

CHAPTER 8

METALLICA'S EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM

From We to I and Back Again

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Rock music has always been about *freedom*, about the expression of freedom in a variety of forms: as sexual desire, as nonconformity and rebellion, sometimes as critique, and certainly as the proclamation of new artistic possibilities. Indeed, many great artists and bands are remembered by their characteristic expression of freedom. When Elvis Presley put a white face on the seemingly dangerous pelvic gyrations of black music, he propelled himself straight into mainstream America and changed popular music forever. When snarling Sid Vicious and the Sex Pistols gave Margaret Thatcher the finger and urinated on their adulating audiences, punk rock pushed the limits of expression beyond what had been known before.

Metallica too can be considered in the light of their unique expression of freedom. And while there are many approaches one might take in such a consideration—as there are many philosophical perspectives from which one might think about freedom—freedom as the expression of *authenticity* is an approach particularly suited to capturing the essence of the band. According to philosophers in the existentialist tradition, authenticity is a kind of *lived* truth, a *truth proved in existence*.¹ Music fans, and particularly Metallica fans,

¹ Existentialism is a tradition in philosophy which encompasses a fairly wide spectrum of thinkers; some are religious, some are completely secular, some resist even

usually have a good grasp of what “authenticity” means even without having read any philosophy.

First, existentialist philosophers understand “authentic” to mean something like “truth,” but not “truth” in the sense of “objective facts,” but in the sense of “truth” that is personally, *existentially* meaningful, as when we speak of being “true to ourselves,” or having “a true friend.” Second, existentialist philosophers, like music fans, and like many ordinary, thoughtful people, draw various contrasts between *authentic* and *inauthentic* modes of life, between modes of life that are fresh, original, and interesting and those that are characterized by stereotypical clichés and mere conventionality. Artists, however, fall into a special category, as they are quite often self-conscious about the possible contrast between authenticity and inauthenticity. Artists, likely more than average people, are concerned with *original* forms of expression which are “true” to their own sense of creativity. And in this sense, artists, insofar as they are “true to themselves,” live their lives like existentialist philosophers.

Metallica, in this fan’s opinion, have *always* lived like existentialist philosophers because their music has *always* been grounded in a quest for an authentic expression of freedom. It is this steadfast quest that has distinguished their work through several stylistic breaks; it is what signals their widespread appeal; and it is what helps us to understand their remarkable longevity. Consider, to begin, the mark Metallica first made in history with the genre of “thrash” or “speedmetal.” In the heady (headbanging) days of the early 1980s Metallica stood out for the purity and minimalism of their expression. And in the context of the rock scene of the time, this was a sure sign of authenticity. In contrast to the glamrock poseurs who expressed a quite different brand of rock freedom in playful inversions (in cross-dressing androgyny), Metallica remained unconcerned with appearances (and

being called “existentialist.” In the most basic sense though all are united in the thought that individual human beings are responsible for the *meaning* in their lives. This is the root of the existentialist concern with authenticity as a *truth proved in existence*. Without extensively addressing the many fascinating philosophical debates within this tradition, I will consider Metallica in light of some key themes in four major figures: Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Hannah Arendt—though she is not often classified as an existentialist.

with MTV). Metallica came as themselves and spent their energy immersed in the relentless driving power of their music, in the seemingly inhuman speed with which they played their instruments. And let it also be said that in their purity and minimalism of expression, Metallica made their mark without falling into the “clichés” of metal mythology, the “whole sexist, Satanist crap,” as Lars Ulrich has put it.² Like Elvis, the Sex Pistols, Iron Maiden, and every other great band, Metallica has made their unique mark in history, but in their case the expression of artistic freedom is first and best understood in a stripped-down metal message: “You’re thrashing all around / acting like a maniac,” “ ’cause we are Metallica.”

This is not to say that the relentless quest for an expression of authentic freedom is a simple matter for any human being, let alone for talented musicians who meet with unfathomed success. Considering the journey of a rock band, though, is an excellent way to see the challenges of authenticity that philosophers in the existentialist tradition have identified. Decades before Metallica, indeed before the emergence of rock music itself, the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) and one of his French philosophical heirs, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), outlined the promises and pitfalls of authenticity. The story of Metallica not only fits their fundamental schema neatly, but gives us examples that help us to grasp concretely these two philosophers’ conceptions.

