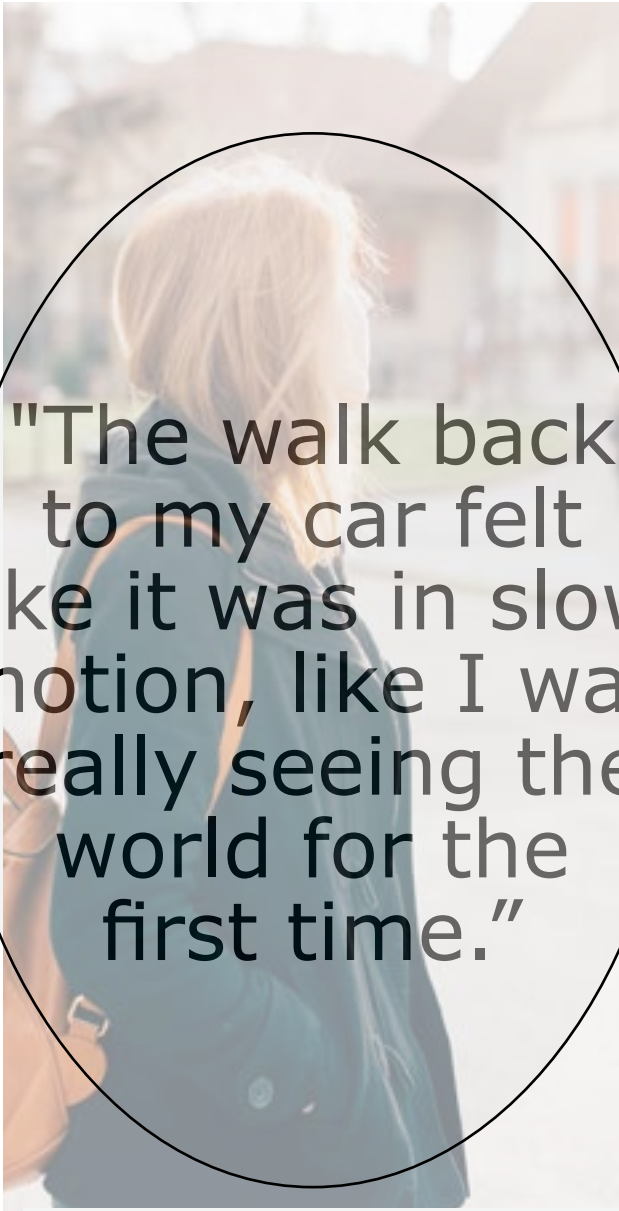
## That student's case isn't unusual, except in the shortness of the time it took to happen.

A sample of some of the students who have reported similar experiences, follow. I put these to you only because of the extraordinary nature of the experiences, and because they have been the primary impetus for me to share Prior Identity with the wider world.

One student from a southeast Asian country simply stood up from the chair next to my desk and said, "I can't describe what just happened in my brain." Another wrote, "Thank you for giving me the greatest gift in my life. I just am speechless and I am still trying to look at things around me and process everything."

One said to me that the words I'd spoken to him in the morning came back to him as he was at work later that day, and that suddenly he went into a state that he described as, "Oneness with everyone and everything around me," and which lasted for 4 or 5 hours.

Still another's knees began to buckle as he left my office to walk through the waiting room, and I had to catch him as he started to fall. I asked him if he was ok, and all he said was, "It's



"The walk back to my car felt like it was in slow motion, like I was really seeing the world for the first time."



a whole new world.” An international student with whom I shared this on a Zoom call, wrote, “When I went outside, I found a genuine connection with others around me. This was a very joyful experience. Looking at the sun, trees, or anything else is different now.” Another wrote to me, “It’s just crazy how you look at everything in such a different perspective when you’re awake. It’s a new world.” This kind of response has been repeated over and over. They had come to my office to protect or salvage their place in a university, and left having seen their place in a universe.

Many of these students have encouraged me over the years to take this to a larger audience. They’ve told me that more people need to hear this. One said to me imme-

diately after she realised what she was hearing, “Why are you telling me this, and not the whole world?”

But having been through the trauma of having my social identity dissolve in front of me on two occasions, I really haven’t wanted to take this concept public and have to tell my story, and thus relive and reveal those traumas. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and its sibling, Complex Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (CPTSD), are very harsh mistresses that never really go away, even with years of therapy, study and meditation. I have found that they can only be managed, and too often not well.

But the irony is that the fear, shame and blame is felt only by those identities that







**So, this story is about the shock, the wonder, the peace and the possibilities that can come when our Prior Identity is finally seen by each of us and all of us in its clear simplicity, and in its radically different paradigm of who we are, that's been hiding in plain view.**

**But as the next chapter will demonstrate as I explain the concept in a nutshell, there are four major impediments that keep this answer from being easily conceived by a highly conceptual brain. And all four work together in a feedback loop to help keep us in the dark. I hope that the words I choose can help shine a bit of light into the darkness in which Humanity now finds itself. I hope that at least some people will find themselves in what I have to say, and in a shorter time than I took, and with fewer mistakes than I made.**

I claim now to have never really existed anyway, except as concepts played out in The Great Improv. When I experience a deep realisation of my Prior Identity, the fear either isn't there, or if it is, I easily see through the illusion of the small invented self who is so afraid. If my point to the students is that their small invented self is the illusion – real, but not real - and that their Prior Identity is the reality, then I cannot keep these concepts hidden in my office to protect a self that I claim is an illusion. I have to either live as if what I'm saying is true, or not say it. And I can't not say it.

# Endnotes

**1 "Astrophysics for People in a Hurry," Pub by W. W. Norton & Company, 2017**

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

**3 Concerns having to do with our existence.**