

# Competition on the Origins of Life and the Scientific Oratory Tradition: Polarizing Evolution and Its Instinctual Faith in Prometheus

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Article abstract

Predating the current billionaire space race, Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* explores an interplay of competing explanations of the origins of life as discoverable in the universe through space exploration. The film's plot debates evolution versus faith as life's origins, and demonstrates evolution as victorious over and utilizing faith. Accompanying this analysis is focus on the film's previously released online prologue scene, a fictional TED Talk that intertwines technological advancements and religious themes that display a brutal Darwinian survival of the fittest hierarchy as the answer to life's origins. In the age of re-emerging space exploration, *Prometheus* and its social media-released prologue oration demonstrate technological control over evolution and relegate faith to functioning as a survival mechanism in response to superior and hyperaggressive species. Faith's value is in assisting humanity to continually seek transcendent answers when confronting life's beginnings and violent endings.

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## **Competition on the Origins of Life and the Scientific Oratory Tradition: Polarizing Evolution and Its Instinctual Faith in *Prometheus***

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**Abstract:** Predating the current billionaire space race, Ridley Scott's *Prometheus* explores an interplay of competing explanations of the origins of life as discoverable in the universe through space exploration. The film's plot debates evolution versus faith as life's origins, and demonstrates evolution as victorious over and utilizing faith. Accompanying this analysis is focus on the film's previously released online prologue scene, a fictional TED Talk that intertwines technological advancements and religious themes that display a brutal Darwinian survival of the fittest hierarchy as the answer to life's origins. In the age of re-emerging space exploration, *Prometheus* and its social media-released prologue oration demonstrate technological control over evolution and relegate faith to functioning as a survival mechanism in response to superior and hyperaggressive species. Faith's value is in assisting humanity to continually seek transcendent answers when confronting life's beginnings and violent endings.

### **Introduction**

While a 2020 Pew Research study concluded that theology has found "harmony and collaboration" with science (Thigpen, Johnson, & Funk, 2020, August 26, para. 1), recent decades' popular voices illustrate the complicated relationship of positivist and religious discourses. Richard Dawkins' ongoing criticism of religion and celebration of evolution (1978; 2008), along with religious responses (Behe, 1996; Frankowski, 2008), have been used to connect the idea of creationism to science, and the polarity continues in popular press literature (Hardin, Numbers, & Binzley, 2018; Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris, & Dennette, 2019). Despite the polarization, the post-positivist progress that dampens the aged duality of scientific

aggression and religious apologetics as against each other has made strides in relation to theological explorations in association with scientific reasoning (Hermann, 2004), challenging the still present knee-jerk reactions to the “social bifurcation” of these differing explanations (Rughiniş & Flaherty, 2022, para. 1).

Coinciding with scientific and religious discussion is the rapid expansion of communication technology, and the evolution and religion debate connects to the current technological era of seeking to know space’s mysteries. In their ambition to discover and inhabit unknown landscapes, famous billionaires Richard Branson, Elon Musk, and Jeff Bezos are engaged in a “space race” (Lincoln, 2021, July 19). These heightened scientific competitions are what writer Rod Pyle (2019) calls the *Space 2.0* effort, or the new fixation on space and humanity’s place in it.

A few years before these ambitious space race efforts emerged, a bifurcated science versus religion depiction of another billionaire-obsessed utilization of technology to explore the mysteries of space appeared with Ridley Scott’s *Alien* (1979) prequel, *Prometheus* (2012). The key character in the film, technology pioneer Peter Weyland, displays insatiable ambition for mastering the creation of life, demonstrated in the film’s prologue scene that was released online before the film’s theatrical release. In his fictional 2023 TED Talk event in Long Beach, California (WTSP, 2017, August 3), Peter exhibits the unbridled rush to find answers about the origins of life, although ultimately to his detriment in the film because of his excessive trust in technology. Peter fails to demonstrate a *Faith Instinct* (Wade, 2009), an evolutionary trait of belief in deity that drives a fight for survival. Also described as *The Belief Instinct* (Bering, 2011), the faith instinct is a current conversation in scientific discourse, demonstrated in the film as Peter’s scientific ambition juxtaposes the religious faith of the main character, Elizabeth Shaw. While Peter’s speech is delivered in a common rhetorical setting, a TED Talk, it explicitly foreshadows and sets the stage for the film’s playout of a survival-of-the-fittest debate about explanations for the origins of life, science versus creation. Scott’s film frames theological belief, despite its usefulness to search for answers and its ability to survive, just as Elizabeth only finds evidence of evolutionary processes as life’s origins, as subject to scientific inquiry, illustrating how “theological concerns have consistently been viewed as, ultimately, subservient to empirical science” (Hunter, 2021, p. 1).

