

SPECULATIONS



The Reality Club

John Brockman
Editor

PRENTICE
HALL
PRESS

New York London Toronto Sydney Tokyo Singapore

Media- Neutral



WIM COLEMAN
AND PAT PERRIN
FEATURING
DANIEL C. DENNETT
AS HIMSELF

So it really was true! I was just a helpless fictional character, trapped in some clumsily written novel or short story—or maybe even some preposterous movie script no producer in his right mind would ever put on film. But if I was just ink trails on a page, how could I be conscious? Was I conscious? And how was I supposed to live with it? I had to talk to somebody, and there was only one man I could think of. That was philosopher Daniel Dennett at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts.

FADE IN:

On HECTOR GLASCO, wearing a hat and an overcoat, climbing a long flight of stairs. Mournful, bluesy saxophone music plays in the background.

GLASCO (Voice-over)

It was Monday in L.A. The kind of Monday where you don't dare draw a breath. If they took all the ozone out of the air I was breathing and put it back where it belonged, the world would be a safer place for sunbathers.

GLASCO reaches a stairwell door and enters a long hallway.

GLASCO (Voice-over)

Yeah, Monday. The worst day of my work week. In my business, there ought to be a law. No Mondays. Period.

GLASCO comes up to his office door, on which is written:

HECTOR GLASCO, M.D.
CLINICAL PSYCHOTHERAPIST

GLASCO (Voice-over)

My name's Glasco. Hector Glasco. I'm a psychiatrist. Psychiatrists hate Mondays.

Glasco fumbles wearily with his keys and saunters into his front office. He opens up his appointment book and scans the names of his patients.

GLASCO (Voice-over)

So who was it going to be today? Father Larry, the flasher priest? Rudy, the Peeping Tom talk show host? Or Cindy, the shy housewife with a private compulsion for whipping cream and leather? Whoever it was, I could be sure of one thing: Monday would bring out the worst in them. It always did.

There is a THUMP. Glasco looks toward the door, where a folded copy of the *L.A. Times* has just fallen through the mail slot.

GLASCO (Voice-over)

But this Monday would be different. I was going to get a little vacation from all that. It was going to be the kind of vacation I didn't want.

Glasco picks up the newspaper and opens it. The following headline is sprawled across the front page:

Deconstructionist Critic Goes Insane
Tenth Scholar Struck Down This Month

Glasco sees the picture of the critic in question—a gentle, scholarly-looking man in a bow tie. Glasco shudders.

GLASCO (Voice-over)

Yeah, there's nothing a psychiatrist hates more on a Monday than to find out that one of his star patients has wound up in the psych ward. It puts a damper on his whole day.

CUT TO:

EXT.—THE VISITORS' PARKING LOT OUTSIDE THE PSYCHIATRIC HOSPITAL.

Glasco parks his car and walks into the unattractive, clinical-looking main building.

CUT TO:

INT.—A HALLWAY INSIDE THE HOSPITAL.

Glasco is walking down the hallway with another THERAPIST, who is wearing the proverbial white coat.

THERAPIST IN WHITE COAT

I'm sorry you had to find it out from the *Times*, Glasco. I guess our staff didn't know who to call when he flipped out last night. When these literary critics go, it's just like that.

GLASCO

It's okay. It's just that kind of Monday.

They reach a heavy, iron door.

GLASCO

He's been violent, I take it.

THERAPIST IN WHITE COAT

Well, he's under heavy sedation just at the moment. It'll wear off pretty soon. Think you can handle him? These deconstructionists can really go berserk on you.

GLASCO

I'll just have to risk it.

The great door opens, creaking noisily. Glasco steps into the padded cell.

THERAPIST IN WHITE COAT

If you need any help, just scream like crazy and pound on the walls.

GLASCO

Thanks. I'll take it from here.

The door closes behind him. Glasco is alone with his PATIENT, the utterly innocuous gentleman whose picture we saw earlier. At the moment, he happens to be wearing a straitjacket and is strapped to the wall.

PATIENT

(trying to be amiable)

So! At least I made my appointment this morning, eh, Doc?

GLASCO

Boris, Boris, Boris.

We gather from this that the patient's name is Boris.

BORIS

Don't get mad at me, Doc. I can't handle that. I really can't.

