

Suicide, Booze and Loud Guitars
The Ethical Problem of Heavy Metal

Daniel Frandsen

Introduction

There have been many controversies about the heavy metal culture ever since the first Heavy Metal songs hit their audience in the 1970's. Mainly, these controversies have been about ethical and aesthetical issues. In one of the most well-known controversies on heavy metal culture, two young heavy metal fans at Columbine High school killed 13 people, wounded several more, and subsequently committed suicide. In the aftermath of the Columbine massacre the artist Marilyn Manson suddenly got into the cross fire kindled by the media, since he supposedly seemed to have had noticeable influence on the two metal fans at some point. For a number of reasons he certainly was not to blame for the (insane) incident at Columbine High, but one thing still remains unsettled: Is there a connection between Heavy Metal and unethical behaviour? In the following I will focus on the question stated above, also exploring the important role of the aesthetics associated with Heavy Metal culture/music and the possible influence on its audience. One might ask whether there is any connection between ethics and aesthetics at all. One is about the *good* and the *bad* in some sense, and the other is about what constitutes beauty and ugliness. At first sight the two seem to be unrelated. This view is called autonomism. As there are a number of reasons to regard autonomism as doubtful, the first part of this paper will focus on exactly this complex of problems concerning autonomism. Thereafter I will look at the moralist view as it is put forward by Berys Gaut, who claims that an unethical content will always result in an aesthetic flaw, and discuss why this theory cannot be true concerning Heavy Metal. In the last part of the paper I will show why the position called immoralism (or contextualism) is the preferable theory.

The Rejection of Autonomism

Philosophers, such as Monroe Beardsley have claimed that there is no reason to propose any real connection between the good and the beautiful, or generally speaking: there is no connection between ethics and aesthetics.

The claim is that it literally makes no sense to attempt the establishment of a relation between the two concepts, because the two are fundamentally different¹. This claim is called autonomism, and indicates that no content of any artwork can make any difference to any artworks' aesthetic value. However, this view is, at best, irrelevant, but since autonomism has been popular to defend, it is necessary to show why the theory does not hold.

Autonomism holds that the ethical content of an artwork is irrelevant to the aesthetic value of the work, but what we are concerned with here, is works of art (music to be specific), where the ethical content is highly relevant. To reject autonomism, it has to be made clear how ethical content can be relevant for the value of this type of artwork. It is quite often the case that we evaluate works of art partly according to its ethical proposals. We praise some works of art for their ability to illustrate the goodness in humans for instance. Therefore the notion that the ethical content in such works of art is irrelevant will be wrong in such cases. Certainly there will be other cases in which the ethical content is highly irrelevant for the aesthetic evaluation of an artwork. But for this paper's purpose it is indeed important to notice that there actually *are* cases in which the ethical content is pertinent/relevant for the aesthetic value of certain works of art – such as for music.

One way to do this is to imagine a piece of music, where the ethical content is normally considered to be relevant, like the song Noose by the band Sentenced for example, without any ethical content. Obviously, it is a song about committing suicide, which is - for obvious reasons – socially considered a bad and irreversibly desperate act, and therefore often stays a concealed topic within society. Imagine if Noose kept its sound but changed the content – the lyrics of the song - and the song changed into something absolutely irrelevant to any ethical evaluation, would this simultaneously change the aesthetic value of the work? Claiming that the aesthetic value actually changes, I will, in the following, elaborate on the important role of musical composition and thereby show why autonomism needs to be rejected in regard to the instant case.

The Case of Moralism

During the last decades there has been quite a lot of controversy surrounding the Heavy Metal culture. The prevalent concern has been the suicidal acts committed by some young Heavy Metal fans. Some people claimed that the music, as well as musicians are to blame for such tragedies. What is claimed here is that there is a direct connection between such tragedies and the content of the music. Some would perhaps propose that specific content (unethical in this case) can in some way corrupt the audience. Whether this is true or not, it may seem irrelevant for the discussion presented above. However, there is a connection between the debate about the controversies and the value-relation that should be given attention at this point. The claim that musicians can be the ones to blame for another persons suicide, can be formulated in terms of the reverse relation between the ethical content and the aesthetic value. If a work of art proposes immoral behaviour, its content is ethically flawed, thus (in the moralist view) aesthetically flawed, and in its effect can convince people to behave in a certain manner. But claiming this is to suggest even more than moralism. Holders of this position will have to claim at least the possibility of some works of art, being able to cause a change in a person's beliefs, specifically about ethical matters.