I argue that through the interplay of competing explanations of the origins of life in the scientific oratorical tradition, the film *Prometheus* and its social media-released prologue oration polarize evolutionary theory against religious faith, and in the process assign faith to function as a survival mechanism. As survival of the fittest is essential, faith is relegated to combative grit and violent creativity. I examine how the film and its prologue demonstrate physicality and aggression as manifestations of evolution, highlight the role of technology dangerously controlling evolution, represent creators of life on Earth as undivine, celebrate evolution's victory over religion, and illustrate faith's complex but subservient relationship to evolutionary explanations.

## **Evolution and Creation as Mass Culture**

Darwinian evolution (1859) has been described as both liberating and oppressive (West, 2015). It has challenged religious assumptions in educational settings (Numbers, 1998), been associated with racism (Latham, 2002; Fuller, 2017), and empowers women's rights (Hamlin, 2014). Positivistic dismissal of theology is traceable across both the film and its oration promotion scene released on social media. Rhetoric of science scholars David Depew and John Lyne (2013) call this continual bifurcation of scientific ideas and religion the "false dichotomy" that comes from "epistemic pessimism" that surrounds public discourse, operating as divisive rhetoric (5). The two camps have been shown to compete through science fiction portrayals because "each offers a conception of reality inclined toward different explanations not just of human behavior but of divine (supernatural) behavior" (Connor, 2014, p. 367).

Yet, evolutionary theory's interplay with religion also offers religion a subsumed voice as an extension of science in the search for concrete answers to life's origins (Ambrus, 2019, p. 570). Thus, Scott's film contradicts the common intertwining of science and religion by writers who explore "the possible and the imaginable" (Morth, 1987, p. 87). David McWilliam (2015) sees the debate within *Prometheus* as inconclusive: "we are neither free beings that have evolved naturally nor products of the benevolent Creator God of Christianity" (p. 545). Still, Ridley Scott's religion-as-sidekick-to-evolution depiction heightens the polarity of theology and science, and challenges to roads paved in a post-positivist state (Cowan, 2021, p. 183). The

film illustrates Hollywood's common pinning religion against reason (Varney, 2020, January 1), where religion is overly simplified (Creasman 2020, para. 11).

As the film's story begins with a social media oration teaser before the theatrical release, the scene's explicit interlinking of theological and scientific ideas demonstrates the rapid integration of theology and science in online settings, reflective of sites such as *The Symbolic World* (Pageau, 2022), the *Templeton Religious Trust* (Templeton Religion Trust, 2022), and *The American Scientific Affiliation: A Network of Christians in Science* (Interdisciplinary Encyclopedia, 2022), illustrating Gerald Vano's (2018) *The Coming Merger of Science and Religion*. This shared dialogue between religion and science is represented in Elizabeth's insistence on being both a biologist and a believer, captured in her numerous debates with other scientists about the value of faith.

### **A Rhetorical Prologue**

The cinematic quality of the oration prologue is comparable to Anthony Chase Mitchell's (2022) description of The Bible Project with its aesthetic, emotional appeal on YouTube. Also presented on YouTube, the prologue's appeal operates as a cliffhanger invitation into the film's haunting plot. As *Prometheus* combines "scientific knowledge and religious cosmologies" (Williams, 2016, p. 132), the mixing of scientific and religious explanations in cinema brings "an intriguing relation between an evolutionary view of the macrocosmos and the mythic symbols that continue to hold sway in scientific endeavors" (Plate, 2012, pp. 532-533). As an ambitious technology mogul who declares himself liberated from deities and referring to them as cruel, Peter is unconstrained and brazen in his "risk-taking" ambition for scientific progress (Ceccarrelli, 2013, p. 4).

