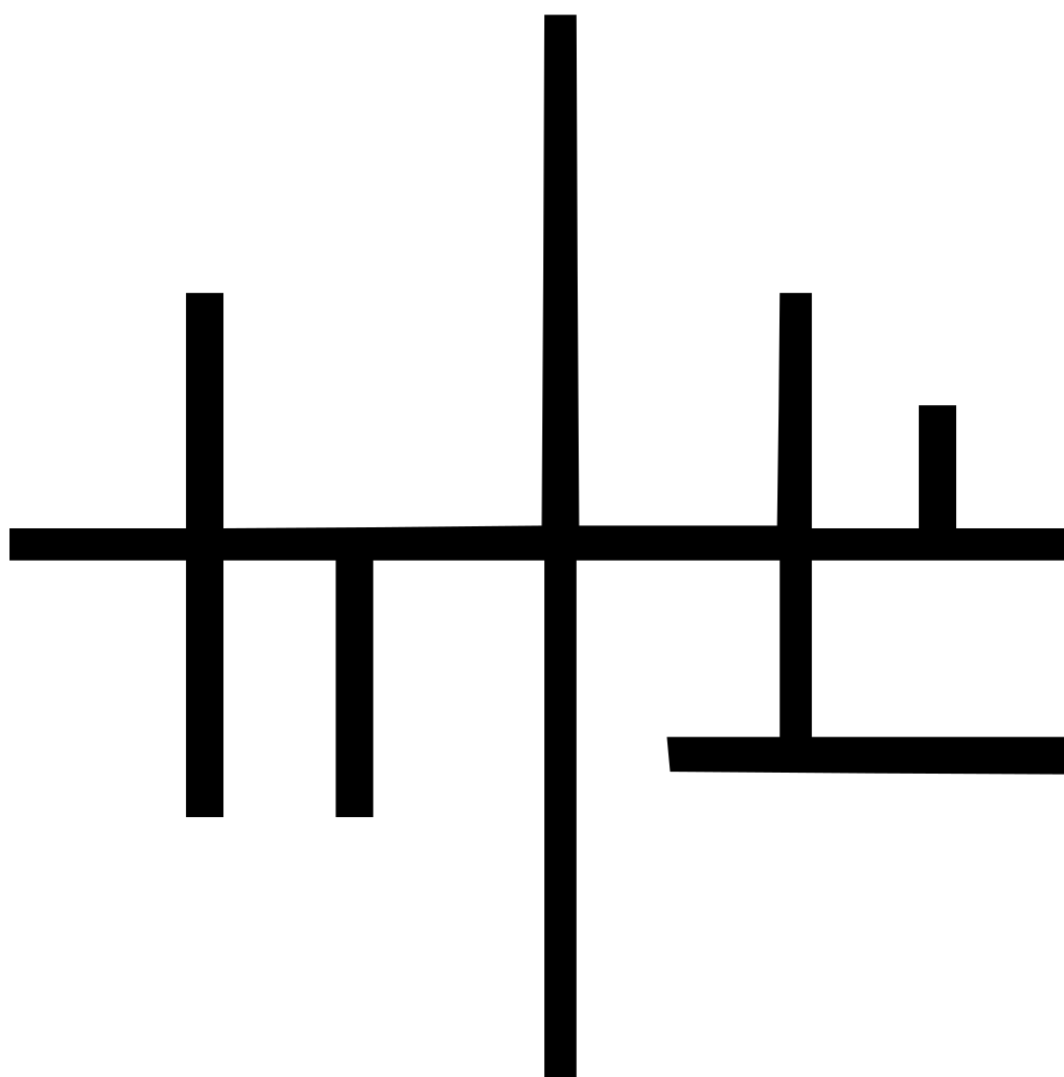


Developing Conceptions of Humour: Irony and Internet Memes

By Raoul Titulaer



“Humor can be dissected, as a frog can, but the thing dies in the process and the innards are discouraging to any but the purely scientific mind.”

-E.B. White

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1. Introduction

Through my early adolescence up until now, I have often been confronted with and amused by memes. I want to clarify that I do not mean this in the sense of pertaining to the field of memetics as Richard Dawkins coined the term in *The Selfish Gene* (1976), but in its common usage: referring, bluntly, to a funny picture on the internet. What always intrigued me about them is not just the amusement they provided, but the fact that this amusement came seemingly out of nowhere, often leaving me confounded about why I was laughing this much. Some examples of memes that I will consider in this thesis include cats that act like humans, symptoms of being scrambled, and a favourable comparison of anti-natalists to people who have children. I would like to delve further into the following questions: What is an internet meme and how does it differ from a Dawkinsian meme? What kinds of memes are there and what mechanisms do they rely on to elicit laughter from us?