In *Being and Time* (1927), Heidegger’s most existentialist work, the question of authenticity primarily concerns *historical* existence.³ To live authentically is to grasp the potential to make the most of the historical condition into which one is “thrown.” In Heidegger’s formulation, to fail to understand oneself historically and thus to fail to recognize “one’s own most possibilities,” is to live inauthentically; it is to mechanically repeat the past; it is to remain with “the They,”

² Quoted in Mick Wall and Malcom Dome, *The Making of Metallica's Metallica* (Burlington, Ontario: CG Publishing, 1996), p. 23. Hereafter cited in text as *MM*.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962). Hereafter cited in text as *BT*. For those interested in a further exploration of Heidegger, an excellent place to begin is the collection *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper Collins, 1993).

the unthinking people who fail to either take responsibility or be authentically free. Although in *Being and Time* Heidegger is thinking more of politics than art, his historically grounded line of thought makes much sense of the history of art, of the “genius” of creativity and of the development of artistic genres. From this perspective, to be in a band that helps to originate a whole new genre of music—in Metallica’s case, “thrash” or “speedmetal”—is precisely to recognize the possibilities of one’s historical existence, to express authentic freedom.⁴

In *Being and Nothingness* (1944), Jean-Paul Sartre, writing a generation after Heidegger, upped the ante of authenticity as he gave existentialist philosophy a new psychological depth and furthered our understanding of the obstacles confronting freedom.⁵ In Sartre’s analysis—so well-suited to a consideration of Metallica—the task of living authentically requires constant vigilance, a real effort to understand oneself with maximal honesty and transparency. Where Heidegger in *Being and Time* primarily understood authenticity as the heroic founding of new possibilities unseen by “the They,” Sartre revealed the layers of deception and inauthenticity *within* the individual self. In his famous analysis of “bad faith,” he portrayed human beings in near constant states of denial as they identify with masked caricatures of themselves, because they live according to roles which have been externally ascribed to them or with which they have long since ceased to identify (*BN*, 86–118). For artists, and particularly successful artists, the dilemma of “bad faith” analyzed by Sartre is intensified for a couple of reasons. In the first place there is something we might call the “rock star syndrome.” Typically, the people around the rock star—precisely because they passionately identify with the form of freedom he or she represents—come to expect certain forms of expression. As it turns out though, it might not feel “authentic” to smash one’s drum set *every* night. In the second place, for an artist

⁴ As Heidegger emphasizes in his later writings, it is just as “authentic” to maintain and preserve a tradition once it has become established as it is to grasp the possibilities of a new foundation, provided of course that one does not become homogenous and mechanized. For a further discussion of Heidegger’s development, see Krell’s discussion in *Basic Writings*.

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. by Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Washington Square Press, 1956). Hereafter cited in text as *BN*.

who must change and grow in order to develop his or her artistic potential, remaining with what one has already achieved instead of developing new ideas and new capacities is a constant *temptation* and a danger to oneself. Thus, in an ironic sense, a steadfast concern for authentic expression might itself become an obstacle to authenticity. For what feels “true” at one point might appear as “stock” or “average” at another time. And finally, success may present an obstacle to authenticity on a more personal level; it may imply modes of living that no longer correspond to political, ethical, and cultural reality. In James Hetfield’s words, “Change has to happen no matter how much people don’t want to see their stable things change. As humans we have to change” (*MM*, 22).

The Power of the “We”

In a 1984 interview for the British magazine *Sounds*, Lars insisted that nothing about Metallica was planned or orchestrated, “Everything Metallica does is spontaneous; I think if we lose our spontaneity we will be in one hell of a lot of trouble.”⁶ As fans can read in Metallica’s official fan book, twenty years later this pronouncement appears rather brash (in a good way) to the band members themselves; it sounds like the talk of “young punks” [James], of kids, “young, drunk, full of spunk” [Lars], “pumped up and ready to take on anything and everything” [Kirk] (*SW*, 5).