Peter's prologue speech passionately highlights the tale of the titan Prometheus being punished for giving fire to humanity, foreshadowing how the film's stronger species who created life on Earth, the Engineers, also "overreacted a little," to humanity's defiance. The social media release of Peter's retelling this tale foretells his and Elizabeth's struggle at the end of the film when they finally meet the last remaining Engineer.

In the opening sequence of the film, which transitions from Peter's oration as a paratext and foreshadow scene (Genette, 1997; Gray, 2010), Elizabeth is inspired by ancient hieroglyphics on Earth that depict the engineers being worshipped by humans and interpreting the symbols as invitations "to come and find them," leading Peter and Elizabeth's assembled team of scientists to find the Engineers' home planet in 2094. The ship's mythic name Prometheus, a name introduced with meaning by Peter in the prologue, demonstrates the "setting apart particular objects" for the purpose of discovering humanity's creators, but also foreshadows the ship's disastrous outcome, as explicitly and hauntingly foretold in Peter's oration (Plate, 2003, p. 1).

Offering a sense of realism, Peter's aggressive speech performance focuses on his determination to pursue technology's ultimate hope to mimic the natural order of evolution by creating life. The speech links technology to evolution as technology is itself the outcome of advanced intelligence and innovation in the film's plot. It extends the film as "one medium shares a ride on the back of another," as described by Thomas Cooper (2020) in applying McLuhan's *Law of Media* (1992) to connecting social media to traditional storytelling mediums, such as film (p. 51). Further, Peter's domineering form in his speech delivery is intimately tied to the film's portrayal of evolution, and the foreshadowing of the fall of Peter due to his hubris and lack of an instinctual nature in relation to the Engineers' brutal, survival-of-the-fittest world setting, captures what scholars describe as scientific madness (Stoehr, 1978; Tudor, 1991; Towmey, 1992; Kawana, 2005; Schummer, 2006; Stiles, 2009), which is also demonstrated in the actions of the film's villains.

The film's prologue is a rhetorical interlude (Yergensen, 2007), or a rhetorical locus within cinema that is "concerned with the cultural and political climate . . . of a film" (p. 21). These cinematic scenes also operate as directives for addressing exigencies and itemize how to act (Yergensen & Church, 2022). Yet as Peter's oration is a prelude rather than an interlude, it is a primer for the audience to observe the intense determination of Peter to push the boundaries of technology, which also sets the tone of the film's serious discussion of evolution and space exploration. Peter's oratorical focus on technological innovation situates evolution as a process to be controlled. Yet as demonstrated later in the film, Peter's own creation, the robot David, is as murderous as the human-like Engineers.

In his speech Peter declares his ambition for progress through the artificially superior David, showing his sheer will to succeed as a creator, “How is there a law that states, if we build a man from wires and metal” it is “considered unnatural?” Peter also defies caution about mad science: “These rules exist because the people who created them were afraid of what would happen if they didn’t. Well I am not afraid! My ambition is unlimited.” Peter enacts Lantz Miller’s (2014) ploy of scientific machinations controlling the future of evolutionary processes as driven by the ambition of singular interests where “self-ordained persons will guide the species in its evolution” (p. 1012). Along with his competitive, survival-of-the-fittest ambition, Peter leaves his audience quietly stunned as the audience is heard gasping and mumbling in awe as he erroneously dismisses deity’s power, “We are the gods now,” an overly confident phrase that costs him his life later in the film.

### **The Physicality of Evolution**

*Prometheus* and its prologue paratext demonstrate the pursuit of dominance, an outcome of technological advancement that “provides us with the most fascinating fantasies in which technology operates as fetish” (Fernbach, 2000, p. 234). This hyperaggressive association with technology is displayed as the violent and Herculean-sized Engineers are experimental scientists planning to exterminate humanity on Earth, exhibiting aggressive displays that include “reflexive, primal” illustrations of the tendency to react quickly and violently as part of the evolutionary process. Endowed with these physically dominant qualities, the Engineers are muscularly large and tall, only male-bodied, have little body fat which highlights their muscular limbs, have shaved heads and no eyebrows, and stand with their arms protruding from the mass of their back muscles. This physical prowess is what Marianne Kac-Vergne (2018) describes as *Men of the Future* in science fiction. Demonstrated in the opening scene of the film, an Engineer removes his robe to be shown wearing nothing but an undergarment around his waist, and the cinematography lingers on shots of his muscular arms, chest, legs, and abdomen. This brutal “reflexive, primal” evolutionary manifestation is highlighted again in the climax of the film when the last remaining Engineer is awakened and aggressively hunts Elizabeth.