Berys Gaut, who is one of the well known experts in the debate about the relation between ethics and the aesthetics, put forward a model for analysing, and in the end reconstructing the theme in his work *Art, Emotions and Ethics* from 2007. The first thing to consider is whether the relation between ethics and aesthetics is invariant or complex². If it is invariant, it means that the relation cannot change, no matter which artwork is evaluated. That is, if one is convinced that an ethical flaw necessarily results in an aesthetic flaw, then the relation is invariant. To argue that the relation is complex, is to claim that the relation can vary, meaning that an ethical flaw in a work of art can in some cases result in an aesthetic merit, but not necessarily in all cases.

The next thing to consider is whether the value-relation of ethics and aesthetics is symmetric or inverted. An invariant symmetric relation means that, in all cases, an ethical flaw will result in an aesthetic flaw. If the relation is inverted, however, it means that an ethical flaw will result in an aesthetic merit. For obvious reasons, such a position has never been noticeably promoted. All theories that suggest a complex relation between ethics and aesthetics will propose that the relation is symmetric in some cases, while inverted in others.

In order to have a plausible theory that proposes an inverted relation, it has to be complex rather than invariant. This position is often called immoralism (or contextualism in Gaut's terminology). If one holds that the relation is invariant and symmetric, it will be a variant of what is normally called moralism (or ethicism in Gaut's terminology).

	Invariant	Complex
Symmetric	Moralism / ethicism	Immoralism / contextualism
Inverted	Extreme immoralism	Immoralism / contextualism

This certainly raises the question why anyone should be a moralist? A moralist is committed to say that any ethical flaw within any work of art, will necessarily result in that work being also aesthetically flawed. This does not mean that a work is really bad, just because it contains an ethical flaw in its content. It is aesthetically flawed, in so far as it is ethically flawed. So a song about suicide can still be considered good, but, it could never qualify to appear as “aesthetically perfect”. Gaut however proposes that the use of what he calls “pro tanto principles” can justify the moralist view. This means that thinking in terms of a work of art which is aesthetically flawed - in so far as it contains an ethical demerit - will allow the moralist to acknowledge that the aesthetic value of a piece of music, can depend on an ethical flaw in its content. This seems to make moralism an attractive position to hold, but there remains one problem, which appears unsolved. The theory still implicates that any work of art which contains an ethical demerit is aesthetically flawed. This generates the result that artworks, and in this case lyrics about suicide will consequently be valued lower than lyrics on the pleasant sides of life – at least as long as we will solely consider the aesthetic value to the extent of ethical content. The following section will focus on a (more) preferable alternative theory, especially in regard of Heavy Metal culture.

Noise and the Aesthetics of Heavy Metal

Before focusing on immoralism (contextualism) it will be reasonable to examine some important points about the aesthetics of Heavy Metal music and its aesthetic perception. Since it is impossible to make a throughout analysis of the aesthetics of Heavy Metal, I will settle with the most important point, namely the use of noise in the composition. One of the most significant theories on the use of noise in music has been put forward by Theodore Gracyk, in *Rhythm and Noise* (1996). Although he wrote his work on the aesthetics of Rock music, most of it can easily be transferred to the aesthetics of Heavy Metal, without any significant difficulties.

What we call noise can be divided into three categories:

- 1) Any sound that interacts with human communication
- 2) Any sound that disturbs humans
- 3) Any sound at a volume that can damage the listener physiologically

Noise in the first category will not be dealt with at this time, since it allows every sound any human might ever hear, to be noise, and if all sounds are considered noise we cannot distinguish noise from other types of sound, and therefore, the discourse would change into a general discourse on sound rather than noise.

The second category is more interesting for the paper's purpose. What is often referred to as noise, are sounds that disturb us, and this is also what some people think of Heavy Metal, for exactly that very reason. In fact, most Heavy Metal music is composed with the intention to disturb the listener. What some people, who do not like to listen to the rough sound of Heavy Metal music, point at, is the feeling that it is hard to focus on other things, while listening to an 'infernal racket', such as referred to Heavy Metal music, playing in the background. Recognizing that the intention of Heavy Metal music is to disturb the listener, it becomes obvious at this point that this intention is overall fulfilled.

