

# Through the Mist and the Madness: Metallica's Message of Nonconformity, Individuality, and Truth

by Thomas Nys

I was about fourteen years old when I bought my first Metallica t-shirt at a local store. A shiver ran down my spine when I put my money on the counter, my palms were sweaty, and the whole transaction felt a bit like breaking the law. Buying this t-shirt was an unmistakable act of rebellion, a way of showing I was different from the rest. Back then I believed that wearing a Metallica t-shirt provided the perfect expression of my rebellious nature. Nowadays, I believe wearing the t-shirt provided the perfect excuse for not talking to the beautiful girls I was secretly in love with (girls who would have nothing to do with such a rebel). Whatever my deepest motivations may have been, Metallica's message of nonconformity was clear. Some Metallica-bashers would say their message has changed, and that they have sold out. But let's not bother with the critics. Let's return to the original message of Metallica—the Metallica of my t-shirt buying days—which was not only about being different, but also about being true to yourself, being free, and seeking the truth.

Philosophers have always disliked conformism (and conformists, in turn, have always despised philosophers). Socrates (470-399 bce), for example, was ridiculed for his unusual behavior by Aristophanes (448-385 bce), who in his play *The Clouds* depicted Socrates as a madman who was hopelessly entangled in his own philosophical constructions. Or consider Diogenes (404-323 bce), a colorful Cynic who lived in a tub and who, when Alexander the Great asked him what his deepest wish was, calmly answered: "Stand back, you block my light." From the very beginning, authority, fashion, and custom have been at odds with philosophy. Admittedly, throughout the centuries philosophy has become respectable—the domain of professors who could afford the luxury of contemplation. Nevertheless, as a critical profession, philosophy has remained highly skeptical of conformism. Even in the nineteenth century, a period in which philosophy had reached the pinnacle of its prestige, John Stuart Mill (1806-73) and other philosophers frowned upon conformity, fashion, and custom.

At first glance there is little in common between Mill and Metallica. Mill was a prototypical English gentleman: well-groomed, polite, and incredibly intelligent, whereas the members of Metallica either deliberately or unintentionally seem to shun such qualities. But when we compare the central messages of Metallica and Mill, we find the similarities truly striking. Let's begin with their shared contempt for conformity.

## **Nonconformity: Do You Fear What I Fear? Living Properly**

In its early days Metallica was all about rebellion. The title of their debut album is a case in point. On their tribute video to Cliff, James tells the crowd that the title *Kill 'Em All* refers to the managers and "men in gray suits" who control the music business. Metallica was clearly not afraid to bite the hand that fed them. Indeed, Metallica was pissed at the entire world. They were sick of people telling you what to do, pointing their fingers, and making you play by the rules. They hated the "posers" with big hair and makeup who tried to woo their female audience with their high-pitched voices. Metallica wanted to do things differently. They wanted to be faster and louder than any band that had gone before. They had no desire to be smooth and sexy and, as a result, they looked like shit. In fact, we all looked like shit in those days, because that just happened to be the uniform of rebellion, and we wore it with pride.<sup>1</sup>

The lyrics on *Kill 'Em All* read as a manifesto of the metal way of life. Metallica reached out to thousands of kindred spirits across the world and urged them to join their ranks, leaving no doubt that in joining them they would distance themselves from others. James, Lars, Kirk, and Cliff were deeply committed to what they called the "metallization of your inner soul," and you could either "jump by your will or be taken by force." Metallica's goal was to forge a bond between like-minded people by clearly separating "us" from "them." This feeling of belonging, this sense of connectedness, is prominent in various songs, but it is perhaps most straightforward in "Metal Militia": "We are as one as we all are the same / Fighting for one cause / Leather and metal are our uniforms / Protecting what we are / Joining together to take on the world / With our heavy metal / Spreading the message to everyone here / Come let yourself go." The message of nonconformity, of being different, is most clear in "Motorbreath," which gives the following advice: "Those people who tell you not to take chances / They are all missing on what life is about / You only live once so take hold of the chance / Don't end up like others the same song and dance." Being a Metallica fan required guts because you separated yourself from the flock of blind followers.

