

Living for Music, Dying for Life - The Self-Destructive Lifestyle in the Heavy Metal Culture

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Abstract

Since the early days of Heavy Metal, the musical tradition has evolved, in many directions. One thing that seems to remain the same across the different sub-genres, is the lifestyle among the fans and certain musicians. To the core fans of Heavy Metal, the music is the most important thing. The reason why they go to work, is to earn money, to be able to buy cd's and go to concerts. At least, that is what they will say, if they are asked the questions. Like musicians, they say, that they "live for the music", even if they are not themselves musicians of any kind. Alcohol has always been a large part of the Heavy Metal lifestyle, both on and off the scene, and it still is to this day, especially among the young fans. The music is meant for being played loud, and the fans literally choose to risk their sense of hearing, each time they set foot at a venue, and even when they play a cd at home. The Heavy Metal lifestyle is, on the surface, self-destructive for the individuals in the Heavy Metal culture, without being destructive towards the culture itself. The culture survives from the self-destructive individuals, who claim to "remain true to the culture". How and why, can a rational being choose its own destruction? Is it possible to live this lifestyle, and still live according to one's authentic self (or nature)? Can the authentic nature of a human-being be self-destructive?

Philosophical issues on the self, self-destruction and authenticity are central to the above-mentioned debate, and will be addressed in this paper.

Key Words: Authenticity, heavy metal, self-destruction, identity, identity-creation.

1. Introduction - The Authentic Self

Throughout the history of philosophy, there has been numerous attempts to describe what the *right* way, for a person to live her life, is. Spinoza claimed that to live the "free life" one must live according to ones "nature", which meant to live "as the part of the whole", which one is. To be *true* to one self.

According to Rousseau, the authentic life, is the "original" or "natural" life. This basically means that humans, in their search for authenticity should go back into nature, by removing itself from society – or rather, have society turn into nature again.

The term "to be true" is often found in the Heavy Metal culture – mostly among fans, who seem to put a big effort in attempting to "be true" (to the Heavy Metal culture). When someone fails to live up to the standards for being authentic, so to speak, they will usually get labelled as "posers", i.e. Someone who tries to show herself off as being something she is not.

This phenomenon has to be examined from the inside, since it will not be possible, for someone outside the Heavy Metal culture, to distinguish between a so called "poser" and someone who is "true", according to that culture. On the surface they are too much alike. Why is this so?

The Heavy Metal culture is at certain levels defined by the people who made it, which to a certain extent is the musicians, especially the early Heavy Metal bands. This is a matter I will return to.

Is it possible to be authentic, and if so, how is it possible? These two questions demand a description of the self, which would take up too much space for an article this size. Therefore I will not go into a long debate about what kind of thing the self is, as such, but merely use certain well-known theories in an attempt to find a relation between the self, being authentic, and music.

One thing that must be stressed at this point is that the people I have in mind, when I talk about Heavy Metal fans (and other people who listen to music), is primarily young adults, since it seems to be the age-group who most frequently listens to music, and identify themselves with a certain musical sub-culture.

2. The World as Absurd and Alienation

In the end we are all going to die, in one way or another. Life as we know it, cannot be eternal, and that can lead to a feeling of absurdity: "Why bother doing anything, if I will be dead anyway?" or "I have to make the best of it, since I cannot know whether my life will end in the morning". This feeling of absurdity is described by Albert Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as a feeling that arises in the realization of the world's irrationality and the self's constant attempts to find the rational in the world. This is an obvious impossible task, and therein lies the absurdity. Why attempt to do something that will be impossible (perhaps even by definition)? Camus says that we cannot do

anything else, and that we therefore will be in this constant feeling of alienation from the world.

A feeling of not belonging to the world. My claim is that a similar feeling can be found among Heavy Metal fans. However, it is not as much alienation from the world, as it is alienation from the modern society – especially the people outside of the Heavy Metal culture. By analysing the culture, it becomes clear that there is the unspoken assumption that Heavy Metal fans are different from the people not in that culture. This assumption goes deeper than just the individual tastes in music.

What we end up with here is a world without meaning. As Sartre claims, life is meaningless, but that it is not a bad thing, since we are able to create meaning in our lives, on our own, through the freedom we are forced to live with. And with freedom comes responsibility, which I will return to a bit later.