Concerning the third category of noise it is a well known fact that most Heavy Metal fans listen to music at a high volume, that could supposedly be loud enough to damage their hearing. It is quite often the case that the music is recorded at a rather high volume, which makes a difference in most cases. The reason for this can be found in exploring how the electric guitar works. What we hear, when we hear the sound of an electric guitar, is not the sound of the strings vibrating. Magnets are placed underneath the strings (these are called pick-ups) through which an electrical current is flowing. The vibration of the strings then is causing the above mentioned disturbance through this electrical current, which is also what the audience listens to through the speakers, along with harmonic overtones. In order to get the desired sound out of this process, it will in some cases be necessary to amplify the sound, because some sounds will not be audible at a lower volume. The reasons for the high-volume recording process are obvious at this point, but what does this have to do with the Heavy Metal audience listening to the music on a rather high volume in their own living-rooms too? In order to notice single parts of the music, it can be necessary to play the music rather loud. Often, Heavy Metal-bands are composed of four instruments (some even more), all playing fast in some cases, and when they are recorded at such a high volume, it might be hard to notice all elements of the music at the same time. At a low volume it is mostly the bass that drops into the background. Of course there are exceptions like the band Mötörhead, where the bass is constantly the most noticeable instrument. This is partly due to the special role the bass plays in a band like Mötörhead, where it takes over the role that would normally be performed by the lead guitar. It is of course possible to find more examples where the bass is noticeable, while not filling the role of the lead guitar. However, this shows that the listeners could miss out on a lot

of details and good sounds if they do not pump up the volume on their stereos.

What does this say now about Heavy Metal music and the audience's culture/way of listening to it? Obviously, there are good reasons for applying the word noise to Heavy Metal, but it does not necessarily mean a bad thing. In fact it can help enhancing the meaning of the music, which will be explored on the example of the analyses of two songs by the Finnish Metal band Sentenced.

Shouting out in Misery

One thing that has not been mentioned yet is the important role of vocals in Heavy Metal music. It is true that not all vocals you will find in Heavy Metal are special in some way, instead there are various types of vocals used in different songs. Some remind the listener of screaming, some offer a very rough sound, and even others sing in a way that is far from what people normally call singing. The reason for this variety of vocal-types has to do with the variety of sound played by different Metal bands. Certain vocal-types are more soothing for certain music-styles. If a song is slow and melancholic it would seem inauthentic if the vocals were like Madonna's in Material Girl for example. It would at least be hard taking it seriously, as in the case of watching the film *Spaceballs* (which actually does not have the intention to be taken seriously) since it is supposed to be a parody on the cult film "Star Wars". Even though Star Wars is fiction, and most of it impossible in reality, it is still more trustworthy as a story than Spaceballs. This important point will be reconsidered in the remaining paper.

As it has been shown, it is an aesthetic merit if the vocals match with the overall sound of the music. An aggressive song about mass murder for example, will be more trustworthy if the vocals are as aggressive as the theme of the song, and perhaps sounding "evil". Thence the vocals, the music as well as the lyrical content should be connected in a trustworthy way, in order to receive, the best result regarding the aesthetic value of the work. Any disharmony between these three elements will be problematic for any piece of music, unless the point is to make something that corresponds to what Spaceballs is to Star Wars, namely a parody. Parodies are not necessarily aesthetically unfortunate, or even aesthetically worse than the work it is supposed to be a parody of. The aesthetic value in many cases depends on the ability to make the audience "believe" in its concern. This does not mean that the audience should believe it to be the actual reality, but believe in it solely for the purpose of the aesthetic experience. The best films are often those who make the audience believe to see reality. A horror film that actually makes people scared is better crafted than one that does not.