The context in which John Stuart Mill expressed his contempt for conformism (the appreciation and encouragement of conformity) was of course very different. But he was similarly worried about a tendency in people to adapt their feelings and opinions to whatever is customary. Mill observed that people were quite happy with "the same song and dance" and didn't want to stand out. As a result, something valuable was lost. People no longer had authentic feelings, lively passions, or stimulating ideas; the human race was rendered dull, weak, and without energy. As Mill described the predicament:

[People] ask themselves, what is suitable for my position? What is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? Or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstances superior to mine? I do not mean that they choose what is customary in preference to what suits their own inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what is customary. Thus the mind itself is bowed to the yoke: even in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; they like in crowds; they exercise choice only among things that are commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes: until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow: their human capacities are withered and starved: they become incapable of any strong wishes or native pleasures, and are generally without either opinions or feelings of home growth, or properly their own.<sup>2</sup>

Worse still, those who actually dared to be different were punished for their eccentricity. In his famous and influential essay *On Liberty*, Mill offers a vigorous plea for individual freedom; arguing that people must be permitted to have different feelings, sentiments, and opinions; that they should be allowed and even encouraged to experiment with different ways of life. It was clear to Mill, as it was clear to Metallica, that people should break free from the deadlock of conformity and live their lives according to their own judgment. No person's wings should be clipped before they learn to fly.

## **Happiness and Individuality: Do You Choose What I Choose? More Alternatives**

But why is conformity such a bad thing? Why should we abandon the comfort of fixed ideas about what is appropriate? Again, Metallica's and Mill's answers converge. One important reason is that conformity is an impediment to personal happiness: a person cannot become truly happy if she just follows the rules.

Mill was a proponent of utilitarianism, an ethical doctrine that identifies the good as "the greatest happiness for the greatest number." Utilitarianism is very down to earth: moral conduct should positively affect human wellbeing or, expressed negatively: we should not obey abstract principles or divine commands which do not seem to contribute to human welfare.<sup>3</sup>

Mill, however, was not a typical utilitarian. Most obviously he reacted against Jeremy Bentham's idea of a "felicific calculus" (*felicitas* is Latin

for happiness). Bentham (1748-1832), who was a personal friend of Mill's father and who is widely acknowledged as the godfather of utilitarianism, believed that we should quantify pleasure and pain, and that the right thing to do in any given situation is to calculate which action would generate the most pleasure (or the least pain). The quality of pleasure doesn't really matter. Some people prefer pushpin whereas others fancy poetry, and there is no way to choose between them. James likes driving hot-rods while Lars prefers collecting fine art. Pleasure is entirely in the eye of the beholder-it is subjective- and the more pleasure we accumulate, the happier we become.

However, it has been argued that the central idea of utilitarianism (the maximization of happiness) is mistaken because people are often willing to forego personal pleasures for the sake of some higher cause. For example, as both James and Lars should know, having children requires numerous personal sacrifices. When it comes to balancing pleasure over pain, having children is probably not such a good idea. Yet, we do not put children on this earth for our own enjoyment, and we do not regard the work of parenting as a sacrifice. There must be a different kind of happiness at stake. The loss in pleasure is not a real loss in personal happiness. In fact, the quality of this kind of happiness (the happiness of a family) is infinitely higher than that of drinking beer. (Remember James' "more beer!" sticker on his white Gibson Explorer? If we agree that there is a qualitative difference between different types of happiness, then no amount of beer could ever compensate for the lack of a deeper kind of happiness.)