To try and answer these questions, I will examine the history of the word meme and how its usage has developed, after which I will explicate the word meme and how I will be using it. I will then develop a pragmatic typology of memes based on the explication I have formulated. These types will later be analysed in terms of several theories of humour. To situate the theories of humour that I will be discussing, I will briefly summarise the history of humour theorising in general. I will then turn my attention to the earliest philosophical work entirely dedicated to laughter: Henri Bergson's '*Le Rire*' (*Laughter*), a classical interpretation of laughter first published in 1900. In *On Laughter*, the case studies and examples are mainly comprised of satirical writing, theatrical comedies and farces. I will compare this conception of laughter and humour to some other interpretations and theories of laughter, like superiority theory, incongruity theory, and benign violation theory.

I will then break these theories down into their constituent parts, forming some tools I can use for analysing memes. I will try and see which tools are most effective for analysing the humorous component of memes and posit some changes to existing theories if and where necessary. At the end, I will point out the faults in these theories that became apparent through my research and discuss the implications of my findings for the philosophy of humour in general.

I would like to add as a disclaimer that I do not endorse any of the content shown in the memes I have chosen; they are chosen purely for pragmatic reasons to make a point about the philosophy of humour.

2. Memes beyond memetics – the post-Dawkinsian meme

Since Richard Dawkins coined the term in 1976, subsequently spawning the controversial anthropological field of memetics, the word has acquired a new meaning in popular culture, but let us first take a look at its origins. Etymologically, its roots can be found in the Greek word *mimesis*, meaning imitation. The idea was to describe a unit of non-genetic information that is passed on through replication in the form of mimicry, or imitation, that undergoes random mutations, and can spread through a population, competing with other memes. As such, it is the cultural equivalent of a gene and can be used similarly to how genes can be used to explain biological evolution. This unit of cultural information is supposedly equally subject to heredity, variability, and selection as the information stored in our genes.

The Dawkinsian meme is a hypothetical unit of cultural information, varying randomly, transferred on basis of selection in a competitive environment. When Darwin wrote *On The Origin of Species* in 1859, how variation arose was still inexplicable. Mendel's work on genes was published 7 years later, but largely ignored until the turn of the century. It then took until the early 1930s for the modern synthesis to show how Mendelian genetics could be used to explain continuous variation.¹ So according to the original evolutionary theory, many aspects of an organism could then be subject to evolutionary change, not just the coding for proteins. In response to a linguistic study, where Darwinian principles were applied to language creation, Darwin remarked in his *Descent of Man* (1871):

“[t]he formation of different languages and of distinct species, and the proofs that both have been developed through a gradual process, are curiously the same.”²

This Darwinian explanation of the development of natural kinds, if you will, could in theory also be used to explain cultural differences arising over time. Memetics, however, is a rather shaky area of anthropology. The heredity is questionable: imitation either occurs sloppily, not at all, or so exactly that it does not allow for variation. Some socio-cultural constructs are more than just the product of random variation and their spread and dominance cannot be explained merely through selection pressures. While memetic evolutionary mapping is an interesting tool for studying the spread of ideas, words, gestures, and other bits and pieces of cultural information, it may not be sufficient for understanding what culture is and how it arose.

The term was revitalised when Mike Godwin talked about his first experiment with memes on the internet in the October issue of WIRED magazine in 1994. The Dawkinsian meme that he noticed was that of people bringing up a comparison of someone to Nazism or Hitler. The internet meme that he constructed and released in 1990 on multiple Usenet newsgroups, the counter-meme³, as he called it, was a jokingly constructed ‘Godwin’s Law’ stating that the longer an internet (or Usenet) discussion lasted, the higher the probability of an analogy to Hitler or Nazism becomes, approaching 1.

The word meme has nowadays passed into common usage, with few people knowing its origins. Dawkins himself noticed this and in a 2014 interview with WIRED, the same magazine that dragged his term into the common soil 20 years earlier, he said that its current usage is not very different from how he had used it. The most notable difference being that internet memes are conscious active variations of a certain meme instead of automatically occurring random variations. The way they arise and spread, however, is very similar to viruses or bacteria in a highly competitive environment.

But what then is a meme? Finding their origin in e-mail chains, Usenet, and electronic bulletin boards, but now commonly arising in larger spawning grounds where people rapidly share newly created images

¹ Robert Boyd and Joan B. Silk. *How humans evolved* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2018), p. 61.