This punk attitude, this unchecked confidence in “spontaneous” expression, appears in hindsight as the “magic of youth.” But it also reflects experiences of creativity and freedom that can be considered *philosophically*. Just because Metallica themselves did not philosophize at the very time they were busy helping to originate a new genre of music, does not mean that this spontaneous expression cannot be described in theoretical terms. A good place to start is with the account of *positive freedom* made by the political philosopher Hannah Arendt

⁶ Quoted in Steffan Chirazi (ed.), *So What: The Good, the Mad, and the Ugly; The Official Metallica Illustrated Chronicle* (New York: Broadway Books, 2004), p. 3. Hereafter cited in text as *SW*.

(1906–75) (a student of Heidegger, incidentally). In *The Human Condition* and many other writings, Arendt argues that freedom is experienced most authentically when it is *shared* with and among other people *in the world*.⁷ In the scheme of her political philosophy authentic freedom is *public* freedom. It is not the private freedom of the single individual existing in solitude, but freedom that *happens* in a shared space when people act *with* each other rather than against each other. In such moments of shared freedom—we might think of a protest or a town hall meeting—people become *empowered*. This experience of positive, shared freedom feels richer and more vital than all other forms of freedom. Importantly, this empowered feeling is not rooted in violence or omnipotence, experiences which Arendt sees as characteristic of tyranny rather than of freedom. It is an experience of the “we.” The feeling of power and capacity, of the “I-can” (to use Arendt’s expression), comes because one is part of something larger: one is not alone, but part of a “we.”

Arendt is thinking of a specific form of *political* freedom, but there is no doubt that musical performances, particularly kick-ass ones, are experiences of an empowered “we.” And certainly for all of their changes and challenges throughout the years Metallica has always been grounded in this “we” of live performance, all the more so as they have been one of the hardest working bands in rock and roll, often touring for years on end. There are numerous stories about the band that corroborate their dedication to the “we.” Think of their repeated celebration of the “garage days” and the decision to follow Cliff Burton (a kind of punk rock hippie) from Los Angeles to San Francisco, a city considerably more grounded in experiences of the “we.” If we consider in particular the first album, *Kill 'Em All*, it is truly remarkable how predominant the experience of the “we” is at the beginning of Metallica’s journey. In the lyrics of this album the word “we” appears more times than on all the other albums combined. It appears and is repeated, again and again announcing the “we” of the newly born speed metal community. From “Hit the Lights”: “No life till leather / *We* are gonna kick some ass tonight / *We* got the

⁷ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958). See particularly chapter 5, “Action.” Also helpful is the essay “What is Freedom?” in *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 1993).

metal madness . . . When *we* start to rock / *we* never want to stop . . . *We* are gonna blow this place away . . . *We* are gonna rip right through your brain / *We* got the lethal power.” From “Whiplash”: “*We* are gathered here to maim and kill / ’cause this is what *we* choose.” From “Metal Militia”: “*We* are as one as *we* all are the same . . . Leather and metal are our uniforms / Protecting what *we* are / joining together to take on the world.”

It might seem that *Kill 'Em All* is “immature,” both musically and thematically. In comparison to Metallica’s later work their debut features less musical virtuosity and no social commentary. On the other hand, we might say that this immaturity precisely corresponds to the expression of the freedom of the “we.” “Jump in the Fire,” which is, of course, not about the devil, but about the “we,” beckons us to join the collective in a metal baptism, moshing “down in the pit.” The remarkable spontaneity that Lars spoke of is nothing other than the feeling of power and capacity, which “we” feel when the “adrenaline starts to flow.”

Discovering and Developing the “I”

Metallica’s subsequent albums in the 1980s, *Ride the Lightning*, *Master of Puppets*, and . . . *And Justice for All*, established the band as masters of the metal genre. Although the dynamic power of the “we” is still present in every note and drum beat, there is a remarkable new emphasis on the singular experience of the “I.” In the lyrics of *Ride the Lightning* the word “I” appears in almost every song and is reflected throughout the thematic content of the album: “I can feel the flame . . . As I watch death unfold . . . I don’t want to die” (“Ride the Lightning”); “I have lost the will to live . . . cannot stand this hell I feel” (“Fade to Black”); “I am dying to live / Cry out / I’m trapped under ice” (“Trapped under Ice”).

