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A L I E N
AND PHILOSOPHY

I INFEST, THEREFORE I AM

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ALIEN AND PHILOSOPHY

I INFEST, THEREFORE I AM

**Edited by
Jeffrey Ewing
and
Kevin S. Decker**

WILEY Blackwell

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*In memory of Kathleen Ewing, shining light and amazing mother.
You're always in my heart, and thank you for everything,
forever. — J.E.*

To Phil Neale, philosopher and alien. — K.S.D.

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Contributors

In Space, No One Can Hear Them Scream

Alejandro Bárcenas teaches history of philosophy at Texas State University. He is the author of *Machiavelli's Art of Politics* (2015) and a contributor to *The Daily Show and Philosophy* (Wiley Blackwell, 2007) and *The Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy* (Wiley Blackwell, 2016). His research focuses on political theory and classical Chinese philosophy. He hopes one day to get a chance to discuss *Lawrence of Arabia* with David from *Prometheus*.

Adam Barkman (PhD Free University of Amsterdam) is an associate professor of philosophy and the chair of the philosophy department at Redeemer University College. He is the author of five books, including *Making Sense of Islamic Art and Architecture* (2015), and the co-editor of four books on philosophy, film, and pop culture, most recently *The Philosophy of Ang Lee* (2013). Adam has traveled to over fifty countries in his time, but still wants to see a pyramid in Antarctica (sans alien queens, of course).

Alexander Christian is a research fellow at the Duesseldorf Center for Logic and Philosophy of Science at the Heinrich Heine University in Duesseldorf, working in philosophy of science (demarcation problem) and research ethics (scientific misconduct, questionable research practices, responsible conduct of research in health sciences). Alex gave up his dreams of being an astronaut when he was ten years old and watched *Alien* for the first time alone on a tiny black and white TV. Although he thinks that his second career path is way more secure, he hides an M41A Pulse Rifle under his desk. Because they mostly come during office hours, mostly.

Daniel Conway teaches philosophy at Texas A&M University. He too has been deemed “expendable” by various employers, though not yet—as far as he knows—in the context of their pursuit of weaponized alien biotechnology. Needless to say, *that* decision would be understandable...

Kevin S. Decker teaches philosophy at Eastern Washington University, where he often lectures about the phenomenology of peaches and the rights of vampire citizens. He is the editor or co-editor of several anthologies of philosophy and popular culture, including *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy* and *The Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy* (with Jason T. Eberl) and *Philosophy and Breaking Bad* (with David Koepsell and Robert Arp). His book *Who is Who? The Philosophy of Doctor Who* saved his life recently when, the lights having gone out, he used it to wedge a door piston shut on the USCSS *Costaguana* to protect him from the predatory ship’s cat, Smithey.

David Denny’s career as a graduate student in philosophy has just started at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, and he’s excited to dive right into some heavy-duty philosophy. His hobbies include playing funky music on bass guitar, being something of a political dissident, singing R&B on karaoke night, and referring to quotes from smarter people than himself when he wants to get a point across. Stay groovy comrades, and keep an eye out for Xenomorphs!

Jeffrey Ewing is a doctoral candidate at the University of Oregon, and has written chapters for various popular culture and philosophy books, including those on *Frankenstein*, *Jurassic Park*, and *Ender’s Game*. He loves to write poems on natural subjects, such as Xenomorphs. “Roses are Red, Grass is Green. Where is the Facehugger? It’s lunging at m – ” *muffled scream*

Martin Glick is a doctoral candidate at the University at Göttingen studying legal philosophy. His research interests also include political philosophy, aesthetics, and trying to convince the general population that *Predator 2* should be considered one of the essential 90s action films.

Tim Jones, PhD, is an Englishman who wrote the final draft of his chapter while staying with his partner’s family in America. He therefore knows what it’s like to be an alien and manages to conduct himself without tearing to pieces everyone he comes across and desiccating

their corpses, so can't see why the Xenomorphs are unable to behave themselves by following his example.