Defending Immoralism

A big part of what can be called the ethical content of a piece of music is the lyrics. At least it is easier to deal with the meaning of the lyrical words, than merely dealing with sound, even though it can be claimed that the music in itself (without the lyrics) has a meaning that can, to a certain extent, be formulated in words. I agree with this view, but it is nearly impossible to say what a specific piece of music is about, without having any lyrics, since almost everyone could have their own individual beliefs about the meaning of the music. To not dwell in this debate, it is necessary to strictly focus on the ethical content of music in reference to its lyrics. One of the examples I will focus on is the song *Noose* from the Finnish Metal band *Sentenced*. The song was released in 1996 on the album called *Down*. As the title of the song might reveal, *Noose* is about committing suicide by hanging oneself. The story in the song is quite similar to the poem of Novalis *Hymnen an die Nacht*. The protagonist in *Noose* is depressed because his loved-one has taken her own life, by hanging herself. Up until her suicide her life had been depressing, and she decided to end it all by taking the rope. The grief ends up to be too overwhelming and, he starts excessive drinking and in the end decides to take his own life: "I'll take the rope just like you, and where ever you are I'll be too". In this song it seems like suicide is presented as a preferable solution to the narrator's grief, which is – without major controversies – unethical in the way that suicide should not be promoted as a way of solving personal problems. Obviously, it is very common to condemn persons who are telling others to end their own lives just because it seems to them that they are not able to overcome their sadness otherwise. But what makes the case of *Noose* different is the fact that firstly it is a fictional story, and secondly the writers of the song do not consider suicide a good ethical action. However, this does not show that it is a piece of music, in which the (un)ethical content is actually an aesthetic merit. As mentioned above, the discussion on the matter has mainly been focusing on the composition – this is not enough though to defend immoralism (contextualism). One of the best defences for immoralism can be found in Matthew Kieran's article 'Forbidden Knowledge: the challenge of immoralism' in *Art and Morality* from 2002. He calls his position cognitive immoralism, which proposes that unethical art, or art portraying unethical behaviour, will make people understand certain things about the world, which would otherwise remain invisible. One of the examples he uses is bullying. He says that the only way to know what it is like to be a bully is to either *be* the bully or understand the bully. But how can we come to understand a bully, without being one? A possible method might be a film that portrays the behaviour from the bully's perspective – assuming the film is made in a good manner in order to make the audience understand the bully's motivation for the unethical behaviour.

What those works of art do, is to award the audience with something cognitive. When we are confronted with this type of art, we achieve, what Kieran calls imaginative experience. It is a sort of indirect information about a certain aspect of the world. Looking at the information through another perspective than one's own, it will contribute to a greater understanding of the whole. This is, of course not a necessary condition to understand the world, but it is a sufficient condition. This means that when a person listens to a song like Noose, it might be possible for that person to learn what it is like, to be in such a mental-state where suicide seems like a good solution. If a work of art can teach us something about the world, it will, on this point have an aesthetic merit above a work from which we cannot learn anything.

This position has been criticized by Gaut, namely in the point which says that what will be learned from such imaginative experiences does not correspond to the content of the work. Noose is a song about killing yourself, because of a lost loved one, but we also learn how it feels to be in that mental-state. There is, in Gaut's view, no direct connection between the apparent content of the song, and what is learned, because we are not actually learning that hanging ourselves is a good idea. Gaut is right about this, but he seems to miss an important point. It is not important that what we learn is exactly the same as what is proposed in the lyrics of a song, but that we learn something about what it is like to be in the mental-state that has been described.

Enjoying the Misery

An often stated question is how and why one can enjoy listening to songs about suicide, murder, alcohol- and drug-abuse etc. The answer is not as straight-forward as one might think. The easy way out of this discussion is to make a statement about the difference in peoples taste in music, but that would disqualify any attempt to continue this debate, and in the end, when analysed sufficiently, people tend to be absolutists about this issue. Most music-lovers would agree on the fact that "good music" is to be used about certain pieces of music that live up to some criteria. But these criteria obviously may differ from person to person.

It would not surprise anyone, if people claimed that they like music about the bad and difficult things in life, without any further explanation. It is exactly the explanation we are looking for. So how do we explain the enjoyment of hearing about the darker sides of life? This is where the issue becomes tough to deal with, but I will give an explanation in two ways. Firstly, one may argue that it is purely the aesthetic excellence that makes one listen to a song about suicide, if it lives up to the criteria about a certain connection between the music, vocals and lyrics as described above. But this alone will not give a sufficient reason why anyone would want to listen to the misery of another person's life. What it shows, is that anyone who claims this, will only say that they like to listen to music that lives up to their criteria for good music. This

means we would have to assume that persons who like music would like to listen to the music they like personally, whatever kind of music it might be, and that the music happens to be about the miseries of life, is a coincidence. Another quite different approach has been offered in the article 'Fade to Black: Absurdity, Suicide and the Downward Spiral' by Justin Donhauser and Kimberly A. Blessing in *Metallica and Philosophy* from 2007. As it is stated in the article, James Hetfield said in an interview in 1991 that in the process of writing the song *Fade to Black*, he was quite depressed and he used the artistic process as a sort of therapy³. In the end it would make him feel better. Therefore I claim that this is true, not just for the composer and performer, but also for the audience. That obviously shows that music is not only used to enjoy the good sound, but is also used as a way of dealing with one's emotional problems. Many Heavy Metal fans therefore tend to argue that they do not increase their aggressiveness, but rather calm down by channelling their bad vibes and moods out of their minds through the aggressiveness of the rough sound of Heavy Metal music. The music functions as a kind of catharsis then. If one feels depressed, it can be soothing to listen to songs about life being nothing but misery. But this is a claim that is difficult to proof and justify sufficiently and will therefore not be relevant in this analysis.

