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Søren R. Frimodt-Møller: A review of *Metallica and Philosophy: A Crash Course in Brain Surgery*, edited by William Irwin, Blackwell 2007.

The Blackwell book series "Philosophy and Pop Culture" aims at serving philosophy "with a little sugar on top" to quote the promotional material. The series follows the standard set by the similar Open Court series "Popular Culture and Philosophy": By drawing on examples from the well-known virtual worlds of popular culture such as TV sitcoms, blockbuster movies etc., the books try to explain both classical and modern philosophical problems in a context that people who spend more time watching television than reading books can easily understand. The series includes previous and upcoming titles such *South Park and Philosophy*, *24 and Philosophy*, *The Daily Show and Philosophy* and many more. The books also aim to persuade otherwise media-phobic scholars and academics that significant content from philosophy and the history of ideas may be found in products of popular culture and that these are therefore worth taking seriously as objects of study and tools with pedagogical utility.

The latest addition to the Blackwell series is a volume of articles devoted to the band Metallica and excerpts from their entire career (so far). Metallica was one of the pioneers of the thrash metal genre in the 1980s. Having a sound that actually was an alternative to almost every other metal band back then (even those with similar musical agendas) the band earned a cult following that went from cult to massive popularity as the 1990s approached. With the release of *Metallica* (aka *The Black Album*) in 1992 the status of the band as a phenomenon of popular culture was cemented with hits such as "Enter Sandman," "Whereever I May Roam," "Nothing Else Matters," "The Unforgiven" and so on. Even though many old fans winced at the more commercial tone of the album, *The Black Album* indisputably drew a lot more fans not just to Metallica's back catalog, but also to heavy metal as such.

But though Metallica has made music of historical importance, from a purely musical perspective some people (including the undersigned) would think that there have been many much more sophisticated metal bands since Metallica that would be worth some academic attention. *Metallica and Philosophy: A Crash Course in Brain Surgery*, however, is not just about the music. In the 1990s Metallica were not merely pop stars: Their lyrics ("Sleep with one eye open / Gripping your pillow tight / Exit Light / Enter Night / Take my hand / We're off to never never-land") were commonly known, their cover images iconic (the majority of people who were conscious in the 1990s will know the *Master of Puppets* T-shirt even if they have never heard the album it promotes), the band members household names. The world of Metallica is a compound of old, innovative thrash metal, easily digestible pop music, detailed lyrics often with storylines and illustrations to support these, and the story of the band members and their ups and downs (chronicled in several documentaries and footage such as *A Year and a Half in the Life of Metallica* and the recent *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster*).

Though the members of Metallica are neither philosophers nor have educations of a theoretical nature their songs deal with many aspects of life and society and – in the opinion of the authors of this book – in an intuitive way touch upon several essentially philosophical discussions. This fact

and the status of Metallica as a phenomenon of popular culture make the band a very suitable object for an anthology of this sort.

The book is divided into five parts, or “discs” as the editors have wittily labeled them. Disc 1, “On through the Never” contains four chapters that in various ways discuss the impact of Metallica’s music and, more prominently, Metallica’s lyrics on the listener. In the first chapter, “Whisper Things Into My Brain: Metallica, Emotion, and Morality,” Robert Fudge examines the somewhat clichéd point of view that heavy metal makes the listener aggressive. He correctly states in response to this idea that it might be “that at-risk adolescents are drawn to the music because [...] it helps them deal with pre-existing issues” (p.11). These two positions – art as a dangerous “stirring of the emotion” and art as a provider of catharsis for the emotions of the spectator (listener) – are explained by Fudge with reference to Plato and Aristotle respectively.

William Irwin, who is also the editor of the book, describes in his article how the virtues praised in Metallica’s lyrics have moved from those of the warrior (coupled with an almost Nietzschean critique of conservative Christianity) to those of the Buddhist. With respect to the Buddhist aspect the chapter focuses on Metallica’s latest album, *St. Anger*, where the lyrics often reflect singer James Hetfield’s going through rehab. The same focus is apparent in Bart Engelen’s article that discusses the classic dilemma between knowing the right thing and actually doing it in relation to Metallica’s struggle with alcoholism and abuse in general.

Thomas Nys’ article “Through the Mist and the Madness: Metallica’s Message of Nonconformity, Individuality, and Truth” concludes Disc 1 with the thesis that the message of non-conformity in Metallica’s lyrics is actually a parallel to philosophy as such.

Much in the same vein as Nys’ paper the articles in “Disc 2: Existensica: Metallica Meets Existentialism” explore the ideas of existentialism reflected (if just not formally) in the lyrics of Metallica that praise the authenticity of the individual in contrast to the mindless conformity of the masses (“das Man” with Heidegger or Kierkegaard’s “spidsborger”). The section also returns to Metallica’s critique of religion and its parallel to Nietzsche’s similar agenda in Peter Fosl’s article “Metallica, Nietzsche, and Marx: The Immorality of Morality”.