Chris Lay is a doctoral candidate and graduate teaching assistant at the University of Georgia and is deeply interested in issues of personal identity. He devours science fiction in all its forms: books, movies, video games—you name it. Chris un-ironically and shamelessly enjoys SyFy Channel original movies far more than he should. He has a serious problem; please help him.

William A. Lindenmuth is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Shoreline College. He received his MA in philosophy in New York City from the New School for Social Research, and his BA in English from Saint Mary's College in California. He's taught in New York, Las Vegas, Seattle, and Rome, Italy. He specializes in normative ethics and moral psychology, particularly through the mediums of literature and film, arguing that our stories show us both who we are and who we'd like to be. William has contributed to *The Ultimate Star Trek and Philosophy*, *The Ultimate Star Wars and Philosophy* (Wiley Blackwell), and the forthcoming *The Philosophy of Christopher Nolan*, *Jane Austen and Philosophy*, and *Romancing the Zombie*. He mostly philosophizes at night. Mostly.

Greg Littmann is a human—a sort of tube of soft tissue, composed mostly of water, and held semi-rigid by a calcium endoskeleton. Having an internal skeleton leaves his vital organs dangerously unprotected, but has two major advantages. Firstly, an endoskeleton provides great structural support, allowing him to grow almost two meters long—large enough to become Associate Professor of Philosophy at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. Secondly, an endoskeleton permits sufficient joint articulation for fine manipulation like typing, enabling him to publish on the philosophy of logic, evolutionary epistemology, and the philosophy of professional philosophy, as well as writing numerous chapters for books relating philosophy to popular culture, including volumes on *Doctor Who*, *Jurassic Park*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *The Walking Dead*. Taxonomically, humans are a species of ape, most easily distinguished from other apes by their patchy hair and enormous buttocks.

Louis Melançon is a faculty member at the National Intelligence University. He's a doctoral candidate at the George Washington

University and has contributed various chapters on philosophy and popular culture topics including *The Avengers* and *The Hunger Games*. While it's true that in space no one can hear you scream, he now realizes that people can still hear you weeping in your office.

Robert M. Mentyka received his MA in philosophy from Franciscan University of Steubenville in 2011, and has since authored chapters in both *Bioshock and Philosophy* and *Lego and Philosophy*. He currently works overnight shifts as a legal document processor, but was recently cited by mid-level management for “excessive ethical thought while on the job.” He is currently scheduled for transport to Fiorina “Fury” 161 for reeducation in company policy, but is confident that nothing eventful could happen at such a remote corporate outpost...

James M. Okapal is Associate Professor of Philosophy, Chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion, and Chair of the Department of History and Geography at Missouri Western State University. His research explores the intersections of ethics and popular culture, especially in science fiction and fantasy. He's published articles on ethical issues in *Harry Potter*, *Star Wars*, and *Star Trek*. He often finds himself misquoting Call when he receives a phone call or email—“I can't respond now. I burned my modem. We all did”—and returning his attention to something much more enjoyable.

Bruno de Brito Serra, who has previously contributed to *Sons of Anarchy and Philosophy*, holds a PhD in philosophy from Durham University and, much to his own dismay, does *not* hold one of those awesome body-mounted machine guns that Vasquez and Drake carry around in *Aliens*—which would certainly come in handy to increase the persuasiveness of any philosophical arguments tossed around the table at the Philosophy Department...

Joe Slater is a doctoral candidate at St Andrews, Scotland. He works on moral philosophy and is particularly interested in how much morality demands of individuals. As a big sci-fi nerd who has occasionally been suspected of being an alien, he was naturally attracted to contributing to this volume.

Sabina Tokbergenova is an independent philosopher interested in ethics and social philosophy. Her most recent publication is a chapter in *Wonder Woman and Philosophy*. While she may not know how to

operate a flamethrower, Sabina does know a thing or two about how to scorch her enemies in philosophical debates.

Seth M. Walker is a doctoral student at the University of Denver, studying religion, media, and popular culture. He regularly writes on topics in these areas—including volumes in the PCP genre on *Jurassic Park*, *Orange Is the New Black*, and *The Walking Dead*—and edits an online magazine that engages the intersection between religion and popular culture: *Nomos Journal*. He's been known to stand on the peaks of Colorado's beautiful 14ers, scornfully shaking his fist at the gods...and the impending Xenomorph invasion.