Demonstrating and setting the tone for aggression in the story, the younger and stronger version of Peter in the prologue exhibits the same evolutionary aggression and power of the ambitious Engineers. He wears a dark suit, which is part of the “Masculine Identity” (Claro, 2005, p. 153). In a traditionally authoritative business executive style, he sips alcohol while straightening his tie just before he begins his speech, which are actions for posturing authority (Wright, 2020, p. 143). Showing his alpha male persona, Peter extends his arms to embrace his audience, declaring that he will “change the world.” As aggressive oratorical style is understood as a historical manifestation of dominance (Goodale, 2010; Zaeske, 2010; Sheeler & Anderson, 2014), Peter’s rough, reverberatingly deep and gargling voice raises in pitch and volume during his ongoing exclamations as he touts his technological and evolutionary progress as an innovator. His delivery resembles the war rally speech pattern of other aggressive battle orations in film where male characters pace back and forth and scream for violent action against enemies (Gibson, 1995; Jackson, 2003). Similarly, Peter calls out those who are inferior to him, referring to them as “weak.” Further, Peter paces and owns the stage as he constantly walks as he speaks, stopping only for emphasis as he points at the crowd in a commanding style. His aggression exhibits western literature’s theme of control and the appeal to preside (Straub, 2017). Yet these evolutionary dominant displays are honed, guided, and controlled by technology in the initial acts of the film—or at least for a time until competition for survival enters the plot.

### **Technology as Control over of Evolution**

While evolution is threaded with hyper-aggression in the film, the use of technology is simultaneously portrayed as attempting to contain the raw brutality and power of some species. This technological control is initiated in the opening scene as the Engineers jump-start evolution on Earth as a deliberate, technological act. Similarly, the mastery of technology is itself interpreted by Peter as evidence that humans are transcending mortality, demonstrating the contemporary concern that “certain leaders will handle the species’ evolution” (Miller, 2014, p. 1016). In his confident devotion to technological innovation, Peter highlights the technological advancements of humanity for his arena audience, describing how humans can undo mortality. In his bravado display of his hypothetical that the to-be accomplishments of humanity overcome all mortal barriers through technological innovation, Peter’s speech



connects technology to the creation of life that is displayed in the film, bypassing organic evolution and operating as mad science, which captures “the public’s relationship to science” that is “unsettling” (Romm, 2014, October 29, para. 1).

Peter’s technological ambition demonstrates how evolutionary survivalism changed from a biological to a technological process, sped up by human intelligence with the ambition to control life’s creative process, which is regularly hypothesized in science fiction (Adams, et al, 2015), but also theorized in scientific philosophy as a potential outcome as “our species has rather abruptly been cosmologically privileged to take over the evolutionary process” (Miller, 2014, p. 1012). Peter’s own ambitious creation of an immortal life form ends up later turning on humanity, as David begins tinkering with the xenomorph technology to kill the crew, ultimately taking over the evolutionary process. As a common theme of disaster in science fiction that displays the consequences of overly ambitious science (Tudor, 1991; Smits, 2006), in his fixation for innovation Peter inadvertently creates a murderous monster that has the same violent nature as the Engineers who created the xenomorphs to destroy humanity. Creators cannot control the sheer power of their creations to use technology to murder intellectually and physically inferior species. The film intertwines mad science with competitive survivalism, both each serving a techno-evolutionary prescription of reality.

The Engineers’ mechanical and inquisitive malevolence, along with the brutal physicality toward humans, illustrates Darwin’s reference to the great advantages of an evolutionary perspective: “There is a grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers” (Darwin, p. 425). As part of those “powers,” evolution’s brutality is portrayed in the Engineers’ use of technology to participate in the evolutionary process of creating monsters who will kill humanity rather than assist them. The Engineers aren’t divine, but are driven by genocide. As David discovers how the Engineers plan to wipe out humanity, the film gives an artificial intelligence a superior intellect over humanity in the evolutionary process, a cause for human panic because “Many futurists have foreseen evil robots and computers—AI systems that develop free will and turn against us” (Schwartz, 2001, p. 1). David is the “killer robot” in popular culture explorations of faith versus evolution (Young & Carpenter, 2018, p. 562).

