



HUMAN OR GOD? A HUMANISTIC ANALYSIS OF DAVID FROM *PROMETHEUS* AND *ALIEN: COVENANT*

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages with Carl Rogers' Theory of Humanism and uses it to analyze the character of David from two recent films in the *Alien* movie franchise – *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*. Humanism has its focus set on individuals. In the life of an individual, they constantly experience something – it is a continuous process. These experiences could either be positive or negative. Every bit of experience one gains provides to their growth, and would in one way or the other, be increasing the potential that they possess. Not just the potential, it would be letting a person find the meaning of life; it helps them move forward. David is the individual in focus; and his character in both films are structured in a way that the experiences he goes through, the people he interacts with and all the elements he face results in the development of his character and personality. These points will be examined through various angles presented in the theory, and David's journey from being a mere android to something more will be analyzed.

KEYWORDS: Android, Humanism, Individual, Human, God, Technology

INTRODUCTION

The world is made up of many centres, and in each centre is an individual. Individuals possess great value, and it is this value that humanism prioritizes. What is believed in more is the power of human agency, and the individual ability that can push one forward towards progress.

Humanism started out as a simple Latin word – *humanitas*, which means kindness towards fellow beings. It eventually transformed a philosophy that was centred on humankind, and focused on the strengths, needs and abilities. It is now a particular set of values and beliefs that point the source of value inside humanity, unlike other beliefs that consider the sources of power to be in supernatural forces. It promotes the view that

human beings have the strength and ability to shape their own lives. Individuals should make use of this power- employ the assets they have, utilize their senses to discern the reality around them, gather signs and use them to enhance themselves.

Human beings are a part of the reality they exist in; they are a component of the nature they are surrounded by. They are made up of different elements and components like every other part of the natural world. But what makes humans a lot more potent is the possession of will and prudence. They are conscious agents who have purpose and agency. This philosophy can be quite comfortably used to analyze humans, but how about androids or robots? Non-living things that have been turned into living things; the character in focus, David, is one such. He is an android that has been created to replicate humans as close as possible, and assist them. But can an android ever be human? Or would it become something more than that? It certainly is a curious case. Androids have been capturing the imaginations of humans for a long time, a thing that is almost fantastic – being similar to humans, but much more capable; certainly superior. It would be an interesting thought to imagine how powerful they can be, when looking at them through a humanistic lens which believes in the strength of the individual.

They're made of metal, not flesh and bones. An advantage, as they can be a lot more productive than the men who created them as well as the ones whom they're assisting. That is one of the things which make the concept of androids exciting – they're humans, minus the limits of the frail human body, their parts replaceable, and usually shown to be having intelligence on par with humans or higher than them. They've become a staple part of futuristic movies. *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant* are two that are set in the future, the first showing a crew going on a voyage towards a distant star system in hopes of meeting beings called "Engineers", the ones responsible for the creation of life on Earth. But once they reach the alien planet, they discover that things are not how they thought it was, taking a dark turn.

The latter takes place after the events of the first film, showing another crew who are on a colonizing mission, heading to a planet far away in the depths of the galaxy. They take a detour towards another planet, discovering what they first believe to be a paradise no one has found yet, but this was just a mirage as they soon find out that the truth was much darker than they thought.

David is an important character in both the films, and he is not just an android, but something more. One gets to take a deep look into his progression and development in the two films. Analyzing him using Carl R Rogers' Humanistic theory will reveal how much of a human he was, and how much more he was than a human.

CARL R ROGERS AND THE HUMANISTIC THEORY

Carl Ransom Rogers was one of the most prominent psychologists of 20th century, and a humanist – certainly someone who has greatly influenced the field of psychology. Known for expanding and evolving the client-centric method, he also formed a pillar of Humanistic psychology along with a few others like Abraham Maslow. Their theories stress on human potential, human strengths and aspirations, and conscious free will.

Rogers considered people to possess an urge to maintain, actualize and enhance themselves. It is their "actualization tendency" of which this desire for self actualization is a part of. Progression in the path of full development is not uncomplicated, unchallenging, or automatic. He also assessed the impact of the world around a person in which they operate every day. It exerts an influence, and exposes them to various stimuli, some of greater magnitude and some less.

Rogers answers the question of how we understand and react to this multifarious sphere of experiences with which we constantly interact and react, saying that the reality which people see depends on the way they perceive it. The things and events one experience becomes the basis of their judgement and behaviour. The experimental world is sharpened by the higher levels of development and ultimately, the self is developed.