The texts in this section seem to me a bit weak or not perfectly well executed. For instance I find it a bit imprecise when Philip Lindholm writes “The most important thing for ‘the struggle within’ is to choose either to succumb to internal demons or to conquer them. To deny the issue, to choose not to choose, would be to embrace an inauthentic existence replete with self-deception.” (p.70) To “choose not to choose” is not the same as denying the issue, especially not in an existentialist context. The same author also fails to show which of the (at least) three voices of Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or* (excluding the self-proclaimed “editor”) he is quoting later on page 70. Those familiar with Kierkegaard’s work will know that it is the character known as the Ethicist who is speaking, the philosophical newbie, however, may not know this. I also find the ending of Peter Fosl’s chapter strangely “glued on”: After clearly sympathizing with Metallica’s rebellion against religion for several pages, Fosl tells us at the very end that “ironically, this overcoming of religion’s pathologies may have made possible not only a healthier life outside of religion, but also an awareness of the possibility that religion may serve salutary functions, as well.” (p.84)

On the plus side Rachael Sotos’ article “Metallica’s Existential Freedom: From We to I and Back Again” offers – as one of the only chapters – a more detailed analysis of Metallica’s musical development throughout their career in which she argues that the band states its individuality, is *authentic*, by remaining true to what sort of music they want to make right now, regardless of what their fans might think. There are, however, many things to argue about in Sotos’ analysis. Only a hardcore Metallica fan can have so much reverence for the band that she can seriously claim that

they are able to play at “seemingly inhuman speed” (p.87) or that the band was playing “progressive metal” (p.95) on ... *And Justice for All* (epic song structures do not necessarily equal progressive metal).<sup>1</sup> I also strongly disagree when Sotos writes: “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.” (p.95) I fail to see why it should not be possible to make technically demanding, progressive music that also has personal and emotional depth – in fact a lot of the bands I listen to prove that this is indeed possible (just listen to Opeth’s album *Deliverance*, Pain of Salvation’s *Remedy Lane*, Dream Theater’s *Awake*, their EP *A Change of Seasons* and many, many others).

In “Disc 3: Living and Dying, Laughing and Crying” the focus is mainly on the lyrics, typically using specific songs to illustrate specific philosophical problems. Two papers spin off the existentialist discussion treating respectively the meaning of life and Camus’ discussion of suicide (the latter discussion elucidated by the song “Fade to Black”). Brian Cameron uses the lyrics of “Welcome Home (Sanitarium)” to explain Foucault’s view on institutions, Thom Brooks discusses the death penalty with an outset in the title track of *Ride the Lightning* and Jason Eberl introduces the applied ethical discussion of whether or not euthanasia is acceptable with the “One” lyrics as the center of attention.

I do not think the Kant quote on pages 130-131 (in Brooks’ chapter) obviously shows that Kant is of the opinion that criminals should be punished in a manner equal to that which they deserve, as Brooks claims, but otherwise the articles in this section are well-written and accessible.

“Disc 4: Metaphysica, Epistemologica, Metallica” contains three enjoyable chapters on basic metaphysical and epistemological discussions, the most entertaining arguably being Manuel Bremer and Daniel Cohnitz’ article on the identity of rock bands over time. This article not only introduces the reader to the discussion of personal identity over time but also presents some research that is very relevant for both fans of rock bands and people who write about these bands.<sup>2</sup>

The other two articles in this section are perhaps a bit more far-fetched: I doubt that the lyricist of “One” has done much reflecting upon the mind-body problem, although Joanna Corwin’s article on the matter is a very good introduction to the discussion. I also doubt that Metallica in general cares much about whether or not there is a world outside my perception although the fragments of lyrics used in Robert Arp’s article “Believer, Deceiver: Metallica, Perception, and Reality” do serve to spice up the informative overview.

The concluding “disc”, “Fans and the Band” is perhaps the most interesting part of the book in terms of discussing Metallica’s history as a band. “Metallica Drops a *Load*: What Do Bands and Fans Owe Each Other?” by Mark White is a very entertaining article dealing with the question of whether or not it is a betrayal of the fan’s loyalty to release an album that is very remote from the previous musical ideals of the band and reversely the question of whether the fan owes his favourite band his loyalty in terms of keeping on buying their efforts even if substandard. The article weaves in an accessible introduction to the Kantian concept of duty.