GLASCO

So you were messing around with deconstructionist theory again, huh? I thought we decided not to do that anymore.

BORIS

It's not what you think, Doc. This time it was different. This time I found out something really important.

GLASCO

Yeah?

BORIS

A foray into experimental criticism! I found out I was a fictional character. I found out *everybody's* a fictional character. Let me tell you how it happened. You know how we use nonreferential methods in deconstructionist criticism? Not even the author matters! Well, I decided to apply those same methods to my life—to deconstruct my own life, you see, without referring to anything outside it! This is what happened . . .

Boris's ravings fade away. We watch him speak animatedly—or at least as animatedly as one can when one's arms and legs are immobile. Glasco listens with increasing alarm and surprise.

GLASCO (Voice-over the preceding)

So that's when the horrible truth came through. The guy wasn't crazy at all! He'd just made a solid, academic argument for a simple fact that I'd been trying to ignore all my life. He'd figured out that I was purely fictional—that my whole world was purely fictional.

A MONTAGE OF SHOTS:

Glasco runs desperately down the hallway, out of the building, jumps into his car, and drives frantically to the airport. He buys a ticket and gets on the first flight to Massachusetts. We see him restlessly sipping Scotch and munching on macadamia nuts on the plane. A little

tipsily, he squeezes the arm of the man sitting next to him, to see if he's real. His neighbor is not pleased. Then we see Glasco scurrying across the Tufts University campus. He charges into an office and excitedly shouts at a secretary, who seems to give him directions. Glasco rushes out.

GLASCO (Voice-over the preceding)

So it really was true! I was just a helpless fictional character, trapped in some clumsily written novel or short story—or maybe even some preposterous movie script no producer in his right mind would ever put on film. But if I was just ink trails on a page, how could I be conscious? *Was* I conscious? And how was I supposed to live with it? I had to talk to somebody, and there was only one man I could think of. That was philosopher Daniel Dennett at Tufts University in Medford, Massachusetts. I'd read Dennett's book *Brainstorms*, an extraordinary collection of essays on the nature of the brain. Clearly, this man knew a lot of the ins and outs of human consciousness. Maybe he could help me with my quandary. During my trip to Massachusetts, I kept pinching myself to see if I was awake—or even there. I started pinching other people, too. I was afraid my whole world would vanish. When I got to Dennett's office, his secretary told me he was in a seminar. I couldn't wait around till he got out. I had to see him right away.

INT.—A HALLWAY AT TUFTS UNIVERSITY

Glasco walks down the hall, looking for Daniel Dennett's seminar room. His FOOTSTEPS ECHO weirdly down the hall.

GLASCO'S POINT OF VIEW

He wanders on down the hallway, looking into one classroom after another. In one, he sees a rotund instructor writing elaborate mathematical formulas on the blackboard.

INSTRUCTOR #1

. . . so as we can see, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle shows that our ignorance about reality can actually arise out of our attempts to *measure* reality—

(seeing Glasco)

—or perhaps *you'd* care to enlighten us, Mr.—?

GLASCO

No, no. I was looking for somebody else.

Embarrassed, Glasco moves on.

GLASCO (Voice-over)

I left in a hurry. Uncertainty wasn't a subject I needed a lecture on.
I was already an expert.

He looks into another classroom and sees a pompous literature professor, spectacles perched on a beak of a nose, hair tousled in the passion of his own eloquence, reading to his students from a huge volume of Shakespeare.

INSTRUCTOR #2

. . . These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd tow'rs, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded—
(seeing Glasco)

I do hope I'm not disturbing you.

GLASCO

(embarrassed again)

No, no. Not at all.

The professor continues as Glasco walks away.

INSTRUCTOR #2

And, like this insubstantial pageant faded . . .

GLASCO (Voice-over)

I didn't hang around there, either. He was just getting to the "We are such stuff as dreams are made on" bit. I knew it was more truth than poetry.

Glasco moves on to another classroom, in which another, more amiable professor addresses his class. This, in fact, is DANIEL DENNETT.

DENNETT

(to his students)

. . . so now that I've won my suit under the Freedom of Information Act, I am at liberty to reveal for the first time a curious episode in my life—

GLASCO

Excuse me, uh—

The entire seminar turns to look at him.

GLASCO

(horribly intimidated)

—are you Professor Dennett?

DENNETT

(politely)

Yes.