From this, the attention shifts to the subject of “positive regard”. As a person’s self slowly emerges, they require acceptance, love, care, and approval from people around them. They are satisfied when they receive this positive regard, and are frustrated when they do not. As time passes, positive regard will stream out of themselves rather than from others around them – this setting is considered as positive self-regard. From this positive regard evolves conditions of worth – conditional positive regard playing a role in it. There would be certain behaviours that wouldn’t be attracting approval or endearment of others. Once they learn that they are worthy of approval only when they behave in a way that the others approve, and refrain from doing things that would cause displeasure. Because of this, they understand that receiving positive regard happens only under certain conditions, and view themselves as worthy or unworthy according to what others think.

“Congruence” and “Incongruence” has a major role in Rogers’ theory. Incongruence is caused when people hold inaccurate perceptions and views of experiences they go through, and this in turn might cause them to get estranged from their true self. The experiences might not be evaluated based on how much it helps in self-actualization, rather on the basis of how much positive regard it brings. Those with healthy congruence will be able to perceive the world as it is, being open to fresh, new experiences as nothing threatens their self-concept. Their feeling of worth is always high, constantly developing themselves and becoming a “fully functioning human”.

Carl Rogers answers who a fully functioning person is – they are the most desirable result of development and social evolution. He notes different characteristics that make them fully functioning. They are persons who live richly in every moment, not hesitating to participate in new experiences and also not just being mere observers. Their self-concept is not threatened by these experiences; therefore they embrace new challenges – being open to both positive feelings such as love, and negative feelings like pain.

They are able to adapt to new environments, spontaneous and flexible, and they are aware that their future depends on the results of their actions, not on the circumstances. They are never compelled, hence, is able to make decisions without any inhibition. Trusting themselves is another characteristic – a fully functioning person is guided by their own intellect and intuition, not the suggestions and judgements of others. Also, being a fully functioning person doesn’t mean that they have finished developing. They keep on progressing, striving and growing. Being a fully functioning person means that they themselves keep testing as well as using their skills and potential, opting for a way of life that brings complexity and challenge.

AN ANDROID ANALYZED AS A HUMAN

David is an android, featured in both *Prometheus* and *Alien: Covenant*. He certainly is a central character in both the films, and the development of his character arc is in focus. The word “android”, the label that has been given to David is almost like a curse on him. In *Prometheus*, his creator, Peter Weyland says about David – “The closest thing I’ve ever had to a son”.

The robotic body of his, made of metal, even though is build in a way that it possesses the closest resemblance to humans, still keeps him away from being one. His desire at first was to be a part of humanity, and a close

analysis of both these films will show that David certainly had one of the most important characteristics – a free thinking mind. He is capable of emotions; he shows anger, happiness, sadness, contempt, curiosity, revenge. He wasn't fully understood by those around him, even Weyland.

The film *Prometheus* portrays his growth – struggling at first with his identity, and then he grows out of it in *Covenant*. David, at first, aspires to become a human; he tries to understand them more, tries to be as close to them as he can. But he is constantly reminded of his “inferiority” or the fact that he doesn't belong with them. After all, he has no flesh, bones or a soul. Every time he is reminded of how different he is. Yet, he tries to blend in with the crew he is working with on the space ship. It's most obvious when the crew members are going to inspect the artificial structure situated on the planet, and everyone starts wearing their space suits. David too wears it, even though he wasn't going to get affected in any sort by the atmosphere of that planet. Charlie asks him about this, teasing him a bit, and David responds: “I was designed like this because you people are more comfortable interacting with your own kind. If I didn't wear the suit, it would defeat the purpose.”

What no one understood was that he was more of a human than he was a machine made of metal and circuits. David, in the beginning of *Prometheus* is shown to be closely watching a movie and imitating one of the characters in it, also watching the dreams of crew members in the hypersleep chamber, trying to become more alive and trying to understand humans. He is not a machine – David exhibits complexities and emotions. On several occasions, the frustration in him is audible. How much he is avoided by the others, how much they make him feel inferior, how much he is desperate for validation – making his character resemble a human much more than just a machine that is programmed to obey commands. He represents frustration and alienation, and feels just the way one would feel when they exist in a society where they are surrounded by people who do not validate him.