Andrea Zanin feels alien most days she wakes up and blames a combination of growing up in psychotic South Africa and mothering four children under the age of six (as we speak). She is a *cum laude* English honors graduate (with a random law degree to boot) currently living in London, where she spends her time writing, ranting, being a journalist, and trying to be more like Ripley and less like an acid-drooling Xenomorph. She rarely succeeds. Andrea has contributed chapters to various pop culture and philosophy books, including *Sons of Anarchy*, *Hannibal Lecter*, and *X-Files*.

Introduction: A Word of Warning...

Ironically, the first people scared by the Xenomorphs in *Alien* were the cast of the 1979 film themselves. All they knew of the infamous Chestburster scene in advance was that there would be an alien head, and it would have teeth. John Hurt (Kane) was lying underneath the table and “his” chest in the scene was artificial. Prosthetics weren’t great in those days, so they filled the artificial chest cavity with animal organs from a butcher’s shop. The studio started to stink of flesh. Of course, in some ways the cast should’ve known what would happen, since the crew were all wearing raincoats and the set was draped in plastic. Four cameras were rolling, and the cast could see the alien head pulsing under Kane’s t-shirt. The cast leans in, curious about what’s going to happen. Suddenly, the head rips out of the chest and twists around. Everyone panics. A stream of blood three feet long catches Veronica Cartwright (Lambert) straight in the mouth, and she passes out. Yaphet Kotto (Parker) went to his room after the scene and refused to talk to anyone. The whole cast were shocked and scared, the first casualties of the Xenomorph species. The next time you find yourself scared or shocked while watching *Alien*, one of the greatest sci-fi/horror/monster films of all time, remember you’re in excellent company.

Beyond its effective fear-inducing potential, a lovely side-effect of watching a film as thought-provoking as those in the *Alien* saga is that it involves our relationship to radically disparate Others—the Xenomorphs, androids, the Engineers. The *Alien* series gives us grounds to wonder what makes us unique as a species. While we’re

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very much animals (and share much in common with them), as far as we know we do many things that no other earthly animal does—we file legal briefs, pay our Netflix bills, and pilot craft into space.

There are two features unique to being human, though, that are particularly relevant to the book you're about to dig into. First, no animal has devoted so much time towards voluntarily feeling and promoting the experience of *fear* as humans. We sky-dive, bungee jump, and take risks to feel a rush of adrenaline. We stay up late to read H.P. Lovecraft, Stephen King, Thomas Ligotti, and Richard Matheson. We pack into theaters to see *Alien*, *The Thing*, *Cloverfield*, *It Follows*, and hide behind the couch cushions for Netflix's brilliant *Stranger Things*. Second, no other species spends their time philosophizing in the ways humans have—what is the meaning of life? What is beauty? How do you define “art”? How should we treat one another? How do we *know* any of these things? We philosophize, and many of us *love* a good scare. The *Alien* series perfectly combines these two unique traits, inspiring deeper thoughts as much as it scares.

At a technical level, few horror films are as iconic as the entries in the *Alien* series. We owe the sleek menace of the elongated Xenomorph head (and its mouth-within-a-mouth) to the Swiss surrealist H.R. Giger's genius, the surprise of the first Chestburster scene to Ridley Scott's experimental direction. Then there's Ripley “negotiating” with the Xenomorph Queen using a flamethrower as leverage in *Aliens*, Ripley's dramatic sacrifice in *Alien³*, and her discovery of the horrific cloning program in *Alien: Resurrection*. The world of *Alien* is simultaneously horrifying and thought-provoking; as a science fiction/horror masterpiece, it can ask questions that other genres can't easily ask or fully answer.

This book features nineteen chapters that engage both the deeper layers of the *Alien* universe and what those layers *mean* on topics as diverse as identity and personhood, morality and the political and economic forces of the *Alien* universe, just war theory in going into battle against the Xenomorphs, the philosophy of horror, and feminist insights into Ripley's leadership style.