Technology is represented in the film as jumpstarting the brutality of a survival-of-the-fittest

display when utilized by both the Engineers and David to create both physical and intellectual weapons that challenge deity's existence, common in science fiction as robots often "present a challenge of established philosophies" (Cornea, 2003, p. 4). Through situating technology as capable of inquisitive manipulation of life rather than altruistic sacrifice, the film situates scientific ideas as superior to the moot religious explanations of life because the "artificial humanoid" emerges, but does not possess "the biblical God's attitude" of humanity (Ambrus, p. 572).

### **Engineers as Undivine**

The Engineers continuously contradict religious assumptions as Elizabeth's expectations of them as divine are dashed, described in literature as *The Undivine* realization (Barolini, 1992). They are not encircled in heavenly light, nor do they offer comforting words of promise, but are experimenters, aggressive, violent, without pity, and do not see their creations as allies. They exhibit the contemporary heartlessness in science fiction that all life is expendable (Lotufo, 2012). As part of the transition away from hero to villain through the utilization of mad science, the film initially situates technological experimenters as "potentially hero," but also "potentially villain" (Hendershot, 1997, p. 31). This is most evident at the end of the film as the last Engineer slaughters the crew and engages in the symbolic final confrontation between the instigator of evolutionary processes as he, the last Engineer, battles the representation of religious faith, Elizabeth.

The un-divinity of the Engineers is initially displayed during the crew's first exploration of the Engineers' base when they discover a statue of an Engineer, described by David as "strangely human," which explodes in an attempt to study it, causing David to reiterate his earlier observation of the Engineers' human nature: "Mortal after all." In her disappointment, Elizabeth also declares the mortality of the Engineers, "It's us," realizing that her own human existence is closer to the Engineers' nature than her initial assumption of them as deities, an idea celebrated in the popular ideas of Erich von Däniken (1999).

Capturing the social interlinking of media and cultural issues (McLuhan & McLuhan, 1992) in his prologue before the events in the film, Peter's words foreshadow his own downfall in

trusting that the Engineers would be benevolent, as he is the first victim of the final Engineer's angry and merciless reaction to the crew awakening him. Thus, the Engineer's violence parallels Peter's fixation on the titan Prometheus's punishment. Both the titan's and the technology mogul's fates capture the prologue's description of how the Greek gods "overreacted a little" in attacking their inferiors. Peter and Prometheus, both mimicking deity, suffer for their defiance. In comparison, no species or creation in the film possesses the instinctual faith-fight of Elizabeth, who alone avoids the sin of mad science tinkering with evolution.

While Elizabeth hoped for a divinity-confirming experience in meeting the Engineers, instead her makers prefer her dead. The closer she gets to the Engineers, the more her faith is threatened. In wording that echoes Charles Darwin by the homonymous scientist in the film, Elizabeth's partner Charlie tells her that "there is nothing special about the creation of life," paralleling Darwin's phrase: "I view all beings not as special creations, but as lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before" (p. 424). The lack of comfort from the film's representation of what was hoped to have been divinity turns out to be the cold truth about human origins according to Ridley Scott's universe: that there is no loving deity as described by religion.

Despite intentionally creating life on Earth, the Engineers subsequently changed their minds about Earth and created the xenomorphs as weapons to destroy humanity "two-thousand years" ago, which is seen on a hologram recording of the Engineers desperately running from their own escaped monster. Immediately interested in the timing of the event, Elizabeth uses carbon dating to identify the timing of the Engineers' deaths to "Two-thousand years [ago], give or take." This specific timing of two-thousand years as an estimated time frame, "give or take" during the film's explicit setting of 2094 AD, coincides with the death of Jesus in the New Testament, providing an unspoken but planted paratext between the Engineers' violent response to humanity with their creation of the xenomorph at the time of humanity's violent response to Jesus, as recorded in the *Bible* (John 19:1-29 KJV).