Mill was one of the first to react against Bentham's crude form of utilitarianism. According to Mill, real happiness requires *activity*, whereas pleasure can be experienced passively. Such passive enjoyment should not be equated with *human* happiness. Animals can experience pleasure and pain and it is certainly better to be a satisfied pig than a grumpy swine. But human beings are capable of more than just satisfaction or contentment. We are endowed with reason and insofar as pleasure does not require the use of reason, it is not man's highest good. Hence Mill's phrase: "It is better to be a Socrates dissatisfied, than a fool satisfied."<sup>4</sup> No doubt, fools can have agreeable lives (ignorance is bliss), but no person in his right mind would want to trade his difficult life of contemplation for a lunatic's state of rapture. Sometimes we look enviously at our pets ("Look at sweet adorable Whiskers lying care-free in the sun, purring like he's the happiest cat alive!"), but when we come to think about it, we should admit that however tempting it might seem, we do not want to be reduced to a purring or tail-wagging quadruped.

Robert Nozick (1938-2002), a famous contemporary philosopher, makes a similar point. In his book *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* he discusses the

Experience Machine, an imaginary device which, a little like the Matrix, could fulfil all of our desires.<sup>5</sup> Suppose, for example, that you want to experience what it's like to be on stage in front of 60,000 people, or that you want to know what it feels like to play guitar like Kirk Hammett. No problem: you just hook yourself into the machine and it will create the perfect illusion. You will have these experiences just like Kirk has them. Nevertheless, Nozick argues that we would be reluctant to be permanently connected to the Experience Machine. We don't want to be reduced to a mindless blob. Somehow the happiness and the pleasure that we would have in the experience machine would not be earned. Happiness is only worthwhile if there is a possibility of failure, and therefore instantaneous happiness, happiness we don't have to struggle for, loses its appeal. For example, if you could make a person fall in love with you (despite your Metallica t-shirt) by giving her some secret love potion, this love, no matter how pleasurable it would be, would not be real. It would be a farce, even though the victim herself would be entirely convinced of her feelings. Somehow, we want to remain in touch with reality; we want to be active rather than passive, in control rather than under the sway of some external force or device (and *that* is why Neo chooses the red pill instead of the blue in *The Matrix*).

Z Real happiness requires autonomy and self-direction. Happiness is not just about pleasurable experiences, but about living your own life and making your own choices. Autonomy has become a key value in contemporary free societies. The state or government should not force you to become happy in any particular way; it should be neutral with regard to your personal conception of the good; and it should refrain from paternalism. The government should not interfere with our liberty of action because this would not only be an offense to our dignity, but it would also be counterproductive. Personal happiness comes in many shapes, and individuals are generally the best judges regarding their own happiness. Although other people can force you to make certain decisions, they cannot make you *endorse* these particular life choices. And since such personal endorsement is a necessary ingredient for human happiness, they should allow you to choose your own way of life.<sup>6</sup> As Mill puts it, a person's "own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode" (*OL*, 141).

Hence, Mill proposed his famous *harm principle*:

The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized society, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant. He

cannot rightfully be compelled to do or forebear because it will be better for him to do so, because it will make him happier, because, in the opinions of others, to do so would be wise, or even right . . . In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. (*OL*, 94-5)

Of course, a lot depends on what counts as "harm to others," but perhaps the principle is most convincing if we interpret "harm" as a commonsense notion. For example, most of us agree that people are not genuinely harmed by the mere fact that their neighbors are gay (although they might say that they are deeply offended by such an "unnatural" lifestyle). Yet, we also agree that society should intervene if one of these homophobes suddenly decides to attack his neighbors. In free societies we agree that people should have a space of their own, a private realm in which they can do whatever they want as long as they do not interfere with the similar pursuits of other people. A very unsophisticated version of the harm principle was poignantly proclaimed by the Anti-Nowhere League's charismatic lead singer Animal in the song "So What!" As long as there is no clear harm to others (sheep and goats notwithstanding), no one has the right to tell a person what to do.