² Darwin, Charles. “The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex.” *Princeton University Press*. (1981) [1871] pp. 59–61.

³ <https://www.wired.com/1994/10/godwin-if-2/>

and judge them on their humoristic value either by a voting or points system (websites like reddit or 9gag), or simply by resharing on other pages (4chan or other imageboards). While I recognise that a neologism as volatile in its meaning as the word meme is determined more by usage than a commonly accepted definition, for the sake of my argument I would like to posit the following explication (in the Carnapian sense of the word ‘explication’):

X is a meme* if and only if

- (M1) X is an image or video that may or may not contain text or be purely textual and can be subject to heavy editing,
- (M2) X is either the paradigmatic example of a meme (the meme format), a variation on a known meme format, or it adheres to a style associated with (certain) memes,
- (M3) X is intended to be shared to a certain extent, and is intended to make the viewer laugh, and
- (M4) X has a certain lifespan or is closely related to a certain (cultural) phenomenon.

I have chosen these criteria because I wish to limit my scope to public, humorous memes that follow certain trends of memes on the internet. Some things may fit these criteria, but should not be regarded as memes, like webcomics for example. The main things that divide webcomics from memes are the manner in which they appear, how easy they are to ‘consume’, and the fact that people do not tend to call them memes.

Memes are often found on websites that simply host large collections of them, where people can post images and videos and comment on them. Most memes nowadays originate, however, on discussion forums or message boards, where content is quickly processed by large groups of people, allowing for rapid dissemination of a meme when one is considered funny or more notoriously, when it spreads a certain political view in the form of a joke⁴. In this way, the internet basically functions as a word-of-mouth accelerator, allowing thousands, if not millions of people to come into contact almost instantaneously, globally spreading memes in a matter of days.

* From this moment on, when I use the word ‘meme’, I will use it to refer to this explication exclusively.

⁴ Zannettou, Savvas, Tristan Caulfield, Jeremy Blackburn, Emiliano De Cristofaro, Michael Sirivianos, Gianluca Stringhini, and Guillermo Suarez-Tangil. "On the origins of memes by means of fringe web communities." *Proceedings of the Internet Measurement Conference (2018)*, p. 188-202.

3. Kinds of memes – a pragmatic typology

A typology of memes can grow as infinitely as genres of music, making distinctions based on either form or content and sometimes both. However, in this section I will try to pragmatically formulate one with the goal of showcasing the greatest diversity of memes as well as challenging current theories of humour. The typology will also be used to pragmatically justify choices in the aforementioned explication of the word meme. Three main ways of discerning types of memes I will discuss are format, content, and style (usually referring to a combination of content and image editing).

2.1. Reaction Images

Not necessarily being a meme as such, some images posted to show someone's reaction to a discussion on a forum without having to use words have developed into memes. Notable examples include the 'rage faces' (see: section 2.3), Wojak or 'feels guy', and Pepe the frog, which have been used to show surprise, sadness, and anger, spawning an almost endless variety to better fit certain situations. Pepe the Frog has also been linked to the alt-right movement, although I will refrain from politics in this thesis and focus on the humorous content of these memes. With reaction images, the degree of humour and why it is funny varies greatly depending on the situation in which they are used.

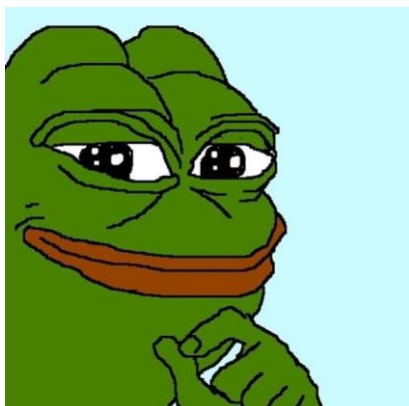


Figure 1. Pepe the Frog, shown with its original smug expression.



Figure 2. Wojak or 'feels guy', usually used to depict empathy or sadness

2.2. Popular Memes

Memes are jokes that tend to get overused and get old quickly. This type, which I will dub the *popular meme* usually has a certain *format*, that is, a certain image with a certain style of captions that go with it. This format can be recaptioned, edited, or even mashed up with different formats to create numerous overlapping reinterpretations. These get shared and spread quickly over the internet because people tend to enjoy humour that refers back to a format they have seen before. Why this occurs, we will explore in section 5.

Most memes nowadays have a relatively short, but intense lifespan. This means that the currently popular meme is sort of like pop music: enjoyed for a while by many people and only by a few after it leaves the spotlight. However, this means that, like in popular music, a collective memory is formed, allowing for 'retro' memes to make a comeback (like how pictures of Grumpy Cat⁵ became popular again after the cat in the picture died, see: *figure 3*⁵) or for new memes to refer to old ones, often ironically. We will examine instances of this ironic reinterpretation in the following sections.