Realizing that we are free to do what we want, enables us to do things that may seem irrational and even counter-productive, like spending our money on going to concerts instead of buying food, or drinking heavily on a weekday, and then having to go to work with a hangover. Looking at this from a strictly rational perspective, it is what could be called "bad" or even "stupid" behaviour, but there are reasons for choosing that kind of lifestyle.

Sartre claims that we cannot want to do an evil deed, since we will always see what we choose to do, as a right (or good) thing to do, perhaps only in the moment when the choice is made. So, the self-destructive lifestyle is not chosen because of the bad things. Heavy Metal fans do not spend their money on concerts, because they want to be unable to eat for a few days (if that happens), or drink a lot of alcohol because they want to go to work or school with a hangover. They do it because of the good things that they get from doing it, in spite of knowing about the bad consequences that will follow on the next day. What are the good things people can get from this kind of behaviour? This theme will be examined later.

3. Music and self-identity

A common belief among people is that judgements about music are only about music. According to Theodore Gracyk this is a false belief, since judgements about music, to a certain extent, always will be judgements about other people. When evaluating music, you are saying something about the people who like that particular kind of music. The main reason for this, is that music is a central part of identity-creation. It is clear that there is an

assumption behind this claim, namely that the self is constructed, and not something we are born with. If the self would not be a construct, we would not be able to create our own identity. Gracyk describe this identity creation with reference to David Hume, who argued that there is no such thing as a self that remains the same through ones life. It is impossible to find something, by introspection, that is the self that remains constant. So when we look for the constant self, the only things we can find, are constructed elements, like our taste in music. It is a commonly known fact that young adult in particular, identify themselves with the culture (mostly sub-culture) they belong, or want to belong to. Some people describe themselves as Heavy Metal fans, which is to put a label on the self, that can be constant, at least for some time. This stability is something people will look for at some time or another, in their lives. A kind of anchor for the self.

The question is now, why music can be seen to be such a central part in this matter. Gracyk gives a reasons for this. He claims that there are parallels between listening to music, and introspection for the self. Taken that claim to be correct, there are, according to him, three ways in which music can help construct a concept of the self:

- 1) The recognition and predictability we feel by listening to music, is similar to what we seek in the self by introspection. Because we can recognize musical objects and in advance predict the coming parts of a musical object, it can be a way to do the mental practice of integrating different experiences of the same piece of music, into a coherent object, which could be part of what can be called a musical genre. Although a musical genre is not a stable object, as such, it can aid a person in the process of creating a concept of the self, through that persons activities with works within that genre. By listening to Heavy Metal daily, and creating ones self, through the stability of the genre (with many works sounding similar), it is possible to find the stability that we as humans naturally seek (according to Hume), for example by ending with the belief “I am a Heavy Metal fan”.
- 2) Listening to music works as a memory-stimulus. Often when rehearing music we heard in the past, we recall some past events. The reason for this is that we associate certain songs with specific events in our lives, like the day we graduated or the day a friend died. Since memory can be seen as a large part of the constructed self, and music can help us recall certain memories, it seems clear that music is the aid of the self-creation.
- 3) Music can be seen as the prototype for the kind of thing we seek, when we are trying to establish personal identity. Like musical works the self is an intangible object, and in attempting to locate the

self, one must do the same activity when trying to grasp a musical work. The object we seek is a relational object, not a concrete one. When identifying a musical work, we synthesize all the different sounds that seem to be connected, under one name, which in most cases will correspond to the title of the work. Even when identifying what kind of music a person likes, it will mostly be done in the same way, by synthesizing the works, styles etc. that the person likes, under a fewer number of styles and genres. When attempting to identify the self we have to do the same thing, namely synthesizing all the experiences under one concept, which can be called the self. Hence a relation between a concept and experiences of something other than the concept.

4. The true Heavy Metal fans and the posers

The terms "true" and "poser" are often found used in the Heavy Metal cultures. They are used to distinguish those who are said to be authentic to the culture, from the people who are merely pretending (or trying) to be part of the culture, but for one reason or another are unable to live up to the standards. But what are these standards, and why are those, and not other standards, considered to be the standards of the authentic Heavy Metal fan?