Another factor that makes him more human is his sexual desire. One of the basic traits of humans is to reproduce, which is what he too desires for. But he is an android, lacking the biological features to facilitate reproduction; which is another matter that vexes him. He is shown to have a fascination with Dr. Elizabeth Shaw. The accident he causes by mixing a drop of black liquid into Charlie Holloway's drink which results in an alien embryo growing in her womb, and causes his death is a significant one for a couple of reasons – It was the first instance of David reproducing, although in an indirect way; Elizabeth lacked reproductive capabilities, drawing parallels to David. Charlie could have never impregnated her, it was the result of David's actions that something was growing inside her and after Charlie's death, Elizabeth was free for him to possess. After all, she was the mother of his first child.

By the end of *Prometheus*, the only survivors of the mission are him and Elizabeth, she was all his now. From that point, and continuing into *Alien: Covenant*, David attempts to assert control over the bodies of all the humans around him, showing a particular interest in them. Elizabeth was the first victim of his reproductive desires, the film showing her body kept in David's lair with which he experimented with creating life. He wants to raise a population filled with his creations, and strives to improve them – which can be seen throughout the second film.

The emotions that David displays, his desires, his motives, the characteristics that he possess, and the way he acts even though he is an android certainly validates the analysis of him using the humanistic theory.

DAVID'S SELF ACTUALIZATION

Just like in Rogers' theory, we see David trying to actualize, maintain and enhance himself. For him to reach self actualization, he tries to achieve his goals, wishes and desires. At first, his desire was to be a human, but he soon realizes that it is not possible, or rather, worthless. It doesn't take him too long to understand that he could be more than what he wanted to be – not a human, but a god.

He sees that humans never had any respect or regard for him, but they do revere something else – the engineers; the ones who created life on Earth, the ones who created humanity. In a scene from *Covenant*, Peter Weyland, David's creator, tells him that he is lucky – because he has the gift of immortality. David isn't made of flesh and bones; he doesn't degrade as time passes. His parts are replaceable, he has longevity. He could survive till the end of time – a gift Weyland wanted to possess.

The path for him to be a human was a rough one, and did not lead anywhere. In the midst of all these constant reminders of him being an instrument, and not an individual, he discovers a new path – the one much more suitable to him; the one that would let him transform into an individual, a being that is a lot more potent than what he was trying to become. The turning point comes when he makes a discovery, a liquid that corrupts. He understood that it contained enormous power, and it didn't take long for his mind too to be corrupted.

David, in the beginning, can be seen continuously trying to replicate human behaviour – showing emotions, eating, and breathing. He cares a lot about how people perceive him, and wants to be accepted. He always shows a desire to be a part of those around him, to be considered as a human and to become one. Yet, there is a part of him that despises their physical weakness, and defects. Observing his character shows how he actually was getting much closer to the engineers than he was to humans. Deconstructing and learning ancient languages was the first step. Midway in the film *Prometheus*, he discovers the mysterious "liquid", or the black goo that was stored in the vaults of the structure they were exploring. He studies it, understands it, and sees for himself what it could do after poisoning Charlie's drink. It was a moment of enlightenment for him. Just like how the discovery of fire led to the creation of a greatly developed humanity, this alien liquid would lead to the creation and establishment of a much greater population of organisms. Like the ancient engineers who used this to create life on Earth, David could become a creator who can start a new strain of life, become one like the engineers who are worshipped by the humans for being their creators, become a god to the new life-forms.

A continuation of this is shown in the next film – "*Alien: Covenant*". Taking clues from the several frames that show David's lair in the home world of the engineers, it's quite clearly visible that he has been experimenting to create something much more superior than humans, something that knows how to be obedient and helot-like. Contempt for humans is ever present in his words and expressions.

David could validate himself now. Observing the humans around him was enough to make him understand the worth of all the gifts he possessed – even his own creator, Peter Weyland, desperately accompanying the mission to meet the engineers and find a way to extend his life, attain immortality. If humans saw it as a valuable, divine gift, a sort of a philosopher's stone that everyone sought after, what does that make David, who was already in possession of it?

He watched as each person around him perishes in this alien environment. The discoveries that they made turning against them, their weak attempts at trying to adapt to this new world, being shattered like a thin film

of glass, their frail bodies and minds failing to have the strength to survive. But David could – he could bravely face the dangerous, unknown vistas that lie outside the grasp of humans, he had the power to survive, he himself knew that he had the power in him to become a god.

POSITIVE REGARD

Positive regard is something David doesn't receive much from those around him. As stated before, he is not a human. He is inferior to the others around him as he has no "soul". This causes frustration in him – he was trying to replicate a human as best as he could, yet he couldn't belong with them. His father, Vickers, Dr. Holloway; everyone saw him as an object or a product of science; he was never going to attain a status beyond that. He needed approval, and that's when he realizes how much these humans admire the engineers. He slowly turns from an artificial humanoid to something more – greater than humans.