⁵ Data source: Google Trends (<https://www.google.com/trends>)

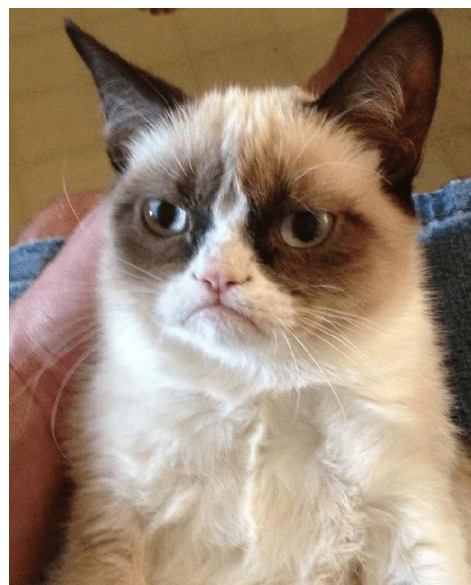
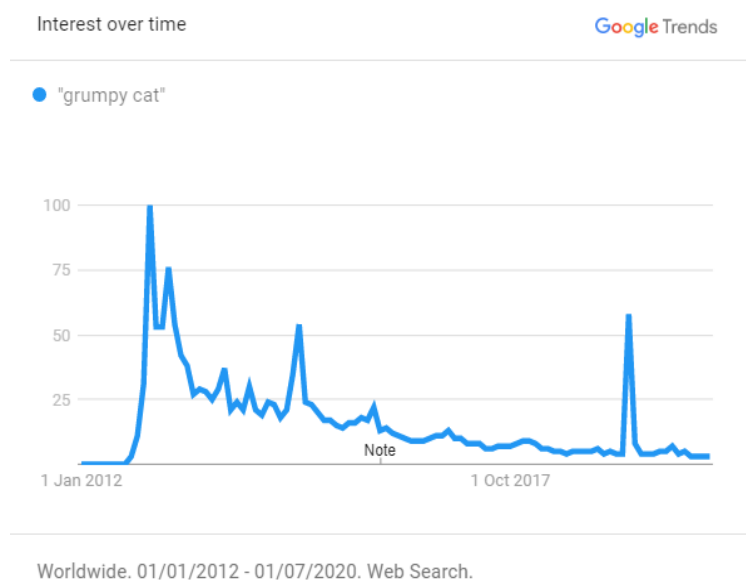


Figure 4. Graph showing Google searches in term of percentage points, containing the term 'grumpy cat' (shown on the right). Note the sharp peak in 2019, shortly after Tardar Sauce's passing.

Memes can appear in the public consciousness in another way, by being linked to a certain (cultural) phenomenon. They are then characterised by their similarity in content and can vary greatly in form and style, often mirroring currently popular formats. The content varies as widely as there are things people are enthusiastic about or can relate to one another about, e.g. music genres, tv-shows and movies, crustaceans, the corona pandemic, being an expat in the Netherlands, etc. I will not include sub-types of these memes in my typology, but will highlight notable examples for analysis in section 7.

As more and more people got involved with memes and their rapid dissemination, the speed at which the fads change has increased monumentally. The lifespan of memes has shortened dramatically and competition is harsher than ever before. But the growing number of participants in the spread of memes has also allowed for them to spread further and faster. We can see this below in figure 5.⁶ where Rage comics, a popular meme that has since been elevated to a certain style (which will be further discussed as a separate type of memes), are compared to the short-lived, but intense 'tide pods' meme.

The joke with tide pods is that the warnings about their ingestion is supposed to be a conspiracy, hiding their delicious flavour. More of such 'forbidden snack' memes exist. This joke, unfortunately, got taken too far by some, resulting in death. The surging popularity can therefore be explained by their spread to old media, the deaths reaching the news as well as sparking international concern about youths taking their irony too far. However, the spread to old media also usually spells the 'death' of a meme. The prevailing view seems to be that memes are supposed to stay online.

The tide pods meme is also an example of a mixed-media meme, spreading through images captioned with words like 'delicious hidden flavour' as well as through videos, showing people biting into them or cooking them. This kind of video meme stems from dance fads, which 90s sitcoms have shown can be heavily intensified through the use of media. TikTok is currently one of the fastest growing social networks. TikTok is entirely video-based and seems to encourage the rise and spread of such fads. I will take a short look at a notable example predating TikTok in section 7

⁶ Ibid.