Ride the Lightning’s concern with death—in the electric chair, under ice, by suicide—might seem a morbid fixation characteristic of youth, but in fact such concern has a long history in philosophy and in Christian theology. In the existentialist tradition Heidegger stands out with his “death analyses” in *Being and Time*. According to Heidegger, reflection on one’s own death is important for authentic living. In his

formulation, “attunement” to the possibility of death “discloses” one’s “own most possibility” and thus can return the individual from an inauthentic mode of living among “the They” to authenticity and the recognition of one’s “true” possibilities in this life (*BT*, 270–311).

Heidegger is a good reference point in thinking through Metallica’s mode of expression in this period because, from at least one perspective, his underlying concern in *Being and Time* corresponds neatly with an important development in Metallica’s music. In Heidegger’s view the “attunement” toward death and other seemingly negative experiences such as “anxiety” in fact produces an *empassioned* sense of life; from these moments of negativity, *conscience* and responsibility develop. Thus while the song “Fade to Black” is dark indeed, the overall pessimism of *Ride the Lightning* is only the flip side of a powerful activist sentiment, of a passion for life: “I am dying to live.” On *Master of Puppets* and . . . *And Justice for All* the dark reflections of the “I” are analogously developed. The concern with death gives way to ruminations on addiction, hypocrisy, nuclear proliferation, environmental degradation, and social injustice—all evils to be confronted in this world. Interestingly, the darker and more pessimistic the overall themes become—as if the world were dictated by deterministic forces that overwhelm the very possibility of freedom—all the more does Metallica’s forceful driving music provide powerful optimistic counters to the “dark forces.” If “Master of Puppets” reminds us that something else is “pulling the strings” and “The Shortest Straw” tells us that something bad might have been drawn for unlucky you, we have at the same time, as a vital counter, the extraordinary musical virtuosity characteristic of this period. This is most dramatically the case with Kirk Hammet, of course, whose brilliant solos win him recognition by guitarists far and wide. From our perspective we might say that Kirk’s talent, developed to genius, represents the living power of freedom confronting the forces of determinism.

The “Embodied Me”

Metallica’s fifth album, the so-called Black Album, put the band on the megastar map. In this fan’s opinion, as the Black Album is chock

full of such classics as “Sandman,” “Holier than Thou,” “Sad but True,” “The Unforgiven,” and “Nothing Else Matters,” it stands on its own, absolutely. As it also signals the ambition for commercial success though, it immediately raised “authenticity questions” for some diehard fans, particularly the choice of the radio-savvy producer Bob Rock. As Lars summed up some fans’ horror at the choice of the producer responsible for the likes of Mötley Crüe and Bon Jovi, in 1991 it seemed Metallica was now “standing for” what they had been “going against for the last five years” (MM, 11).

From a philosophical perspective, Metallica and their fans have been engaged in a constant dialogue about authenticity that has parallels in the history of philosophy. First, defending the Black Album, Metallica explicitly resisted being pigeon-holed in the thrash genre. Second, they explained their own dissatisfaction with the increasingly technical and progressive direction that the last albums had taken, particularly . . . *And Justice for All*. As Kirk put it, reflecting on the supporting tour for *Justice*, “we realized that the general consensus was that the songs were too long . . . I can remember getting offstage one night after playing the [ten minute-plus] song ‘And Justice For All,’ and one of us saying, ‘that’s the last time we ever play that fucking song’” (MM, 23). Lars echoes this sentiment with a further analysis: “I think we spent a lot of years trying to prove to ourselves and to everyone that we can play our instruments . . . this big drum fill . . . Kirk’s playing all these wild things that are really difficult.” In fact though, “it’s gotten so clean and antiseptic that you’ve got to wear gloves to put the damn thing in the CD player!” Lars insists that the decision to go with Bob Rock was because the band needed to express something “looser, groovier,” some “emotion,” “the shit that’s in there naturally” (MM, 12, 9). And finally, James adds that Metallica was seeking a new sound, something “really bouncy, really lively—something that just has a lot of groove to it” (MM, 8).