Without explicit discussion of Jesus in the film, Ridley Scott nonetheless described his consideration of a plot surrounding a "Space Engineer Jesus," where Jesus was a rejected

Engineer who came to Earth, and that the creation of the xenomorph to destroy humanity was a response to humanity's violent rejection of the Engineer Jesus (Moore, 2012, December 17). The presence of such a blatant, would-be religious plot element coincides with Elizabeth's questioning the final Engineer when she meets him, "I need to know why! Why do they hate us? What did we do wrong?" Although this theme is not developed in the film beyond the "two-thousand years ago" statement during the carbon dating scene, the weight of its symbolism functions as an intertwining of evolution and religion. Furthering situating theology as serving evolutionary processes instead of being an independent explanation, Scott connected the Jesus probability to the hypothetical of his narrative: "if you look at it [from the Engineers' perspective] as an 'our children are misbehaving down there' . . . And you can say, 'Let's send down one more of our emissaries to see if he can stop it.' Guess what? They crucified him." The intertwining of theology into the evolutionary process, even as Jesus being portrayed as an Engineer despite not making it into the final script, assumes a hierarchy of better versus weaker explanations, and of faith serving as utility for evolution.

### **Evolution's Superiority Over Faith**

While Elizabeth is committed to her faith, the other scientists in the film who argue for Darwinian evolution articulate their stances in defiance of her continual declarations of faith. Charlie describes the linear structure of the Engineers' headquarters as "God does not build in straight lines," referring to the stark differences from a god described in religion who lacks a linear and mechanical building structure, such as "straight lines." Being experimental scientists, the Engineers are mechanical in their creation approach, and not focused on aesthetic landscapes.

Important in the film's plot is the vicious willingness to allow, distribute, and endure pain, which Peter prioritizes as a survival mechanism in his prologue speech. In his opening remarks, Peter cites a scene in the film *Lawrence of Arabia* (Lean, 1962) where T. E. Lawrence possesses enough tolerance to pain to allow him to put a match out with his bare fingers, stating: "The trick . . . is not minding that it hurts." This reference foreshadows the cruelty toward humanity that is displayed later by Peter's own creation as David kills humans. Also inspired by the *Lawrence of Arabia* matchstick scene, David repeats the same phrase to

himself as a new personal theme, giving him endurance and savagery through experiencing and distributing pain (Freeman, 2015). Being incapable of human feelings such as compassion, David proceeds to conduct his own experiments that lead to the death of humanity as he implants the xenomorph technology into the crew's bodies, which he does incessantly in *Prometheus's* sequel, *Alien: Covenant* (Scott, 2017). As the advanced creation that Peter hinted to be his new project in the prologue speech, David is an evolutionary superior manifestation that threatens the survival of anything less than itself, namely humans.

Later, mission commander Meredith Vickers demonstrates the evolutionary perspective's cynicism toward the idea that the Engineers are god-like and can miraculously heal her father Peter's aging body with their advanced science. Disgusted at her father's faith in unknown beings from another planet, Meredith shows her impatience as she has long pursued control of Weyland Industries from her father, "A king has his reign, and then he dies. It's inevitable. That is the natural order of things," causing Peter to recoil from his daughter's display of ambition to supplant him. Meredith's cynicism toward her father's quest for a "miracle" cure from his aged state turns out to be the more accurate perspective as the Engineers, who demonstrate the common theme of brutality in popular culture (Hallam & Marshment, 2000; Thomas, 2018), defy the assumption of their divinity and brutally kill Peter.

Whereas in the prologue Peter briefly references God, at the end of the film, after being attacked by the Engineer, he declares as he begins to lose consciousness, "There is nothing" evident about an afterlife. Seventy years after his speech, Peter is dealt the crushing blow of realizing there is no technological cure for mortality, and he realizes that humanity is without purpose and will not be miraculously spared from a superior species. Evolution is, in its brutally struggle, the mere promise of permanent death.

