

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

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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 *Nostromo* 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*<sup>3</sup>, 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].<sup>1</sup>

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 *Nostromo*'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."<sup>2</sup> Animals don't have the ability to think because they don't have souls.

The same argument can, I think, be extended to androids like David. Androids appear to act like human persons—they communicate, evidently emote, and are outwardly human in nearly every way. However, their behavior is strictly mechanical. Without a soul, David cannot think. Without thought—the essential Cartesian criterion of personhood—David cannot be a person. He is just missing the right sort of features. This is exactly how David is treated by the other characters in *Prometheus*. Weyland explicitly points to David’s lack of a soul in his speech to the *Prometheus* crew. A despondent, half-drunk Charlie Holloway condescends toward David while shooting pool, all the while noting that David is lucky that he—an unfeeling android—cannot experience disappointment like a real person could. Even the generally optimistic and kind Elizabeth Shaw sees David as nothing more than a sophisticated machine. At the film’s end, when a bodiless David wonders why Shaw is so eager to track down the Engineers and seek answers from humanity’s creators, she matter-of-factly asserts, “Well, I guess that’s because I’m a human being, and you’re a robot.” These characters apparently adopt the Cartesian view of persons in denying David personhood. David cannot feel emotions like disappointment or empathize with those who have a desire for answers because he does not have a soul, which is the seat of such capacities.

### **“Technological, intellectual, physical...emotional”**

The Cartesian take on personhood is not the only way to read *Prometheus*, though. In a promotional short film for *Prometheus* called “Happy Birthday David,” David is introduced as an “Eighth generation Weyland TIPE: technological, intellectual, physical...emotional.”<sup>3</sup> Two of these qualities are primary features of persons, according to John Locke (1632–1704). In contrast to Descartes, Locke believes that what makes something a person is not tied up with having a soul. Indeed, a “person” is something completely different from a “human,” or any other animal, for that matter. The primary feature of animals—including humans—is, for Locke, a certain functional organization of their bodies. That is, their organs work together in particular ways to make sure that the being can perform basic life functions.

At the same time, we can distinguish persons from mere animals with a certain functional biology. Locke defines “person” at two points in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. First, he says

that a person "is a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places."<sup>4</sup> So, persons are able to think, can be rational—or follow some set of logical rules—and have the capacity to self-reflect. This last idea is especially important. If something is to be considered a person, it must have the ability to see itself as a thinking thing that persists over time. "Person," Locke later adds, "is a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery."<sup>5</sup> What Locke is getting at here is that the category of "persons" is crucial for identifying who deserves praise or blame (morally, legally, and otherwise). For the label "person" to act as an identifier for something having moral status, persons have to be capable of rationality (acting in observance of laws) and moral emotions (happiness and misery). In other words, a person must be able to understand why she is being held accountable and that her actions have consequences in terms of emotional effects.

To sum up, the picture of a person we get from Locke is of an intelligent, rational, self-reflective, and emotional being. Anything that can have all of these features must count as a Lockean person. Ripley's cat Jonesy may exhibit a sort of intelligence and even feel to some limited degree. Yet, the cat can neither act according to some set of rules—that is, he is not rational—nor can he self-reflect. Thus, Jonesy is not a person. The human characters of the *Alien* franchise do seem to have all of these characteristics. So does the clone Ripley-8. What about androids like David, though? Do they have what it takes to be persons according to Locke's definition?

### **"The trick, William Potter, is not minding it hurts"**

We have four criteria of personhood to work with here: intelligence, rationality, capacity for self-reflection, and emotionality. In the case of David and other androids, I think that only three of these are really up for discussion. No one questions whether or not androids are rational—in fact, the problem often seems to be that they are *too* rational; they cannot do anything *but* follow rules and commands. Taking intelligence next, David surely appears to be capable of thought, understanding, and other mental operations (which is just what intelligence is for Locke). David can communicate (he even learns the Engineers' language, more or less) and

respond to both instructions and environmental changes. But this is only what Locke calls a “passive” power of thought or intellect: David enjoys certain mental operations, but only in a responsive way, like how a basketball only moves if something else picks it up or throws it. He is programmed to have certain thoughts and the like. This might count as a sort of limited intelligence, but to self-reflect, David would almost certainly need to be able to *actively* think. He would need to be able to generate novel thoughts himself, independently of his programming.

It seems clear that David is able to do this. He is plainly aware of himself, as he models his behavior, speech, and appearance after Peter O’Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*—whom David idolizes. This demonstrates a concern with not just how he sees himself, but how he would like others to see him as well. David also seems to be painfully aware of himself when Weyland notes that David has no soul. His dejected expression tells of a being that suddenly regards itself as “less-than.” David is, in Weyland’s speech, made cruelly aware that he will forever lack something that could put him on equal footing with everyone around him. So, if we believe that David is self-reflective, we should identify some self-generated mental features (products of active thinking) that make this self-reflection possible.