Interest over time

Google Trends

● Rage comics ● Consumption of Tide Pods



Worldwide. 01/01/2008 - 01/07/2020. Web Search.

Figure 5. Graph showing Google searches containing the words 'Rage comics' compared to those pertaining to the consumption of tide pods, showing the difference between spread of interest and intensity between old and new popular memes.

2.3. Rage Comics

This type of memes sprung from a badly drawn digital four-panel comic, featuring specific grammatical errors and other characteristic features. The comics feature 'rage faces', named after the original comic and its spin-offs which expressed anger under relatable circumstances. Other 'rage faces', however, do not necessarily express anger, a notable example being 'Trollface'. Showing a heavily contorted smirk, Trollface appeared usually in conjunction with a deliberate attempt to annoy, or 'troll', someone. Figure 6. shows the original rage comic from 2008⁷, compared to a more recent ironic reinterpretation of the format.

Rage comics were one of the most popular meme formats at their time, dominating the front page of most larger meme websites. However, the contemporary view has shifted, leading to many people disengaging with the format and instead trying to find ways to make fun of it. The usage of the French article 'le' as well as the exaggerated use of rage faces for situations that warrant a more moderate reaction are often mocked and seen as 'cringey'. To cringe at something in online communities is to express a kind of shame for someone else's or someone's own (often past) behaviour. Cringe (which has also grown to serve as a noun) lies at the base of a lot of mockery on the internet, often directed at people's own interests when they were younger. The people who grew up with rage comics in 2011 are often the ones ironically reinterpreting them today.

⁷ "Rage Comics". <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/subcultures/rage-comics>, accessed on 01-07-2020.

The fact that it contains multiple coinciding incongruities makes it hard to pin down what the joke is about exactly, because it can be interpreted to be ‘about’ multiple things. *Figure 7* shows an exemplar of this type, showing ‘meme man’ and pointing to the absurdity of talking about irony as an essential aspect of memes and its glorification in ‘meme culture’, as well as upheaving the function of a punchline as such. The comic itself seems to both deride and make a joke based on ‘layers of irony’, layers which we can analyse as multiple coinciding incongruities (see section 5).

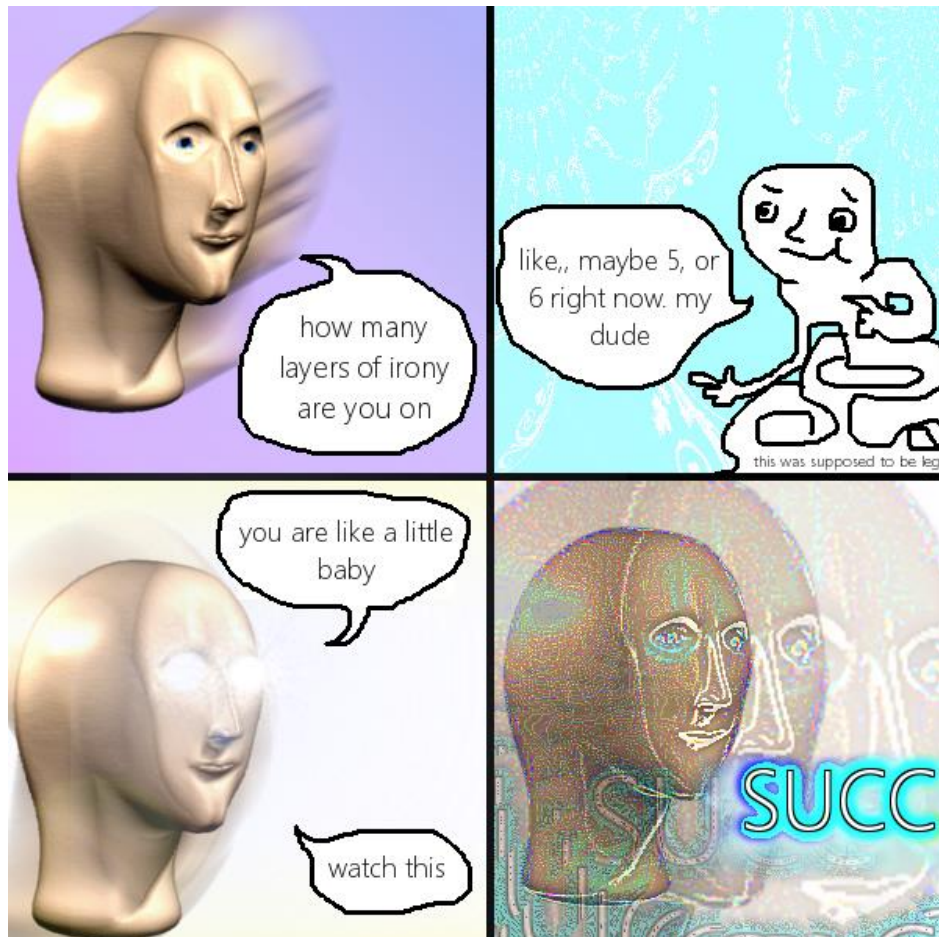


Figure 7. Exemplar of a surreal meme.