### **Instinctual Faith as Survival**

Although described in science as an evolutionary instinct by multiple scholars (Wade, 2009; Murphey, 2009; Bering; Teehan, 2018), faith is verbally and symbolically scorned in the film when used as an attempt to explain life's origins. Keeping faith afloat in a utilitarian rather than empirical context, religion takes a commonly negated place in science fiction tales (Connor,

2014). Amid the struggle to know the source of life's origins, Elizabeth's ability to transcend the life-threatening difficulties demonstrates "assurance of control over unpredictable adversities," including "disaster or death" (Wade, p. 1), a claim about faith also observed by Darwin as "successive generations" develop "peculiar mental habits" (192-193). Opposing the primal instinct, Elizabeth is caught in two intertwined battles against the dominance of evolution: the intellectual and the physical. She battles the intellectual answers of evolution against male scientists, fights for her life physically against the xenomorph technology planted into her by two male characters, and later fights for her life again in her confrontation with the final Engineer.

The durability of Elizabeth's faith is presented early in the film as a flashback dream shows Elizabeth as a child listening to her father declare his faith that life after death offers "heaven" to believers and is "beautiful." This flashback visualizing Elizabeth's religious faith is further symbolized in her wearing the cross necklace that her father wore earlier in the flashback scene, a "mythic symbol" that drives the narrative and represents faith's endurance (Plate, 2003, p. 7). Utilizing her faith instinct in a particular act of defiance to evolutionary authority when David attempts to remove it from around her neck because "It may be contaminated," Elizabeth fights off David physically and verbally over the religious symbol's usefulness.

The other scientists, mostly men, do not take Elizabeth's claims of humanity being created by the Engineers seriously, responding to her faith in creation, "Do you have anything to back that up? I mean, if you want to discount three centuries of Darwinism, that's ... woohoo!", with accompanying sarcastic thumbs up gestures. As Elizabeth responds with a simple declaration of faith that she was equipped with from her father, "I don't. But it's what I choose to believe," she demonstrates her resilience and lack of intimidation in response to skepticism. Similarly, Meredith assertively states to Elizabeth, "I'm certain your Engineers are nothing but scribblings of savages living in dirty little caves," and dismisses her father's assumption that the Engineers can and will save him from death: "Weyland was a superstitious man. He wanted a true believer on board." As these scenes take place early in the film, the debate between evolution and religion sets the tone for the violent ploy of a survival-of-the-fittest contest as the plot develops, along with foreshadowing Elizabeth's journey toward using her faith at the end of the film to defeat superior species.

Damaged and distressed from her physical battles with monsters, Elizabeth declares to the aged Peter: "We must leave!" Unshaken by her warning, Peter responds with his lack of discernment of danger: "Time to see if you can deliver what you promised: meet my maker." As the scene transitions to Elizabeth looking in a mirror and weeping amidst her crisis as she has realized that the Engineers are nothing like the deity that her cross necklace represents, she tells herself, "Okay. Okay" as she accepts Peter's charge to exercise faith yet again, despite her already knowing that the Engineers intend to harm humanity. Differing slightly from the theatrical version of the film, its trailer (*Prometheus*, 2012, March 18) shows Elizabeth in a praying position with her hands clasped and head bowed in a prayerful, pleading position; a paratext image that further enriches the contest of explanations in the film.

In an earlier scene following her discovery that the Engineers were attacked "two thousand years ago" by their xenomorphs, Elizabeth is the only crewmember who discerns that the Engineers' technology is dangerous, leading her to scream, "Stop! Stop! Don't touch it! Don't touch anything!", as David attempts to pick up a xenomorph incubator. Quickly piecing together the Engineers' destructive plans with the xenomorphs while every other scientist around her is oblivious to the danger, Elizabeth trusts her instincts as she realizes the final Engineer is a threat, whereas other crew members fail to figure out the Engineers' plan to eradicate humanity. Her ability to identify warning signs of danger illustrate Elizabeth's faith functioning as a survival mechanism. She possesses a methodical observation of danger and is quickly willing to fight back rather than shrink in fear. She exhibits bravery that other scientists lack. They stand too close to the Engineer in the final confrontation, falsely trusting that he will be civil. This wisdom comes from the earlier triumphant confrontations with David. With care, she stands away from the Engineer rather than in awe at his size, strength, and ancient gravitas.