GLASCO

Could I, uh, speak with you for a moment?

DENNETT

Certainly. My seminar will be over in forty-five minutes.

GLASCO

No, it's really very urgent. You see, I—

(summoning up his courage)

I've discovered that I'm a fictional character.

In unison, the students do an enormous double-take at Glasco.

CUT TO:

EXT.—TUFTS CAMPUS

Glasco and Dennett sit on a bench in the cool spring air, discussing Glasco's latest dilemma.

GLASCO

... so how can I possibly be conscious if I exist only on paper?

DENNETT

First of all, I don't think you exist only on paper. You may be a fictional character, but it seems to me that you also exist in other media as well.

GLASCO

For example?

DENNETT

Well, certainly, Hamlet isn't made out of ink. In fact, Hamlet's existence is quite media-neutral at this point.

GLASCO

(puzzling over this)

Yeah?

DENNETT

Not originally.

GLASCO

But now he's in the media of millions of people's imaginations, isn't he? The media of all sorts of different theater and film productions, classrooms, and—

DENNETT

And that's important.

Inexplicably, a chess board appears between them. As Glasco and Dennett move about, the pieces seem to change in shape and material.

DENNETT

In that regard, Hamlet is rather like a chess piece. Some chess pieces are made out of ivory or wood, some out of metal, but of course people can play chess just in their heads. And when they do, then the white bishop that's on the white square isn't made out of anything. Still, there always has to be a medium. It might be patterns of excitation in the brain or it might be ink trails on a page.

Glasco looks a little relieved.

GLASCO

Well, if I started out as ink trails on a page, the likelihood is that I've resonated out from that through a number of different readers who may have communicated about me in a lot of different ways, expanding on that fiction!

DENNETT

Indeed.

GLASCO

That's very reassuring. The idea of being ink on paper is a rather terrifying thought—a rather deterministic thought.

DENNETT

It's rather demeaning, yes. And, of course, it is true that most characters have a primary relation to one body, which no other character can share with them, and to which they sort of have squatter's rights. And, I gather from what you say, that's not true of you. You have to share your primary body medium with at least one other character.

Glasco's discouragement returns.

GLASCO

I'm afraid so.

DENNETT

Indeed, perhaps with a character who, if asked, would say yes, he was your "author."

GLASCO

That's exactly what concerns me.

DENNETT

Well, let's put it this way. You have a biography, don't you?

GLASCO

Yes. I'm certainly convinced I do.

DENNETT

There are lots of biographies around. In fact, there are rather more biographies than there are people—that is to say, more than there are human bodies—because each human body generates at least one biography, and then some human bodies generate a whole lot of others. Novelists, for instance, generate quite a few.

GLASCO

Certainly.

DENNETT

But sometimes people who are not novelists—that is, human bodies that are not novelists—will generate more than one biography. For instance, multiple personality disorder sufferers often generate half a dozen, twenty, or thirty different biographies. And those have an existence that is, oh, sometimes partly on paper, partly in other media. But what makes you think that some of those biographies are truer, or realer, or less fictional than others?

GLASCO

Well, my concern is, if I am *authored* by someone else, doesn't that make me less free? I've always wandered through life thinking I could make my own choices. But if, in fact, somebody else is calling the shots by writing me or creating me in some other way, I find that rather disturbing.

DENNETT

Yes, I agree with you about that. If you're authored by somebody else, then that is a particular sign of diminished status. Most selves are not authored by any other *self*. They are *created*, but not authored by any particular other author.

GLASCO

Is this true even, say, in the case of a multiple personality? If I were a facet of a multiple personality, then might I still consider myself autonomous and separate?

DENNETT

Oh, yes. That's almost the rule.

GLASCO

One of the surprising things about this kind of consciousness—this state of being a facet of somebody else's consciousness—is the illusion of continuity. Perhaps I become someone else during intervening moments. But I feel that my consciousness continues from one moment to the next.

DENNETT

No doubt it does, more or less. It's discontinuous every twenty-four hours, for a number of hours. And there may be brief absences that go without much notice during the course of the day. But aside from that, it seems that your consciousness is more or less continuous. Well, so it is.

(He stops to consider.)

