

Review of Kevin Decker and Jeffery Ewing, *Alien and Philosophy: I Infest, Therefore I Am*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2017. 240 pages.

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Preview

The movie *Alien* first hit the box office in the spring of 1979, and it was met with critical acclaim; in 2008, it ranked seventh best film in the science fiction genre by the American Film Institute. The chestburster scene is now stuff of legend and is iconic in the world of pop-culture and entertainment. Kevin Decker and Jeffery Ewing's book, *Alien and Philosophy: I Infest, Therefore I am*, was also published in the spring, thirty eight years later, and not only does it also explore what it means to be human—and alien—but it does so in a way that both the movie and their book share: it is a form of entertainment. Of course, it is clear that Decker and Ewing's purpose in *Alien and Philosophy* is not merely to entertain its readers, but to engage the reader in philosophizing while nevertheless ensuring that the entertainment factor is sufficiently met. In a rather gripping way Decker and Ewing explore 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”.

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Decker and Ewing adequately explore two features that are unique to humans in *Alien and Philosophy*. Firstly, unlike animals—and any known aliens—humans voluntarily spend, and sometimes end, their lives seeking and promoting the experience of fear. One need only consider that form of thrill-seeking through risky adventures such as sky-diving, bungee jumping, big wave surfing, and downhill mountain biking, all done for the rush of adrenaline. But we also stay up late reading horror ridden tales from authors like Stephen King and H. P. Lovecraft. We snuggle close to our friends and loved ones while hiding behind our pillows and blankets while watching movies like *Alien* and Netflix's *Stranger Things*. We pack ourselves into theaters with our popcorn and sodas to watch movies like *Halloween*, fully aware that they are intended to scare us. Secondly, unlike any known species, humans spend much of their time philosophizing, questioning the meaning of life, how to define art, and how we know anything. We are curious creatures that like to debate and, presumably, are motivated by fear. Through the lens

of the *Alien* universe, Decker and Ewing provide the reader with an insightful and entertaining discussion of both of these features.

Of particular relevance to the reader, in light of the highly polarizing political dystopian reality we find ourselves in, Decker and Ewing explore ethical questions ‘impregnated’ from *Alien*’s diverse array of entities—questions such as what is or is not a ‘person’. The *Alien* universe puts its characters in drastic—even desperately dramatic—relationship with Others: Xenomorphs, androids, The Engineers; and Decker and Ewing investigate what the proper response is and *how* Others should be treated. This exploration not only leads the reader to wonder what makes us unique as a species, but also suggests that our questioning should be more open to the ‘stellar’. For example, “Ash and Bishop are not human, however, they do meet the criteria to be seen as *persons*. And if they are, what is their moral *status*? Do we [humans] have any duties to treat them [androids] well, or are they merely *things*?” (2) Indeed, unbeknownst to many humans, some robots already face today discrimination from ‘racial’ (or as Peter Singer argues ‘speciesist’ (18)) slurs about how they are “artificially” intelligent (AI) or androids; no doubt, the same speciesism might raise its head at some future point in history in relation to extraterrestrial life.

Of course, this line of questioning is also significant for another reason, namely, for determining the moral status of beings such as embryos, nonhuman animals, and even David (the android or Artificial Super Intelligence in *Alien: Covenant*), which all, in one way or another, seem to have the potential to become autonomous beings. In 2007 the U.S Supreme Court upheld the first-ever federal law banning abortion procedures and restricting access to the private health care of women and families. Decker and Ewing argue that “*anything* that has the *potential* to become autonomous has moral status” (20). This would not include, however, plants and brain-dead people.

In the vein of feminist philosophy, Decker and Ewing explore the nature and effects of rape while interpreting the Xenomorph’s violations of human bodies. Our relationship with our bodies determines much of our own identity. And if that identity is involuntarily changed, or altered, the consequences can be devastating. That is why “an attack on the body is an attack on the victim’s personhood” and is “one reason that physical violation of rape is considered the most devastating crime of all” (179). Throughout *Alien* the audience, both male and female, is forced into a genuinely unsettling position, one that forces them to consider sexual violence and that feels a little too like real-world situations. In discussing these issues through the *Alien* universe, Decker and Ewing provide a lens that both adds to the

conversation and leaves the reader wondering what a reality would be like if males had to worry just as much as females about sexual violence.

Additionally, Decker and Ewing underscore the alienation of capitalism. Drawing on the works of thinkers such as Karl Marx, the *Alien* universe is deconstructed and shown to be the effect and consequence of ‘evil’ corporate ideology. Marx insisted “that the capitalist mode of production...strips workers of their basic humanity and dignity” (102). Decker and Ewing stress how this is manifested when the audience is first introduced to the *Nostramo*’s crew members in *Alien*; there is no misunderstanding that the crew is “disconnected, disengaged, and sorely lacking in passion and vitality” (102). Not only are the crew members disconnected from humanity—literally, by the Weyland Company sending them deep into space and towards an unknown planet—but also, the crew members are not seen to be as important as is making use of the newly found species (alien) in the lucrative field of bioweapons research in light of order 937 (104). Decker and Ewing help the reader to see that the real villain in *Alien* is not the Xenomorph, but the profit-ridden, terraforming, interstellar colonization industry spawned from trans-planetary corporations, such as the Weyland-Yutani Corporation, with unprecedented and ambitious reach—and that is scary to think about.

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