At first glance Metallica appears far removed from Mill's conception of happiness. Countless interviews and biographies tell us that the Metalliboyz often engaged in a debauched pursuit of pleasure more akin to the teachings of Bentham than those of Mill. Nonetheless, it is also clear that Metallica is not all about happiness and pleasure. In fact, as a musical genre, metal is not about the celebration of "shiny, happy people." Every day thousands of mothers ask their sons and daughters why the music they listen to is so dark and gloomy. A standard reply to these parental worries is that the world itself is not rosy and cheerful and that good music should reflect this shadow-side as well. As such, metal is about facing facts, and being true to yourself even if the truth is not particularly comforting.

The horror of the caged individual and the importance of choosing your own way of life are prominent themes in Metallica's lyrics. Many of their songs evoke the image of a solitary individual who is swamped, coerced, or indoctrinated by external and often malicious forces. On *Ride the Lightning* there is, of course, the title track ("Who made you God to say / I'll take your life from you!?"), "Escape," and "Trapped Under Ice" ("Wrapped up tight, cannot move, can't break free / Hand of doom has a tight grip on me"). On *Master of Puppets* these themes become truly dominant in the lyrics to the title track, "Welcome Home (Sanitarium)," "Disposable Heroes," "Leper Messiah," and "Damage, Inc." All of these songs depict the gruesome situation of a person who is either forced to

do something against his will, or who no longer even has a will of his own, and is reduced to a mere pawn in the hands of others.

Consider especially "Leper Messiah," which describes how people are willingly turned into blind religious followers ("Witchery, weakening / Sees the sheep are gathering / Set the trap, hypnotize / Now you follow"). What annoys Metallica (and especially James) is not the fact that people are religious, but that they mindlessly do whatever they are told. They apparently long for the comfort of conformity: it is a kind of addiction ("Need your Sunday fix"). Mill had exactly the same concern. Religious people might have the right beliefs (although he too was very skeptical of Christianity), but their faith is rendered worthless because they are just "accidentally clinging to words." They hold their beliefs not because they are true, but because it is fashionable or customary to hold them. They just mimic the behavior of others and, as such, it is just "one superstition the more" (*OL*, 114).

The song "Escape" clearly echoes Mill in its conception of happiness. Happiness comes in many ways; true happiness implies individuality; and a person should actively endorse her conception of the good. In fact, the fade-out at the end of the song—"Life's for my own to live my own way"—could be interpreted as a mantra for autonomy and individual freedom. Apart from the element of nonconformity ("Can't get caught in the endless circle / Ring of stupidity"), there is also the idea of finding one's own truth about what makes life worthwhile: "Rape my mind and destroy my feelings / Don't tell me what to do / I don't care now 'cause I'm on my side / And I can see through you / Feed my brain with your so-called standards / Who says that I ain't right? / Break away from your common fashion / See through your blurry sight." Again, Metallica and Mill agree: we should not interfere with a person's pursuit of individual happiness (as long as she does not cause harm to others), and happiness requires individuality as a "necessary ingredient."

## **Truth: Moving Back Instead of Forward Seems to Me Absurd**

To many people who witnessed the rise of Metallica in the 1980s, it must have seemed as if they were just a bunch of angry young men who didn't really care about anything and who were just out there to "maim and kill." They looked like loose canons without guidance or purpose, genuine rebels without cause. But after *Kill 'Em All*, the rebellion and aggression became much more focused as the enemy became more clearly defined. Metallica and its fans were no longer pissed at the entire world; they were specifically pissed at those who manipulated lives and withheld the truth. On subsequent records, from *Ride the Lightning* until . . . *And Justice for All*, Metallica was deeply concerned about various

domains in which the common man was wrongfully yet ingeniously deceived. More precisely, they were highly critical of those in power. Metallica depicted the life and fate of soldiers as mere disposable heroes; there were songs about the death penalty, the environment, mental asylums, and nuclear warfare. Eventually, this culminated in Metallica's most socially engaged record to date on the downfall of Lady Justice (aka Doris). A focus on deceit, abuse, and the disregard of truth gradually emerged. Yet this new focus was not a departure from Metallica's original message.