Questions about what is or is not a *person* are suggested by *Alien*'s diverse array of entities. Though androids like Ash and Bishop are not human, do they meet the criteria to be seen as *persons*? And if they are, what is their moral *status*? Do we have any duties to treat them well, or are they merely *things*? These questions have deep implications for the human future—how will we treat artificially intelligent AI or androids, and perhaps even extraterrestrial life?

These questions dovetail into major issues in ethics. Does the moral status of human persons imply that the way corporations like Weyland-Yutani treat their employees is inherently wrong? Philosopher, economist, and revolutionary Karl Marx attracts the attention of several of our authors to explore *why* Weyland-Yutani make harmful choices in favor of profit. We also highlight the *political* failings evident throughout the *Alien* series that free the corporate hand to grip its human employees more and more tightly.

These chapters also open discussion on a number of problems in the ethics of warfare. In a related vein, the orphan Newt's situation is used to highlight an often forgotten element of Plato's *Republic*—the argument that involving children in warfare may be, with the right guide, a positive part in their human development.

The *Alien* series allows us to examine the roots of many of our fears about the unknown, the corrupting, the predatory, and the unstoppable—we love a good scare, but why, and what does that mean? What does it show about what makes us afraid? The philosophy of cosmic horror perfected in the works of H.P. Lovecraft (a key inspiration for the series), the value of horror films as art, and themes of contagion and impurity are explored in a number of chapters.

The *Alien* series boasts Ellen Ripley, one of the bravest and most badass protagonists in film history, and Ripley makes a number of choices in the films that allow us to examine femininity and motherhood in depth. What principles animate Ripley's decisions, and what do they mean? Is she representative of a feminist ethics of care, or is there something else going on in her head? Beyond Ripley, *Alien* allows us to examine other concerns of feminist philosophy, such as interpreting Xenomorph violations of human bodies as a lens to examine the nature and effects of rape.

The saga is also illuminated through application of the insights of continental philosophy. Are Xenomorphs exemplars of Nietzsche's ideal of the *Übermensch*? What does the existentialism of Camus say about Ripley-8's decisions *not* to commit suicide despite the discovery of her cloned nature? And how does Jean-Paul Sartre's defense of revolutionary violence highlight our human-centered interpretation of the *Alien* series; do Xenomorphs have a right to resist us? Perhaps Xenomorphs would watch the *Alien* film as a horror movie about being one of their own born on a hostile spaceship, full of extraterrestrials trying to kill it!

The Xenomorphs are memorable for a number of their traits—their raw power, adaptability, their quick development, their hive mind.

As Ash put it, they are the “perfect organism,” whose “structural perfection is only matched by its hostility.” Likewise, we think that the *Alien* films are the “perfect” science fiction/horror series. Establishing a world equally filled with terror and depth, they are the ideal meeting of the two unique human traits we focused on in the beginning of this introduction—our love of a good scare, and of philosophical exploration.

We’re proud to penetrate these questions with you, and hope that you feel the warm glow of philosophical insight hug your face, grow large in your chest, and take on a life of its own.

Part I

IDENTITY AND MORAL CONSIDERABILITY: “WE MADE YOU BECAUSE WE COULD”

“No Man Needs Nothing”: The Possibility of Androids as Lockean Persons in *Alien* and *Prometheus*

Chris Lay

Most of us probably take it for granted that “human beings” and what philosophers and lawyers call “persons” are one and the same thing. The *Alien* franchise often challenges this idea, though. To first-time viewers of *Alien*, seeing Parker knock Ash’s head clean off his shoulders while the android’s body continues to fight back is just about as jarring as the Xenomorph Chestbuster exploding out of Kane in the middle of the *Nostramo* mess hall. Why? Because, up until that point, Ash looked and acted like a perfectly normal *human person* (albeit an emotionally detached one). In *Aliens*, the synthetic Bishop balks at being called an android, demurring, “I prefer the term ‘artificial person’ myself.” When someone else calling himself Bishop shows up on Fiorina 161 at the end of *Alien*³, Ripley elects to throw herself into the active smelter because she cannot be sure that this “Bishop” isn’t an android sent by Weyland-Yutani to harvest the Xenomorph queen gestating inside her. Another android, Call, from *Alien: Resurrection*, both rejects and is disgusted by the fact that she is something that is less than human. However, the Ripley clone Ripley-8 seems to imply that Call’s compassion for others supersedes her synthetic programming and allows her to transcend being a mere “auton.”