2.7. Deep-fried memes

This kind of memes, similarly to surreal memes, depends on heavy editing and ironically points to the absurdity of humour in memes. They warrant a separate category due to their stricter adherence to a certain style of editing where an image is ran through many filters, resulting in a grainy image with distorted colours, often including bulging the image in certain places. Different emoji are also used and added to the picture, in conjunction with the previously mentioned kind of image-editing. All of this in an attempt to make fun of the idea that the original image is supposed to be funny, which leads to taking a highly ironic stance on memes and the usage of emoji as such. Unlike surreal memes, it is often quite clear what is mocked, the way this is achieved is also through a relatively stable method. They are related by their ironic stance, but differ in their method and form.

2.8. Virgin vs. Chad

This meme finds its origin in a darker corner of the internet, namely the ‘incel’ community. This community of often self-ascribed ‘involuntary celibates’ is based around the idea of objective beauty and a skewed image of relationships and women. This leads to the idea that men with certain features simply cannot find a partner in life. These ‘virgins’ are then compared to their antagonist, the ‘Chad’. Chad is the embodiment of what the incel community finds desirable male features, an aggressive and intelligent jock with well-defined features (justifications for which are like a modern version of phrenology). The meme usually compares two kinds of people, products, fandoms, or things like video games, glorifying aspects of the one while negatively exaggerating certain aspects of the other. This can range from harmful comparisons of race and gender to harmless ones, stating, for example, why one video game should be considered better than its sequel.

2.9. ‘Loss’ and ‘Is this Loss?’

One popular meme that originates from the webcomic *Ctrl+Alt+Del* in 2008 depicts one of the main characters suffering from a miscarriage. The four-panel strip (fig. 6) was widely criticised for its shift in tone, going from a usually light-hearted comic mainly about video games, to dealing with a serious emotional issue like miscarriage. This criticism was usually backed by memes parodying it, refusing to engage with the content, but instead focusing on the places the characters take in relation to the frame.