Mill believed that conformity obstructs us in our search for the truth and our quest for progress. Conformity is not only detrimental to personal happiness, it also renders society a "stagnant pool" where the same old ideas are repeated over and over again even though they should have died long ago. Without people who dare to stand out, who dare to be different and eccentric (people like Christ, or Galileo, or Martin Luther King, or Einstein), we lose all chances for progress. Old ideas need to be challenged, to be checked against new findings and new hypotheses. Only if we allow for such criticism will we gradually ascend to the truth. That is why individuality and personal freedom are so important not just for the individual person but also for society at large. To avoid the perilous quagmire we should allow for uninhibited freedom of thought and discussion as well as the freedom of any individual to conduct various "experiments in living."<sup>7</sup>

Admittedly, Mill's primary target was not intentional deceit, but rather the tendency to resist new and challenging ideas that could overthrow existing societal illusions. A song like "And Justice For All," however, directly targets those people who withhold or distort the truth for their own personal gain. Yet it is the individual who is "crushed" by the hammer of justice and whose view of the truth is obscured by the powers that be. Truth no longer seems important ("Seeking no truth / Winning is all"). In "Eye of the Beholder" truth and personal happiness are connected. In fact, the lyrics to that song could be taken as a very brief synopsis of Mill's position in *On Liberty* ("Do you see what I see? / Truth is an offense / You silence for your confidence / Do you hear what I hear? / Doors are slamming shut / Limit your imagination, keep you where they must"; "Do you take what I take? / Endurance is the word / Moving back instead of forward seems to me absurd"; "Do you fear what I fear? / Living properly / Truths to you are lies to me / Do you choose what I choose? / More alternatives / Energy derives from both the plus and negative"). The key message is that freedom of speech as we know it is actually a charade and, as such, the lyrics aptly describe the environment of conformity and censorship that Mill so vehemently reacted against.

## Conclusion: Trying to Get the Message to You

The message of nonconformity, individuality, and pursuit of truth may have faded into the background with the Black Album,<sup>8</sup> but the message is more relevant today than ever. Nowadays, an attitude of nonconformity has become a part of the whole image-building industry and, as a result, it is just a gimmick to increase sales. It is also a position to which Metallica, due to their massive success, cannot return. Whether we like it or not, they have become mainstream and their nonconformity has been copied time and time again with the distinct purpose of copying their success as well. But with Metallica important values, like a concern for individuality and truth, lurk beneath the surface (values that are totally lacking in the copycats). It's time to revitalize this message, to stir things up a bit, and to remind people of the consequences of the "same song and dance." Because, if indeed "boredom sets into the boring mind," it's about time to bang the head that does not bang.

## Notes

1. Looking back, the fact that we all looked more or less the same is actually quite odd, given that we wanted to bring down conformism. Nevertheless, I guess this was the whole idea behind the Metal Militia: to create an army of people that was prepared to "go against the grain until the end." [[return](#)]
2. John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, ed. by Mary Warnock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), p. 136. Further references to this book are given parenthetically in the body of the text as references to *OL* with page numbers. [[return](#)]
3. Alternatives to utilitarianism are deontology and virtue ethics. He first focuses on the concept of duty (i.e., doing duty for duty's sake regardless of the consequences), while the second emphasizes the importance of certain attitudes or dispositions. [[return](#)]
4. John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, ed. by Mary Warnock (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003, 188). [[return](#)]
5. Robert Nozick, *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). [[return](#)]
6. Will Kymlicka, *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 199-237. [[return](#)]
7. Consider the Discharge cover on *Garage, Inc.*, "Free Speech for the Dumb." [[return](#)]
8. I do not intend to say that this message is completely absent on the post-*Justice* albums — "Through the Never" and "The Unforgiven" being obvious examples — but only that it has become less prominent. [[return](#)]