The most clear criteria for being authentic, in this sense, seems to be about which relation the subject has to the music – what specific bands or sub-genres are considered good by the individual. I have noticed, throughout my years in the Heavy Metal culture, specifically in Denmark, that it is important to be fans of certain sub-genres, and not others. Death and thrash metal, being the most commonly accepted, while for instance power metal and symphonic black metal are looked down upon. So there is a tendency towards having the extreme, and "dirty sounding" music as being the "real thing" within the culture. As exceptions to this rule, are the old-school bands, like Metallica and Iron Maiden, which will always stand as core names to the Heavy Metal scene. However, when considering Metallica, there is a tendency to claim that only certain albums from them are "good" or "real" in this sense. The reason for this might be, that the other albums got to be quite "soft" and far from the Heavy Metal tradition, that they themselves was part of creating back in the 80's. A consequence of this rule, is that it might get hard for new, especially younger, fans to earn the label of authenticity, since they to a larger extent will be influenced by the more recent movements in the Heavy Metal scene.

Another term that should be given some attention at this point is "sell-out". This term is normally used about bands and musicians who have moved away from their original style, and into the mainstream, and as a consequence are liked more by people outside the (traditional) Heavy Metal culture. So, to a certain extent bands should not become too popular outside of the culture, if they want to avoid the label of "sell-outs". If a fan is mainly listening to music of a "sell-out" band, she is more likely to be considered a poser, than a true heavy metal fan. This is a point that may seem strange, since it is hard to see why the popularity of a band should be a bad thing, when it comes to the "quality" of the music of that band. How can the fact that more people like their music and buy their cd's, in any way be a criteria for "bad music" or "wrong" in terms of being true Heavy Metal? The only reasonable answer I can see to this, will be that the music changed so much, at a point, so it could no longer be regarded as Heavy Metal, or at least not belonging to the same sub-genre, as before. Hence, a change on the level of the mere sound. After all, it is the sound of the music, that determine which style or tradition it belongs to. What else could it be?

What else separates the authentic fans from the posers? One thing that comes to mind at this point is the behaviour. If someone is to live up to the claim of "living for the music" (without being a musician) they will, in most cases, attempt to show it. This can partly be seen, in bars and other environments that are directly marketed towards the Heavy Metal culture, where the people in attendance most commonly would be debating music. Most Heavy Metal fans will know, that if they are among people they do not know, but seem to be Heavy Metal fans as well, they will know that a way to get a conversation going, is to start talking about music, since it will be the common ground for they two.

A question that comes to mind after all this has been said, is whether it is possible for a so-called poser to become true, or authentic. One thing the true fans will point to, is that posers "just do not get it". They do not understand the music on the "right" level. Apparently it seems to be something that cannot be changed, according to some of the true fans. However, on the surface, this contradicts the earlier claims about the self as (completely) constructed. A way to keep it consistant would be to claim that once the self is developed in a certain direction, it is impossible to go back, or change direction. I find that claim to be misguided, since it is obvious that many people are able to change many things about themselves. So it will all come down to persons abilities to change their taste in and understanding of music. If it is impossible to make any changes in these areas, one would not be able to learn the "right way" in the first place. It would have to be a part of the

self from the very start – and this view seem to have too many assumptions that can never be justified.

As noted above, I find the whole distinction between true and poser ungrounded, since it seems to be a decision made by certain people in the culture. A kind of self-definition to the extent of saying “I am authentic, and the others are posers”. What is interesting though, is the self-destructive lifestyle that is associated with the culture, and what can tempt people to live their lives in that fashion. This is where I will claim the distinction between true and poser to be of most use (if any at all).

5. The will to destroy the self

At the surface it is a contradiction to claim that the self can seek its own destruction (and in the end, elimination). How can something that is, want to end its own existence. So apparently, being self-destructive is absurd by definition. There is more to this matter however, which will become clear when we have realized the necessary distinction between self-destructive behaviour that is directed at the body, and destruction of the mental self. Of course, the complete destruction of one, would lead to the necessary death of the other, but here we are not dealing with suicide, as such. What we are concerned with here, is the self-destructive behaviour that characterize the Heavy Metal culture, which normally does not include suicide in a literal sense. Self-destruction in this sense, will refer to the activities in the moshpit at concerts, the will to listen to music at a volume that can be physically harmful, excessive consuming of alcohol, and in some cases drug-abuse. But how can one justify the will to this type of behaviour? Here I will present one possible answer to that question.