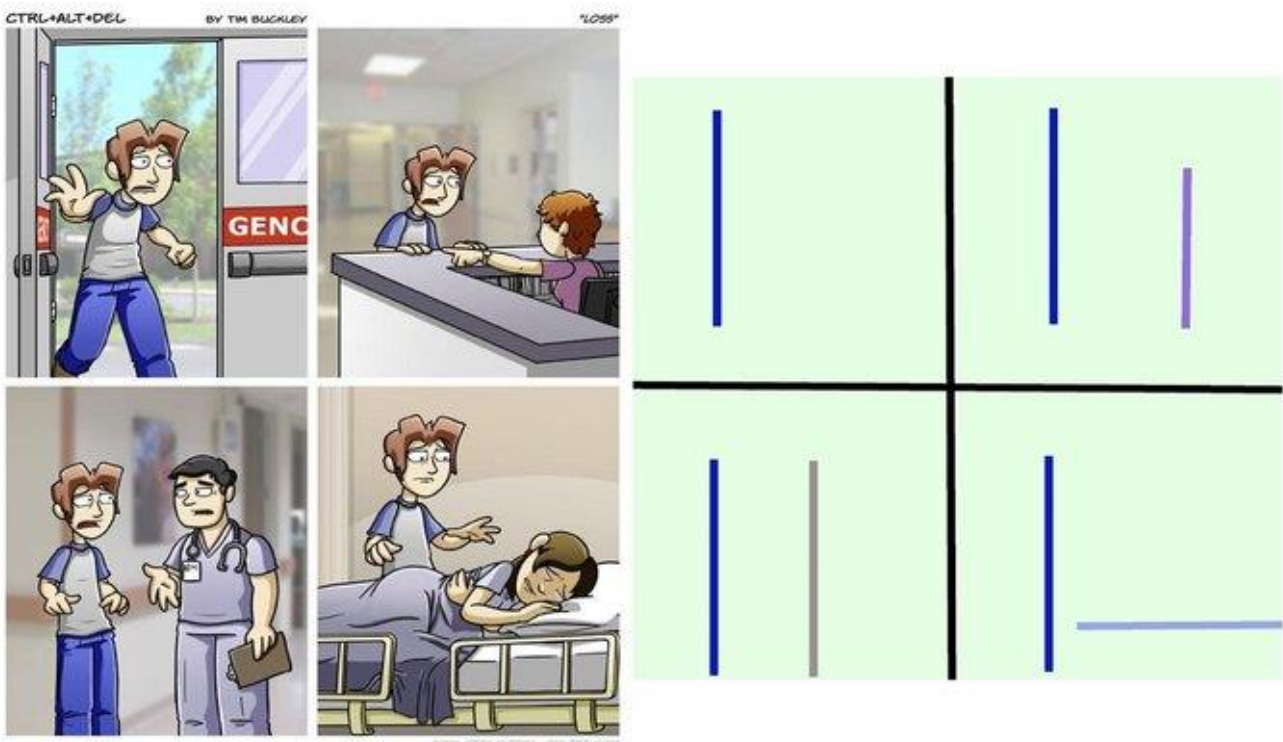


Figure 8. The original comic, titled 'Loss' compared to a minimalist interpretation of it

The prevalence of these kinds of memes led to a new meme, where people questioned whether any four-panel comic they were viewing was a reference to ‘Loss’ as well as many memes having ‘Loss’ hidden in it somewhere. The abstraction of form to the point where the content no longer matters while we are still able to laugh at it is a feature this meme shares with deep-fried and surreal memes. This points to a very high degree of irony, where we do not engage with the propositional content of an image, but merely its form. Loss perfectly exemplifies this irony that persists throughout many kinds of memes.

4. On laughter – a brief critical and historical overview⁸

To find out what it is about memes that make us laugh, we must first look at what makes us laugh in general. Laughter has been largely forgotten in philosophical history. Plato thought that it signified a lack of self-control, that it was excessive, violent, and not to be used by better men.⁹ Aristotle, while mostly agreeing with Plato¹⁰, also shortly discussed wit as a tool in rhetoric. A whole chapter on comedy was to be included in the *Poetics*. A commentary on this theory of comedy is to be found in the *Tractatus Coislinianus*, which outlines the way this artform purges laughter and pleasure in the form of catharsis, much like its tragic counterpart. The stoics thought about it along the same lines as Plato, focusing on the loss of self-control that excessive laughter brought with it. In the bible, it is only talked about in the context of scorn and ridicule, which influenced religious thinkers and the scholastics that followed them.

The first philosophical theory concerning laughter that arose, seems to borrow heavily from this classical and religious conception of laughter as exclusively expressing scorn. This view, that laughter is a way of enforcing social hierarchy by asserting the laughter over the scorned would later be called the superiority theory. It resurfaces much later in Descartes' *Passions de l'Âme* (1649) and Hobbes' *Leviathan* (1651), where only a short paragraph is spent on them as well.

Hobbes formulates the superiority theory very briefly but succinctly, stating that a *sudden glory* gives rise to laughter by observing an imperfection in another person and then causing the laugher to feel better about themselves by comparison¹¹. While scorn and derision certainly form a subset of cases in which we laugh and while there tends to be a 'butt of the joke' in most jokes, we can also think of cases in which there is no such comparison present. It did not take long for this theory to be replaced with theories that more positively appraised laughter.

The next proto-psychological theory of humour to take the stage is the relief theory. This theory, proposed in 1709, relies heavily on a hydraulic conception of our nervous system, stating that laughter arises when our liquid animal spirits used in mental processes are under too much pressure. Laughing is quite literally a way to blow off steam. As science progressed, this theory fell out of favour, but it was later revived by Freud who substituted the fluid dynamics for 'nervous energy' and proposed different subconscious explanations for different kinds of humour in *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unterbewußten* (1905). Understanding as to how this theory in many ways requires accepting Freud's entire underlying system, it is one of the theories that in contemporary times has also fallen largely out of use.

Contemporarily, the most readily accepted theory of laughter is that of incongruity or incongruity-resolution. Finding its roots in Kant and Schopenhauer, this theory states that laughter arises due to a perceived incongruity. Kant discussed in the *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (KdU, 1790) how laughter arises in some cases due to a failure of the Understanding to adequately grasp some absurdity. This then takes the form of an aesthetical idea: empty of content, but pleasing to the mind nonetheless, like beauty. This causes the body and intestines to move in a certain way and expel air in rapid bursts, which causes a pleasant feeling. Earlier in the KdU (§54), however, Kant seems to defend something closer to relief theory, stating that laughter is the result into nothingness of a high-strung expectation.