But actually, I wonder if that's true in the case of Hector Glasco, as

opposed to the author of Hector Glasco. It all depends on how assiduous an author you have. Let's consider a person I've always been interested in, someone a little older than I am—Rabbit Angstrom, from the books *Rabbit Run*, *Rabbit Redux*, and *Rabbit Is Rich*. It seems that his life is not exactly continuous. At least, we've only been given some samples of his life over the years. There are many questions I would have about what his life was like in between the parts that Updike has told us about.

Glasco squirms a little at this comment.

CUT TO:

INT.—TUFTS LIBRARY. Glasco seems aware of the sudden shift in location, wondering what became of the time "between scenes." Dennett is pulling books off the shelves, stacking them in Glasco's arms.

GLASCO

But is there any way on earth I can find out who this author is? It seems grossly unfair that I am denied that information, whereas the author seems to be rather jocularly aware of everything in my life.

DENNETT

This raises several issues. One is that a great many authors complain about the way their characters take them over and won't leave them alone. Sometimes these authors have to wait and see how they'll come out.

GLASCO

Well, I've heard authors make just that complaint, but I've never taken them at all seriously. I always thought they were just spouting some sort of writerly nonsense.

Dennett pulls down several volumes of Dickens and adds them to Glasco's stack. Glasco is very nearly buried under books.

DENNETT

Yes, I've had that feeling on occasion. But Dickens, here, claims to have wept—wept—over the fate of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*. It made him just as sad as it made his readers.

Dennett finds a copy of *The French Lieutenant's Woman* and passes it along to Glasco.

DENNETT

And John Fowles has discussed his own emotional reactions to things he has written, finding that they were just too heartbreaking, so he had to go back and tone down the drafts he'd written. They were too upsetting to him. I think these things happen. I don't doubt, either, that many authors exaggerate and put on airs, and tell a much more robust and flamboyant story about the way their characters push them around. But I don't think there's any impossibility in a fictional character's becoming somewhat unmanageable and imperious and obstreperous in the hands of its creator.

GLASCO

That gives me some reassurance that, even without my knowing it, life may not be quite so easy for my creator on my account as I might guess it to be.

DENNETT

Let's think about the importance of what a philosopher would call intentional objects, and I'm just going to mention two—one of them animate, one of them not.

Dennett, with an utter lack of amazement, produces an enormous gold bar from a bookshelf. Glasco is, understandably, astonished.

DENNETT

The one that isn't animate is the gold in Fort Knox. Now, the only reason the gold in Fort Knox is important is that people believe in it. And if somebody could spirit the gold out without anybody's being the wiser, it would have no effect at all, of course, on the

world's economy. The intentional object—the gold in Fort Knox—is ~~what's~~ important; it's what plays the role it does. The actual, physical gold is there only because its absence would make the intentional object somewhat perilous.

Now Dennett produces an enormous picture book of British royalty from off the shelf.

ENORMOUS CLOSE-UPS—of photographs of Queen Elizabeth II and family.

DENNETT

Let's compare the gold in Fort Knox to another interesting intentional object: Queen Elizabeth II. I remember some years ago seeing on the BBC in England a series of interviews with young schoolchildren—they were probably five years old—about Queen Elizabeth II. They were asked, "Well, what does she do? Tell us about her day." And it was fascinating. These children were very sure they knew exactly what the queen did. For instance, she vacuumed Buckingham Palace while wearing her crown. And she sat on her throne while she watched television, things like that. It was wonderful. And it struck me then that Queen Elizabeth II, the intentional object constituted by the beliefs of these children, had a much more important role to play in British social history than the actual living woman, who, no doubt, finds that the intentional object Queen Elizabeth II is much more important than she is, and also has a certain power over her. Well, that's just a sort of laboratory case. We're all that way: the intentional objects that we become, or that we conspire to create along with those who know us.

GLASCO

So in a sense, we're fictions of everyone we know, and they're fictions of us as well.

DENNETT

Absolutely. In my current work, I'm developing a notion of human consciousness as a "virtual machine"—a computer scientist's

term—imposed on the parallel architecture of the brain. Well, virtual machines are defined by computer scientists in terms of the so-called user illusion that they generate. So the question arises, Who's the user? Well, all the friends and associates we have are our users. And we present a certain user illusion to them—that is to say, our body presents a certain user illusion to them. If our body happens to be the body of a multiple personality sufferer, then it may present a strikingly different user illusion, in which there is more than one person inhabiting the body. But that still seems to suggest that there are these ultimate users who are the victims of these user illusions.