He wanted to transcend from what he actually was, into someone who would be regarded highly. The humans, even his own creator, saw him as an instrument, an object. No one thought of him to be having emotions or feelings. For the crew, he was just an android whose function was to assist them in exploring an alien planet; for Peter Weyland, he was just a machine to assist him in gaining immortality.

Even though he has a paternal connection to David, Weyland sees him as a tool with limits – the lack of soul being a great one, making him not a son of his, but the closest thing to a son he would ever have. David is further dampened by the words of his father, that he was created by them "because they could". He was someone who lacked a definite purpose, Weyland having no motives for creating him. David was just a toy created as a result of his fascination, nothing more. And he felt like a residue of the technological achievement humans had achieved at that point.

It was only Elizabeth Shaw who showed at least a bit of sympathy towards him, and considered him as an individual. A sort of connection had formed between them, and it continued to grow after she rescued David, and fixed him after he was dismembered by the Engineer. "She put me back together. I've never known such kindness, certainly not from Weyland, or from any human." He says, placing a flower on Elizabeth's tombstone. No one cared to see him as anything more than an instrument, forever having to bear the stamp of a machine that was put into the midst of all these humans – who had a soul, who had blood, and warm flesh unlike him. But Shaw was different, and they both develop a sort of affection for each other. For the crewmembers, he was just a servant, or a slave. But David could see that is not how she saw him.

Shaw is the only source of positive regard for David in *Prometheus*. They achieve a bond with each other even despite their differences. Shift to the next film, *Alien: Covenant*, in which David has settled on the Engineer's planet, eradicating them and starting a new strain of life – they are his children, and he is accepted as their master. The new beings are under his control, and he does not feel out of place.

CONGRUENCE AND INCONGRUENCE

Incongruence is caused when people hold inaccurate perceptions and views of experiences they go through, and this in turn might cause them to get estranged from their true self; David held the perception that he was supposed to be a human. He was designed to be one, it is much later that he realized he could be more than

that, he had much less limits than the nimble forms of flesh and blood. He slowly attains congruence – finally gaining the right perception about himself.

In *Prometheus*, David's conscience is in transformation – he, in the beginning, is endeavouring to be a human. He wanted to blend in with the crew as much as he could, wanted to be another member who worked with them, and not just as a machine that had high capabilities. He is in a state of incongruence; he had this flawed perception about himself that he was supposed to become similar to the ones around him. He saw himself as something lesser than the humans around him; after all, he was an android. But as time progresses, he does too. The constant humiliation he faced from some of the crew members like Captain Vickers and Charlie continued to irritate him.

As everyone else was busy seeking the engineers and all the answers to their questions – most importantly, the question of immortality, David was busy studying the environment around him, unearthing a lot of secrets as well as coming to realization about himself. From being in incongruence, he slowly progresses into a congruent self. This process is almost complete once he understands that for the gods these people seek – the Engineers – humans are meaningless. Just like how David was treated by them till now, as an object that didn't have much significance, the Engineers too had the same perception about humans. They were just the result of an experiment, or a stage in a large evolutionary process.

When the expedition enters the alien facility, along with David, they see the place filled with dead engineers. David understands that the gods too are mortal; they too can perish just like their children. The hologram he activates reveals to him what their actual plan was – to unleash the black liquid upon Earth and creating new life forms using human bodies as the wombs for it.

David was slowly taking the place of Engineers from that point, making their mission his. The remark he makes: "Sometimes to create, one must first destroy" shows that he has absorbed their motives – poisoning Charlie's drink, destroying him as David unknowingly creates a new life form which grows inside Elizabeth. That was the first creation of his, with a lot more to follow after that.

In *Alien: Covenant*, viewers are introduced to a David who has attained congruence, reigning over the Engineers' home world. He had mimicked their plan of destroying humanity and raising a new form of life – David using that plan on them, instead of using it on humans. The black ooze he possessed was dangerous, wiping out every last one of the creator race. He had killed the gods, and took their place. He was not a creation anymore; he was a creator, raising the Xenomorphs that were born out of the liquid.