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In each of these cases from the *Alien* films, the franchise asks us to question both what it is to be human and whether or not beings are possible that are like humans, even if they are not biologically human. This is where a distinction between “human” and “person” comes in. Bishop wants to be treated like a human (despite the fact that he’s not, biologically speaking, a human being). Call is ashamed of and appalled by her synthetic nature, but might Ripley-8 be right in thinking that certain features—such as her capacity to self-reflect—make Call more “human” than she realizes? If something shares certain relevant traits with humans (without being biologically human), we may be able to group that something and humans into a common category. Let’s call this the category of “persons.” For philosophers, deciding what belongs in this category and what doesn’t is the *question of personhood*—that is, what makes something count as a person, and can there be persons who are not human?

Perhaps more than any other film in the franchise, the *Alien* quasi-prequel *Prometheus* directly engages this question of personhood. To the viewers, the android David at least appears to be a person: we see David play basketball, worry about his looks as he grooms himself in a mirror, and express his love of *Lawrence of Arabia*. These certainly seem to be things that bona fide persons would do. Yet, many of the characters in the film treat David as if he could not possibly be a person. In a hologram played to the crew of the *Prometheus* after they wake up from hypersleep, Peter Weyland, David’s creator, says of his creation:

There’s a man sitting with you today. His name is David. And he is the closest thing to a son I will ever have. Unfortunately, he is not human. He will never grow old and he will never die. And yet he is unable to appreciate these remarkable gifts, for that would require the one thing that David will never have: a soul.

If we assume that Weyland is right and that David does not have a soul, why should that matter to whether or not David counts as a person? If “having a soul” is essential to being a person, and if devices, no matter how complex, don’t have souls, then David definitely cannot be a person. On the other hand, the relevant features of David that make us think he *seems* like a person might not necessarily be attached to the idea of a soul. In that case, we might have good reason to say that David is a person after all.

**“Well, I guess that’s because I’m a human being,
and you’re a robot”**

René Descartes (1596–1650) would have agreed with Weyland’s take on David. Descartes thought that humans were made of two distinct substances: a body (made of physical stuff), and a soul (made of nonphysical stuff). It is the soul that gives us the features that make us persons, though. In his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, Descartes says:

I know certainly that I exist, and that meanwhile I do not remark that any other thing necessarily pertains to my nature or essence, excepting that I am a thinking thing, I rightly conclude that my essence consists solely in the fact that I am a thinking thing [or a substance whose whole essence or nature is to think].¹

Here, Descartes means that thinking is the one feature of himself that he can be absolutely sure of. So, for example, Ripley could hypothetically doubt that she has a body or that she has been safely rescued from the *Narcissus* (the *Nostramo*’s shuttle). In these cases she might just be dreaming, or, in the case of Ripley’s dream of a Chestbuster in *Aliens*, having a nightmare. However, she cannot doubt that she exists and that she thinks. Indeed, she would have to both exist and think in order to conjure up the dream! For Descartes, the upshot is that our mental features are part and parcel with the soul, or a “substance whose whole essence or nature is to think.”

Of course, human beings also have bodies, but these account only for the biological features of humans. To Descartes, our physical features have nothing to do with our *essential nature*—as things that think—because the body is completely separable from the idea of thinking. Thoughts are not physical things and bodies are. The two are thus wholly different in kind. Since for Descartes the essential features of humans are mental features, and mental features are features exclusively of souls, this means that the criteria for personhood—those essential features that other things might be able to share with humans—are only features of souls. Lots of things have bodies, but only souls (and, by extension, things that have souls) can think. So, for example, Descartes claims that animals are “automata” whose behavior, though similar to that of humans, can be explained entirely “as originating from the structure of the animals’ body parts.”² Animals don’t have the ability to think because they don’t have souls.