GLASCO

One of the things I gather from all this is that I shouldn't be looking for *a particular author*, but should pay more attention to *authors*—plural, including myself.

DENNETT

Sure! And just remember, the fact that you're a fictional character doesn't necessarily mean you have an author. One of the things we have to come to grips with is the fact that there can be narratives without authors—in the sense of conscious, deliberate, planning authors. Some fictions get created without any author at all.

GLASCO

(a bit startled by this)

Can you give me an example?

A FAST CUT:

Suddenly Dennett and Glasco are outdoors, late at night, at the door of somebody's home. LOUD PARTY MUSIC AND CONVERSATION emerge from inside. Dennett knocks on the door.

DENNETT

Oh, yes. There's a lovely party game, called Psychoanalysis. I don't know if you've ever played it.

GLASCO

I don't believe so.

DENNETT

Well, the next time you have a party with some of your fictional friends, you can try this out on them.

The host comes to the door and lets them in. Dennett and Glasco wander through the party, observing the activities almost invisibly. Then the partygoers begin to act out the very scenario Dennett proceeds to describe:

DENNETT

You announce that we're going to play Psychoanalysis. One person is designated the psychoanalyst and has to leave the room. He is told, before he leaves, that another member of the group is going to relate a dream that he or she has recently had to the rest of the party. Then the psychoanalyst comes back into the room and begins to ask yes-or-no questions in order to dope out the narrative of the dream. Once he's got the story line down, he's supposed to guess which of the assembled party dreamed that dream and to psychoanalyze that person.

Well, after the psychoanalyst leaves the room, you announce that *nobody* is to recount a dream. Rather, when the psychoanalyst comes back into the room, his questions are going to be answered according to the following entirely arbitrary rule: Questions where the last letter of the last word are in the first half of the alphabet get answered yes, all others get answered no. But to avoid confusion, later answers are not allowed to contradict earlier ones. As you might imagine, what happens when the psychoanalyst comes back and begins asking questions is that a bizarre and, typically, obscene narrative begins to evolve, much to everybody's intense amusement. It helps if people have been drinking. Eventually, usually the psychoanalyst will say, "Well, I'm sure nobody ever dreamed that dream. It's too bizarre and obscene. But whoever made it up is extremely ill, very sick indeed." And then, of course, the joke can be told, and it's on him: that he, in fact, was the author of that

dream. Well, in one sense he was the author. That is, nobody else suggested putting those three nuns in a rowboat with a gorilla. But at the same time, in a sense it's a narrative that has no author, because it's just a random process.

I think that ALL of our dreams and hallucinations are created by a process that is strongly analogous to that. So Freud is wrong. There is no "dream playwright." There doesn't have to be.

ANOTHER VERY SUDDEN CUT:

Dennett and Glasco are in the hallway of the very building where they started. It is late at night. As they walk past all the empty classrooms, a janitor is mopping the floor.

GLASCO

That reassures me that I'm not necessarily limited by somebody else's "script," and even if I am in somebody else's script, I have a great deal more freedom than I might assume.

DENNETT

I think you should be reassured. The only fictional characters that are completely lacking in free will are a fait accompli. Just don't let any of your authors think that they are the *sole* author of your biography.

GLASCO

(with a strange sense of realization)

I have a very strong hunch that they wouldn't.

DENNETT

Well, that's good.

They arrive at Dennett's classroom. Dennett opens the door. The seminar students are still sitting there, exactly as they were when Glasco and Dennett left them at least twelve hours ago, waiting faithfully for the return of their professor. Dennett resumes his lecture exactly where he left off.

DENNETT

As I was saying, I can reveal for the first time an episode in my life that may be of interest not only to those engaged in research in the philosophy of mind, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience, but also . . .

He closes the door behind him, leaving Glasco in the semidarkened hallway. The saxophone music starts up again.

GLASCO (Voice-over)

So that was the answer! Just try to keep my author busy. Well, as Monday came to a close, I had much more hope for the Tuesday to come. And whoever was writing my story was going to have a lot of work ahead, that much was for sure.

Glasco wanders off into the semidarkness, passing a lonely saxophone player huddled in a doorway, playing soulfully as he goes.

FADE TO BLACK