While subsequently being attacked by the Engineer she screams at him, "Die!" as she pushes a button to open a latch door, allowing the gigantically grown squid monster, like the one extracted from her womb that David implanted into her, to kill her attacker, thereby overcoming the hyper-aggression of scientific machinations. As the sole survivor of the confrontation between creators and creations, Elizabeth demands her father's cross that David confiscated from her, fittingly captured in David's symbolic response that the cross is "In my utility belt."

Her faith assists her conquering mortal danger as an instinctual manifestation to fight.

In her victories, Elizabeth simultaneously embraces science and utilizes her religious drive. Contrary to Peter's technological scientific exploration, she possesses her own unyielding inquisitiveness to find divinity through the utilization of science rather than to pursue violent experimentation. She represents survival while Peter represents hubris and the urge to flirt with mad science. She resists technological manipulation of life, and alone leaves evolutionary processes to operate within their own organic processes of survival. Ultimately, it is Elizabeth, with her faith instinct, who "doesn't mind that it hurts" when facing mortality. In her ever-sustaining faith in God, Elizabeth summarizes her experience with humanity's creators: "They created us. Then they tried to kill us. They changed their minds. I deserve to know why." And in her faith, she insists on continuing her search as she declares her continued resolve in the final sentence of the film: "In the year of Our Lord, 2094... I am still searching."

Conversely, in the middle of his TED speech as he declares that humans have become like gods due to the ability to create life using technology, Peter dismisses the significance of a traditionally religious canon that deities preside over humanity: "I haven't been struck down. I take that to mean I'm right." Yet in contrast to the fate of Elizabeth, Peter is, indeed, ironically "struck down" as he is dealt a fatal blow by the Engineer in the same battle where Elizabeth ultimately outduels her creator. The performance of a faith instinct illustrates the drive to endure, whether it be in the face of danger or when confronted by observable scientific evidence.

## **Conclusion**

Enacting the extensive debate between religious creationists and evolutionists, *Prometheus* situates faith as simultaneously useful but naïve, and yet ultimately sustainable in the human search for meaning in the universe. Faith offers the capacity to see dangers and navigate around them, refusing the impulses that come from "demagoguery" that threaten the opportunity for "a unified community" through polarizing depictions (Cowan 2021, p. 183). Yet despite having purpose, faith is without substance in Scott's cinematic world.



As *Prometheus's* prologue is a digital display of a scientist declaring his independence from theological traditions and describing himself as a manifestation of the godly power, Peter's oration operates as quasi-victories over enemies. Decades later in the film's hypothetical payout, his ambition causes death and horror due to his inability to not force his appetite for control into simplifying the natural world with the use of technology, leaving himself, his scientific advances, and humanity dead.

As the film uses faith to serve stringent positivism without divine display, Ridley Scott's story, unfortunately, demonstrates scientific simplicity as spectacle. Thus, why is the machination of evolution dangerous, at least hypothetically in the film? It suggests the necessity of tyranny in science and culture, centering our evolutionary progress into the hands of a "newly appointed force, whereby these representatives take control of this 'our' (species') evolution" (Miller, 2014, p. 1012).

As a dreamer dedicated to conquering space with technological ambition like the fictional Peter Weyland, in July 2021 billionaire Amazon founder Jeff Bezos told CBS News before his Blue Origin launch, "When it comes to space, ... I'm using my resources to put in place heavy lifting infrastructure so the next generation of people can have a dynamic, entrepreneurial explosion into space" (Harwood, July 19). As humanity endeavors into the frontiers of space, the yearning to discover the mysteries of the space frontier is hauntingly echoed in Peter's aggressive ambition.

As a similar display of contemporary real scientific effort, capturing both Elizabeth's perseverance through her trauma and Peter's ambition, two years after the film's release billionaire Richard Branson, who beat Jeff Bezos to space by only days, expressed on Twitter his unyielding effort to fulfill his own dream, which also hauntingly resembles Peter Weyland's fixation on exploration: "Space is hard—but worth it. We will persevere and move forward together." Apparently, space belongs to billionaires. In Ridley Scott's film, faith might assist in survival, but won't offer Branson's sense of confidence when humanity faces the dark secrets of the cosmos. Nonetheless, faith drives that ambitious search for intimacy with the cosmos, whether the answer be a friendly deity or a vicious Engineer.

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