Normally in the modern western society, we think of the self as being primarily concerned with itself – in other words, egocentric behaviour – which means that what the self wants, is something that is good for it. When we look at the Heavy Metal culture, we see what on the surface looks like absurd behaviour, deliberately leading the self down a self-destructive path. We can try to compare this type of behaviour to that of (extremely) religious people, who are willing to sacrifice themselves for a "higher cause", than their own well-being. Are the so-called true Heavy Metal fans sacrificing themselves for a cause, or other thing "larger than life"? Firstly, it is important to know what the subjects themselves say to this matter. Like musicians, who in this case should not be excluded from the so-called true Heavy Metal fans, since they in most cases are fans as well as musicians, fans will often claim that they "live for the music". Let us for the moment take this

statement to be true – where will that lead us now? The obvious point is, that it will put music as the foundation of the culture, even as the most central thing to the Heavy Metal culture. This does not sound surprising in any way, since we are concerned with a music-culture. But does this mean that the music is the foundation for the self-destructive behaviour, that characterizes the culture? As far as I can see, there is no real connection between a particular type of music, and certain kinds of behaviour. Some people, who might not be regarded as being true Heavy Metal fans, but who are Heavy Metal fans, nonetheless, will not be regarded as being self-destructive in that way. So to say that the music could be the cause of self-destruction will be wrong.

If we keep our focus of the fans who are thought of as being true or authentic to the Heavy Metal culture, we will at some point come to see how their behaviour, to a large extent is imitation of the famous musicians, from the Heavy Metal scene. When we see the stars performing on stage, we experience a certain kind of behaviour, which typically is a manifestation of the belief "live hard, die young". There is no surprise in claiming, that not everything that feels good, is good.

When seeing the stars performing on stage we only see a small part of their lives. If we take the live performance to be the main thing, and as the way to be authentic as a fan (by imitating the stars), the lifestyle obviously seems to be self-destructive. Setting music as the foundation of ones life, it can (in a sense) become as important as God is to a christian. A sort of "higher power" that one needs to show loyalty towards, by sacrificing one self, by living with the (in some cases) daily hangover. The party on the night before is the ritual where the fan will experience the connection to "the higher power" so to speak, and this is filled with a lot of things that give immediate "pleasure"(such as the pleasure of being drunk, forgetting the stressful things of everyday-life, and giving in to what could be said to be the deeper drives of ones existence).

Some questions remain here: Why is it so with Heavy Metal? When people are free to do what they want, and define their lives in unlimited ways, why would anyone choose this lifestyle? Why choose immediate pleasure with bad consequences, over something that is good long-term? The answer to these questions, I believe, is in the feeling of alienation, that most heavy metal fans share on some level.

"Every day I will go the rock n' roll way" (Volbeat – Alienized). Feeling alienized from the rest of society is common among heavy metal fans. It is a feeling of first being alone, and later finding a community where other people share the same values in life. Most people have a hard time explaining why the self-destructive lifestyle is chosen, other than "it just feels

right". The pleasure one will get from the activities that characterize heavy metal fans, is greater than the pain that follows from it. The reason why may seem irrational, but only to the people who do not share the values of the heavy metal culture. This may never be changed, and that could be a good thing for the culture. Heavy metal lives from the feeling of alienation among the fans. A kind of counter-culture to the mainstream. If heavy metal became the mainstream it is likely to change in more areas than just the mere music. The characteristics of the heavy metal culture as we know it would either have to be similar to the characteristics of the whole society, or the norms of society would have to adopt the values of heavy metal. But in that case, I would expect the people who feel alienized (and are found in the heavy metal culture as we know it today) would tend to find or develop more extreme genres of music, and perhaps even more extreme behaviour. To a heavy metal fan, it will be a search for a absurd place in life: being special among equals.

The self-destructive behaviour might always be outside of the mainstream, and that is part of what keeps heavy metal alive. But the question about whether people are self-destructive because they listen to Heavy Metal, or they listen to Heavy Metal because they are self-destructive is another matter. However, one thing is clear: Heavy Metal and self-destruction seem to go hand in hand, no matter how the relation between them might be – and to blame peoples self-destructive behaviour on the music they love to hear, still remains unjustified and in my opinion, wrong.

Notes