Niall Scott’s article “The Unsocial Sociability of Humans and Metal Gods” discusses the nature of Man as being social in contrast to Man’s striving for individuality and his possibility of doing evil against others – all in relation to Metallica’s lyrics and their cooperation as a group (or lack of the same). The latter aspect, Metallica’s working difficulties as a group of people who have to cooperate with each other, is also the subject of Judith Grant’s chapter “Boys Interrupted: The Drama of Male Bonding in *Some Kind of Monster*”. Grant claims, controversially but in my opinion correctly, that the underlying theme in the 2004 documentary *Metallica: Some Kind of Monster* is

one of *homosociality*: An examination of male friend- and companionship and the homophobic difficulties in attaining such intimate (but not necessarily sexual) relations. I resent, however, the cliché that rock and metal bands are “as much about their attitude as they are about their sound” (p.220) and that this attitude is essentially macho (p.219). Firstly, I think almost all musicians – regardless of genre – do care about the attitude they are perceived as projecting on stage or in promotional material. Every musician is interested in promoting his or her work as best as s/he can. But to claim that the image is prior to the music (for the musicians that is, record companies may look differently upon the matter) is, at least, in general, a mistake. It is in fact almost an insult to “real” bands such as Metallica, whose efforts are not merely the product of a gifted producer in a studio, but rather the result of hours of rehearsal with very little time to consider one’s appearance on stage.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, the alleged masculine quality of traditional rock and metal attitudes is, in my opinion, at best a contingent fact. Rock and metal may historically have been dominated by male musicians projecting a strong, heterosexual attitude. This may have set a standard for “the rock image” that bands or artists of e.g. a different gender or sexual orientation have had to comply with before developing their own stage personas. But my point is exactly that it *is* possible for artists to develop an image which is not explicitly heterosexual and masculine. An artist such as Tori Amos has an extremely sexual stage persona, but not a masculine one and certainly not the role of a sex object for the male spectator. Other contemporary artists, especially within the more composition-oriented subgenres of heavy metal (such as progressive metal) have no explicitly sexual attitude at all. I do not suggest that the actual genders or sexual orientations of the band members necessarily define the projected attitude of the band as a whole (although a macho image may be less likely in, say, a band with both male and female members<sup>4</sup>): Even among the historically significant bands in the first three decades of rock music there have been all-male bands with attitudes strongly deviating from that of the stereotypical “biker-gang” – think of Queen, Jethro Tull<sup>5</sup> or even The Beatles from 1962 and onwards (especially in their 1963-1965 period). Disc 5 concludes with an article by Robert Delfino who examines Metallica’s arguments against the Napster file sharing system (against which they also filed a lawsuit) in a clear, informally logical fashion. The chapter also leads through a discussion of Locke’s concept of property.

Overall, *Metallica and Philosophy* is a recommendable “crash course” in a varied collection of philosophical problems, especially accessible to those familiar with Metallica and their lyrics (very often lyrics are quoted without specific references to the songs they come from). As an examination of Metallica’s *music* it is, however, generally superficial if dealing with the music at all. Still it is bracing to see a book that takes a metal band seriously on its own premises without merely reducing its effects on listeners to sociological phenomena. The authors are indeed old fans who have grown up to become scholars – the concluding “Who’s Who in the Metal Militia” offers amusing “insights” into their careers as both fans and academics.

Metallica has doubtlessly meant a lot to their listeners (including the authors of this book), not only with regard to lyrics – the primary focus of this book – but also with regard to the music. One can only hope for future dissertations that examine the “meaning” in the music of other metal bands with equal passion.

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<sup>1</sup> Of course these descriptions may be relative to the music the author is familiar with. But anyone who has heard bands such as Strapping Young Lad, Biomechanical, Decapitated, Necrophagist and many others of their generation will have a very different view on what “inhuman speed” is, and likewise for those familiar with Dream Theater, Opeth, Pain of Salvation and many others, the term “progressive metal” will entail a standard of complexity that Metallica has hardly ever reached, although they may have exerted a stylistic influence on the aforementioned bands.

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<sup>2</sup> For instance, consider the case where a band has split and evolved into two bands both carrying on with the original name (this is the case with the band(s) L.A. Guns). Is either of the two bands identical with the original band, and if so which one and in what way?

<sup>3</sup> The *St. Anger* recording sessions as portrayed in *Some Kind of Monster* are admittedly an exception to the idea that a recording process is necessarily preceded by rehearsals of the music to be recorded. The band starts from scratch in the studio, testing new ideas as the tape is running. But then again, one could argue that they have simply taken the rehearsal process with them into the studio (this indeed explains the extremely lengthy character of their endeavours to get the album done).

<sup>4</sup> And there have been quite a number of these bands within the metal genre: The Gathering, Arch Enemy, Within Temptation, Nightwish and Evanescence among many others.

<sup>5</sup> Who incidentally poked fun at the traditional rock image on their 1975 album *Too Old to Rock'n'Roll: Too Young to Die*.