One very telling example of such a mental feature is David’s judgment about his desires. Although David tells Shaw that “want” is not something that he, as an android, can experience, he immediately follows this up with the line, “That being said, doesn’t everyone want their parents dead?” But to kill Weyland and—as David himself puts it—to be free of Weyland’s programming is hardly David’s only desire. David wants to be accepted by his creators (both Weyland and other humans) as much as Weyland does in his pursuit of the Engineers. This is why David deflates during Weyland’s speech and beams when the freshly awoken Engineer caresses his head (just before violently ripping it off)—for a moment, he thinks that *something* has accepted him. Given David’s imitation of Peter O’Toole, it is also probably fair to say that he desires to look, act, and be perceived a certain way, as well. David judges all of these desires to be worthwhile and hence pursues them. Locke argues that our desires determine our will to act in some given way, but this determination is constrained by our active judgments about whether we ought to see those desires through or not.<sup>6</sup> In fact, for Locke, this is precisely what makes human actions “free”: that they’re in accord with our judgments. David’s choice to pursue these desires shows then that he has an active power of the

intellect—free from the bindings of his programming—that explains the apparent self-reflection that we observe as viewers.

Lastly, we have the possibility of David's emotionality. Is David "capable of happiness and misery"? Locke defines emotions—or "passions"—in terms of pleasure and pain. So, it might be objected that all Locke is talking about as a criterion of personhood here is *sentience*, or conscious experience of sensations like pleasure and pain. Given that David is beheaded and does not seem to mind it all that much, it may look like he can't have these sorts of experiences. David is quite adamant that he does not have any sort of feeling. Further, in "Happy Birthday David," David states directly that he cannot feel human emotions (though he understands them and can respond accordingly).

Locke also points out, however, that there is "pleasure and pain of the Mind, as well as the Body."<sup>7</sup> David certainly seems to take pleasure in things—he enjoys films like *Lawrence of Arabia* and delights in being called a "son" by Weyland. Likewise, while watching the holographic map of the universe in the orrery room of the Engineer ship, David is overcome by a sense of wonder. He is also apparently pained when Weyland says that David lacks a soul and by the scorn of his human companions. His relationship with Holloway in particular reveals David to be capable of the pain of emotional resentment. Just before Holloway is infected with the black liquid, he says to David with a sneer, "I almost forgot, you're not a real boy," and, after Holloway pejoratively remarks that humans made androids for no other reason than to satisfy their own curiosity, he laughs off David's suggestion that the two are not so different. David does little to disguise his contempt for Holloway throughout the scene. Note that it is only *after* their exchange that David decides to contaminate Holloway's drink—making it quite plausible that he does it partly out of spite.

While learning how to act like Peter O'Toole in *Lawrence of Arabia*, David repeats the line from the film, "The trick, William Potter, is not minding it hurts." David seems to adopt not only O'Toole's mannerisms, but also his character's mantra—this is how he inures himself against the emotional pain of being rejected as sub-human by those around him. And this explains the caustic personality he develops toward say, Holloway. Case in point: when the *Prometheus* crew first enters the Engineer ship, Holloway jokes, "They're making you guys pretty close," to which David replies (with no shortage of snark), "Not too close, I hope." Based on the above, it seems clear that David is intelligent, rational, and capable of self-reflection and emotional feeling.

He fits the Lockean definition of a person. David can therefore feel the hurt of being denied his personhood. The trick is ignoring it. Or, as Locke says, making a judgment about the desire to rid oneself of the pain—the judgment to accept the pain and do something with it.

### **“I repeat, all other priorities rescinded”**

Even if it looks like David can count as a person on Locke’s definition, this does not mean that all androids are persons. Ash, the Science Officer of the *Nostromo* in *Alien*, serves as a nice counterpoint to David. Whereas David is treated much differently than his human colleagues, Ash is—quite mistakenly—seen by the rest of the *Nostromo*’s crew to be just like them. Yet when we ask if Ash is intelligent, rational, self-reflective, and emotional, I think we get a very different answer than we do for David.

Again, let’s take it for granted that Ash is rational. He is also obviously intelligent in at least a passive way, as he communicates with the rest of the crew and can adapt apparently spontaneously to situations. For instance, Ash makes the decision to allow Kane back onto the ship with a Facehugger coiled around his neck. This isn’t because Ash was specifically ordered to do this by Weyland-Yutani, but because his doing so falls in line with dispositional or background orders from the company to return any life-forms the crew may find on the planetoid LV-426. Ash is reactive, and as such has Locke’s passive power of thought.