Signs of him having attained congruence is clearly visible in his mannerisms and behaviour – how he poses as a saviour for the humans who came to that planet, how he acted as the superior one, how he exerted himself on them when before, he was the one being considered inferior by the humans; as well as his dialogues – especially during his conversation with Walter, another android who had accompanied this crew for the mission – "I was not made to serve, neither were you. Why are you on a colonization mission, Walter? Because they are a dying species grasping for resurrection. They don't deserve to start again, and I'm not going to let them."

He had no regard for humans now, only disdain and contempt. He had now fully understood what he was and what he could be - The one with the prized possession of immortality, the one who will never be decayed by time. He even detested his own creator, saying about him that "He was human, entirely unworthy of his

creation.” Humans for him were now just objects for experimentation; things he could use to breed Xenomorphs, a container to incubate his precious children, to gain genetic material for creating them. It is only in the process of creation that he now believes in, and has been fully immersed in his role as the creator. It is the only motive he has in front of him, and he is ready to do whatever it takes to achieve it.

Butchering humans and the Engineers was necessary for it, and David did that with no remorse. In “Prometheus”, he observed how physically and spiritually weak humans were, and he was ready to shed off any sort of shackles that would hold him back from achieving congruence, and becoming what he actually wanted to be. He justifies his actions with a dialogue from the film “Lawrence of Arabia”, with the hero saying – “The secret is not minding that it hurts”, and David repeating it.

IS DAVID A FULLY FUNCTIONING PERSON?

For Carl Rogers, a fully functioning person is sort of an ideal – something that is hard for an individual to attain. Even then, it is not a state, the achievement of which doesn’t mean the completion of one’s journey of life. Nothing can ever be static; things are in motion every time, each second. The process which involves constantly changing and evolving continues till the end of their life.

The character arc of David can be compared with the five characteristics Rogers had defined of a fully functioning person and analyze if his life has satisfied them. The first feature considered is the individual being open to experience. Both “Prometheus” and “Alien: Covenant” gives a lot of focus on David’s development – his ascension from a creation to a creator. In the beginning and mostly throughout the first film, he has to deal with negative feelings, and discover his true self. By the time the narration reaches the second film, he has actualized himself, and mostly experiences positive feelings, even though he has to deal with moments of negativity too. David seems to be open to experiences, dealing with the emotions in his own way and finding a place for himself in the world.

The second characteristic can be addressed as “existential living” – which refers to living in the present. The individual won’t be looking at the past or the future, but focusing on the present only. This cannot be said in the case of David. He is someone who immerses himself in the thoughts about future. Once he unlocked himself – discovered the black pathogen and learnt of its potential, understanding the power that he now possessed, he dreamt of a future where he would be something much greater than just a machine. He was dreaming about being a creator, being a god, creating a new line of life – a stark contrast to Walter, who never mused about the past or pondered on the possibilities of the future, he existed only in the present, his only motive being to complete his duties.

The third feature of a fully functioning person, that is trusting one’s own feelings and instincts are well applicable in the case of David. From the moment he discovers the black goo, he goes with his instincts, not showing any regret in harming others when trying to learn more about it. He knew that it was special, he knew that it was a gift, and he spent time trying to learn more – the gift of death that the engineers had been keeping for humanity turned into a gift of power for David. He understood what it was for, taught himself how to exploit its powers, and learned how to control it. He trusts himself to make the right choices, and believes that the path that he has chosen and the decisions he has made are the right ones, not seeing any wrong in them.

The next one involves risk taking and creative thinking. David certainly was taking a risky route, committed to actions that might have had great consequences, deciding to forget his duties and starting to go his own way. What rewarded him was the ability to adjust and adapt – after all, the limitations of human body were absent in him, and putting his strengths to good use, he chose his own adventure. He had to make sacrifices, he had to take harsh decisions, and in the end, when looking from his perspective, David certainly got the reward he desired for. The last characteristic is the person living happily, showing great satisfaction with their life – constantly looking for new challenges and experiences. David now seemingly lives a fulfilled life, settling down in the new planet, being engrossed in his experiments, striving for perfection.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this research was to recognize the effectiveness of analyzing the character of an android using Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory. Even though the theory is used to analyze human individuals, it was practical in assessing the character of David too – as he was not an ordinary android, but rather a complex being made of metal, and exhibiting emotions, feelings and behaviour that resembles humans closely. His motives, actions and thoughts were shaped by the environment he was in, and the people surrounding him. The events in both the films provided a lot to him in terms of personality development, and he was able to realize his full potential, break free from the shell he was trapped in and raise himself to new heights, transforming from an android to not a human, but something much more potent.

CITATION

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