Likewise there exists the opinion that listening to depressive music actually makes people depressed or even more depressed as they already are.. This is incorrect: for one thing there are certainly listeners who are not depressed when they listen to melancholic sounds. Further more it is noticeable that those people who are depressed already listen to the music for exactly this reason - it has a soothing effect on them and their mood, they just feel less alone with their emotions. This still leaves the possibility for other reasons to like music about suicide, without having the intention to end one's own life. This is important since – as has been shown - there can be several reasons why some people like aggressive music, other than being aggressive themselves. In the end, it is possible to enjoy the misery of others, even if the person feeling depressed or angry within the song may be a fictional character just like it is possible for people to like films in which fictional characters are killed.

Closing Remarks

It may at first seem like the issues addressed in this paper, are not directly dealing with the problem of the suicides committed by Heavy Metal fans, and the artists being blamed for it as a consequence. However, there *is* a clear connection here. To claim that an artist carries the responsibility for another persons suicide, because that person may have liked the works of exactly that artist, also carries the accusation that the artist actually made the fan commit suicide. This is false. Firstly, to say that unethical behaviour is the consequence of listening to certain songs is to say that it can work in such a way, that it changes persons' ethical beliefs, or has the ability to make a person more depressed, and eventually depressed enough to want their own death. This is rather unlikely. The majority of musicians certainly compose music without the intention to make people commit murder or suicide. If a Sentenced fan for example feels the urge to hang him- or herself after listening to Noose, there is no proof that the music was actually causing this deadly urge, but rather the listener's own mind and psyche. Such an accusation would appear highly irrational, furthermore even wrong, since that would mean that there should be far more suicides committed. Therefore it is plausible to notice that it takes more than imaginative experience – as described by Kieran – to completely change a person's beliefs.

As I have argued above, there are good reasons to regard a version of immoralism (contextualism) as the correct theory. This consequently means that unethical content in a piece of art does not make art as such less valuable. Of course there is a difference between what “good” art is, and what is good for, especially young people to be exposed to. There is a reason why certain films are rated as inappropriate for children to watch, but can the same be said to apply to music? In most cases, it will take a lot of time to get to know what a song is really about, and not just what the lyrics tell. Music is never as direct as a film, also due to the lack of visuals in the music. Another difference is that parents do not forbid young children to watch horror films because they are afraid of them committing suicide. They do it because they want to prevent them from having nightmares, or behaving like the people they *see in the film*. It is hard to *see* what people do by hearing a song. Music is not telling people how to behave, but a story about life → that's a matter of everyone's personal opinion, try to stay more general and less absolute.

The opinions and theories that have been expressed and described throughout this paper have disproved the view that Heavy Metal music was aesthetically unattractive or even bad. Furthermore it has been shown that the notion of Heavy Metal being ethically suspicious – in the way that the music leads people, either through lyrics or sound, to behave unethically – is false. How can anything that is aesthetically good, be ethically bad, in the sense that the work of art should never have been made, or even that it “brings evil to the world”? As far as I am concerned and as the described theories have proofed

it does not lead to more evil in the world, than by listening to Madonna's Material Girl.

If anyone by default regards Heavy Metal as worthless or even bad for the world or our society, the suspicion lies close to assume that they never took the time to find out what the music really is about: Heavy Metal is not just music which breaks the silence. It is also music that demands attention; it openly disturbs people by opening new horizons in regard to life's misfortunes. Nonetheless, the music's aesthetics as well as its transmitted ethics are not able to push the audience into bad or even deadly behaviour.

Notes

¹ B Gaut, 'Art and Ethics' in B Gaut and D M Lopes (eds), *The Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*, Routledge, New York, 2001, p. 343.

² B Gaut, *Art, Emotions and Ethics*, Oxford, 2007, p. 52.

³ J Donhauser and K A Blessing, 'Fade to Black: Absurdity, Suicide and the Downward Spiral' in W Irwin (ed), *Metallica and Philosophy: A crash course in brain surgery*, Blackwell, Oxford, 2007, p. 149.