The move from the structural complexity and virtuosity characteristic of more progressive metal to a “looser” sound, grounded in the blues base of rock and roll, can be viewed in several lights. Metallica’s move reflects participation in a wider musical trend of the 1990s, a decade when groovier and funkier sounds reinfiltated rock—recall Guns N’ Roses, Jane’s Addiction, and the Red Hot Chili Peppers. But insofar as the move reflects the need for a more “embodied” personal form of expression, it has striking parallels in the

history of philosophy, indeed in the history of existentialism. Let's consider just one of these moments and note again the way in which Metallica have, perhaps without knowing it, *always* lived their lives as existentialist philosophers.

The first and perhaps the greatest existentialist philosopher, Søren Kierkegaard (1813–55), found his footing as a thinker and made his mark while engaged in a deep critique of Georg Hegel (1770–1831), who was generally regarded as the greatest philosopher of the time. To put it much too simply, Hegel was a philosopher in the old-fashioned style; he wrote a *monumental* system of philosophy that claimed to capture all of reality from the perspective of “Absolute Spirit.” Kierkegaard found Hegel’s bombastic monumental system to be a work of genius and yet ridiculous. Kierkegaard wittily suggested (in a notebook) that if Hegel had written his gargantuan *The Science of Logic* but, “in the Preface disclosed the fact that it was only a thought-experiment . . . he would have been the greatest thinker who ever lived.” However, without acknowledging that his system was as an “experiment” offered by a single human being living in this world (rather than an absolute system conceived by a disembodied abstract thinker speaking for God himself), Hegel proved himself a brilliant philosopher, but ultimately “comic” and *inauthentic*.⁸

In a striking sense Metallica’s need for “a looser, groovier” expression parallels Kierkegaard’s original critique of Hegel. It’s as if, for all of the genius and virtuosity of . . . *And Justice for All*, they had become comic and inauthentic because they had lost themselves and their own embodiment in the complex abstract system of progressive metal. What had been authentic before because it inspired the development of their musical faculties (and some truly monumental music), was now in fact an obstacle to true expression.

There’s no doubt that the leap out of the system allowed Metallica new-found creative freedom. With the Black Album and *Load* and *Reload* they explored a variety of genres, from classical to country, and allowed these influences to penetrate their creative process. The band found themselves free to slow down, free for melody, free for the occasional sample. Most strikingly, and most horrific to diehard *heshers* (Californian for long-haired metal fan), they allowed

⁸ Quoted in Roger Kimball, “What did Kierkegaard Want?” *New Criterion*, www.newcriterion.com/archive/20/sept01/kierk.htm.

themselves to strike the pose of poseurs, to play at being rock stars, even wearing eyeliner. If this is a 180-degree turn from the decade before, it is worthwhile thinking about Metallica's new megastar status and the grunge pose of authenticity. Lars, ever the master of "cutting through the baloney," reminds us that a rock star *pretending not* to want to be a rock star itself smacks of "bad faith." As he says: "Apart from the guy in Nirvana [Kurt Cobain], who'll lie to you and say, 'Uh, we don't want anyone to buy our records,' 99.9 percent of people in bands would like people to hear their music and get into their band. That is a fucking fact" (MM, 43).

The most outstanding transformation in 1990s Metallica obviously came for James, who was the band member most liberated by the leap from the progressive metal system. As he explains in the documentary DVD entitled *Metallica*, which follows the making of the album, his new-found permission to actually *sing* rather than simply yell, allowed him to go deeper into himself, to be both "more inward and more universal."⁹ This new depth of experience is manifest in several surprising developments in Metallica's music in this period, especially in the *love* song, "Nothing else Matters," and in James' reflections on the trauma of growing up with Christian Scientist parents in "The Unforgiven" and "The God that Failed." The 1990s Metallica consistently used their new-found freedom to make music that speaks *from somewhere*, be it James' personal experience, the country roots of "Mama Said," or the single feminine voice of Marianne Faithfull on "The Memory Remains." Very much in the manner of Kierkegaard's critique of Hegel's abstract philosophizing, Metallica leapt out of the system of progressive metal and made music with personal and emotional depth.