Rationality and a limited intelligence alone, though, don’t make Ash a Lockean person. Ash patently does not seem to have an active power of thought and so cannot engage in any sort of self-reflection. Remember that, for Locke, active thoughts (like judgments) allow us to choose to act on our desires (or to refrain from so acting). Desires, in turn, determine our wills toward some action. Unlike David, who could actively decide to pursue some of his desires, Ash seems able to follow only the strict rules of his programming. When Brett and Parker balk at checking out the distress signal originating from LV-426, Ash simply parrots rules in the crew’s contracts that would bind them to investigate. He tries to kill Ripley by shoving a magazine down her throat because Weyland-Yutani has directed him to preserve the Xenomorph specimen for study—at all costs. As Ash’s severed head is interrogated by Ripley, Parker, and Lambert about this overriding “special order,” Ripley asks, “What about our lives?” Ash



replies, with eerie calm, "I repeat, all other priorities rescinded." Ash can passively respond to commands and carry out his orders, but never shows himself capable of the active power of thought.

In his discussion of freedom, Locke says that a "Tennis-ball, whether in motion by the stroke of a Racket or lying still at rest, is not by anyone taken to be a *free Agent*" because the tennis ball cannot think.<sup>8</sup> Although Ash can think, he cannot think *for himself*, or in an active way. He is, then, much more like the tennis ball (or Johner's basketball in *Alien: Resurrection*). Just as the basketball's movement is limited to what Johner or someone else does with it, Ash's thoughts are limited to that range of possible responses programmed by the company that created him. This means that he cannot see himself as a "thinking thing in different times and places" but only as an instrument of Weyland-Yutani.

Ash also does not seem to exhibit any sense of emotional feeling in *Alien*. Keeping consistent with Locke's definition of emotions as varying degrees of pleasure and pain, nothing seems to bring Ash pleasure or pain. He has no connection with any of his human crewmates—we see him sitting on his own at the mess hall table in the Chestburster scene. To Ash, the crew are expendable resources for the company, and he seems to have no desires independent of the company's goals. The closest we get to any sort of emotion from the android is mockery in his last words to the crew: "I can't lie to you about your chances, but...you have my sympathies." Ash, then, lacks the Lockean criteria of personhood on two counts: he is incapable of self-reflection and cannot feel. Even if David meets the Lockean requirements of personhood, not all androids do by default. Ash, for one, is not a Lockean person.

### **"There is nothing in the desert, and no man needs nothing"**

We have seen that there are a couple of ways to determine whether or not androids in the *Alien* series—and especially David from *Prometheus*—can be persons. On the Cartesian view, David is not a person because David does not have a soul. Locke challenges this idea with a picture of a person that does not tie the important features of persons to some particular substance, like a soul. While Descartes gives us a quick and simple "no" to the question "Is *x* a person?," in the case of androids like David, Locke's answer is more complicated.

David appears to qualify as a Lockean person, but Ash, for one, does not. The Lockean view leaves open the possibility that there might (currently or in the future) be things that human beings create that could have the same moral status as we do.

When the crew of the *Prometheus* first arrive on LV-223 and see a rocky wasteland, David whispers another line from *Lawrence of Arabia*: “There is nothing in the desert, and no man needs nothing.” To say that “no man [that is, no human] needs nothing” is equivalent to the claim that “all humans need something.” In other words, defining features of humanity are needs, wants, and desires. David also has desires and needs (among other emotions): he wants to be accepted as a son and as an equal of sorts to his colleagues, and he wants to be free of the control of the Weyland Corporation. David very much sees himself as someone ostracized by those around him—just like O’Toole as T.E. Lawrence. And he certainly arrives at this idea of himself by a process of self-reflection. If the nonhuman David does think rationally, self-reflect, and feel like human persons, this ostracism is both arbitrary and cruel. It is hardly different from the pride of the gods that led them to eternally torture the Titan Prometheus when, as Weyland says, the Titan only “wanted to give mankind equal footing to the gods.”

## Notes

1. René Descartes, “Meditations on First Philosophy,” in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Elizabeth S. Haldane (Cambridge University Press, 1911), 28.
2. René Descartes, “To More, 5.ii.1649,” in *Selected Correspondence of Descartes*, trans. Jonathan Bennett (2010), 215.
3. “Happy Birthday David,” along with other illuminating short films used to promote *Prometheus* prerelease, is available as a special feature on the *Prometheus* DVD and Blu-ray, and is also easily accessible on YouTube.
4. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford University Press, 1975), 335.
5. *Ibid.*, 346.
6. *Ibid.*, 283.
7. *Ibid.*, 258.
8. *Ibid.*, 238.