Psychological Stagedive

The end of the 1990s found Metallica in disarray. Granted, things were much worse for other major bands of the period: Jane's

⁹ DVD (2001) *Metallica*, Classic Albums series 3. Limited/Metallica, a partnership. An Isis production in co-production with Eagle Rock. Directed and edited by Mathew Longfellow.

Addiction and Guns N' Roses had split up; Kurt Cobain was long dead. Metallica was still a band, but almost in name more than in spirit. Creatively repressed, Jason Newsted left to pursue his own work in Echobrain, and the relations among other band members were strained. While Metallica's general lack of pretension had always been reciprocated in the dedication of their fans, the Napster controversy opened an abyss between the masters of metal and the iGeneration. The decision to film the making of the next CD—all the while being “therapized” by a performance coach—was bold indeed. To make a “reality show” of the band at its lowest point was, to speak metaphorically, a stagedive risked from the greatest heights, without any certainty that there would be a safe place to fall. As it turned out, the documentary *Some Kind of Monster* landed Metallica even more intimately in their fans' laps, stripped of layers of pretension that two decades of megastardom had inevitably brought.

In the new media environment there are empowered communities of authenticity-hungry fans and a new form of relations that rock bands must engage. Metallica, it seems, with a slight stumble, have hooked into this new (virtual) reality with the same spirit as ever. They have stripped away the wrapping and are allowing maximal direct access to themselves and their creative process.

Some Kind of Monster stands on its own as a documentary with universal significance; it is a tragic-comic revelation of the human condition. From the perspective of Metallica's journey as a band grounded in the quest for an *authentic* expression of freedom in music it is of particular significance, for it brings us full circle to the experience of the “we” that came so spontaneously in the heady days of early speed metal. What the documentary reveals—and this is simultaneously its universal significance—is that the “we” is always something that needs to be tended and nurtured. There are of course magic moments in life when everything seems easy—when one first forms a band, when one first falls in love—but the truth of the matter is that the “we” should never be left to chance. Human relationships involve work. In Metallica's case, acknowledging the “we” meant that the most authentic thing was to allow a touchy-feely therapist (Phil Towle) to create a space for the band to come together. The payoff of this process, as we see in the movie, is that the “we” of Metallica emerges stronger than ever. Most strikingly, a *democratic* process replaces the Ulrich-Hetfield creative dictatorship, the tyranny

that pushed Jason to the point of no return. Thus while there are many moments of beauty in *Some Kind of Monster*, surely among the top is, after so much grievance, Kirk's visible inspiration after James' attitude adjustment, his "opening the door" to other band members writing lyrics. The new democratic mode indeed made for a stripped-down final product, but it is the fulfillment of the promise for which Metallica has always stood. It is freedom that is authentic in the sense that Arendt describes, it is more empowered and alive because it is shared; the "I" is only truly free when it allows others to be free too.

The choice to have the video for *St. Anger* shot at San Quentin, the notorious prison, is a gesture that reflects groundedness in the quest for an *authentic* form of free expression. For what community is more authentically aware of freedom than the residents of the big house? This gesture, along with Matt Mahurin's remarkable illustration of *St. Anger*—an angel in a straitjacket—returns us to themes of the 1980s, to the (Heideggerian) obsession with the obstacles to freedom that heighten our existential awareness, that bring us back from "the They." Metallica's "baptism" of anger and the fact that the supporting tour was named "Madly in Anger with the World" underscore the band's wisdom and maturity. At the risk of being overly philosophical, we might say that Metallica have resynthesized the original power of the "we" with self-reflection and responsibility. Metallica is about "aggressive music with constructive energy," as Lars puts it in the DVD commentary to *Some Kind of Monster*. At the core remains, we may be sure, the steadfast quest for authenticity. "Keep on searching . . . you live it or lie it . . . keep on searching . . . / my lifestyle determines my deathstyle."