Schopenhauer sought to explain this incongruity not in terms of an ungraspable idea, impossible to reconcile with itself, but as a difference between the perceived object as it appears to us and the abstract concept we assign it to and group it under. Because we realise that our conceptions of reality do not

⁸ Morreall, John, "Philosophy of Humor", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2016 Edition), accessed on 27-05-2020.

⁹ Republic (388e).

¹⁰ Nicomachean Ethics (4, 8).

¹¹ Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan* (London: Penguin Classics, 1983; first edition: 1651), p. 125.

always mirror it exactly, this causes us to laugh. It also explains why we tend to dislike mockery, i.e. someone claiming that the ideas we have about the world are delusional. Wit is then described as the mental acrobatics of finding an idea to group a perception under, that includes many objects that are nothing like the one you chose. Puns work roughly similarly, then, by alluding to an oddity of things being similar when they actually are not. Why then, do we laugh at this? The present is the medium of perception, and gratification of the will, directly linked to joy. The mind, on the other hand, focuses on the future and the past, on things we want or no longer have. Being pulled back into the present by a joke causes us to re-enter this domain of joy, causing with it a pleasant feeling and laughter.

Incongruity-resolution theory says laughter depends not only on the realisation, but also the absolution of such an oddity. This theory was developed much later, however, by psychologists in the 1970s. I will discuss this further in section 6, where I will also discuss what I believe to be the most recent addition to this dazzling array of different approaches to explaining humour, i.e. the benign violation theory, which attempts to catch all cases of laughter as well as aiming at a high predictive power with regards to what is funny or not.

Against this historical background, from Plato to Schopenhauer, which Bergson demonstrated to be familiar with, he published *Le Rire* as an exposition of the comical, searching for the comical principle as the source of laughter. He looked for a shared feature in things we find funny, as well as to draw conclusions from that as to what the function of laughter might be, thus addressing the question of why we laugh in two different ways. His research has a very limited scope for modern standards (albeit intentionally to some degree), focusing mostly on comical writing in novels like *Don Quixote* or *Tartarin sur les Alpes*, farces (or situational comedies), and comical theatre based on characters, often those of Molière and other French 19th century playwrights. Due to realist theatre developed in response to romanticism, the prevalent idea was that theatre is a (somewhat exaggerated) mirror image of life, so everything found in theatre would have its roots in real life. Thus, theatre and writing would serve as an ideal area for researching the comical principle.

5. *Le Rire** and the interrelations of theories of humour

Originally published as a trio of essays in the *Revue de Paris* (1899), Bergson comments on his collection on laughter in a 1924 preface, saying that it is better characterised as ‘laughter specifically caused by the comical.’ So when I talk of Bergson, this is the kind of laughter I will refer to. This limitation cuts out cases like nervous laughter and tickling, amongst others. He does not want to catch it in a definition, but to treat it with the respect a living thing deserves, to see it in motion and discover where it might arise and why.

For Bergson, the essence of life is motion and flexibility. He posits that the comical arises when this flexibility is stunted and turns to an unusual rigidity. This rigidity can take many forms, and this juxtaposition of movement and standstill is exploited by comical writers in many different ways. He calls the part of the mind that detects and processes these patterns *the comical fantasy*¹², the logic of which he likens to that of dreams, working by processes of free association and juxtaposition, rather than the deductive logic of our rational mind.

The first general remark he makes is that the comical is essentially human. We laugh at people, the things they say, do, and make. When we laugh at an animal, landscape, or a hat, for instance, we do not laugh at the thing itself, but we laugh at it insofar as it reminds us of a human figure or activity.

“You may laugh at a hat, but what you are making fun of [...] is not the piece of felt or straw, but the shape that men have given it. Several have defined man as "an animal which laughs." They might equally well have defined him as an animal which is laughed at; for if any other animal, or some lifeless object, produces the same effect, it is always because of some resemblance to man, of the stamp he gives it or the use he puts it to.”¹³

This becomes important towards the end of the essay, where Bergson makes a few comments on the why of laughter, rather than the how. Laughter serves the function of social disciplining, we laugh at rigidity because a person is supposed to be flexible. We find it laughable for a lawyer to talk about his family matters in legal terms because one is not supposed to do that. We laugh at Molière’s doctors who act as if the patient exists for the furthering of medical science, because we find that this violates moral and societal norms. A more telling example Bergson finds in vanity, the perfect comical vice.

“The outcome of social life, since it is an admiration of ourselves based on the admiration we think we are inspiring in others.”¹⁴

As an example, this excessive self-love is the perfect comical vice, for it is the one that is cured only through laughter, according to Bergson. Nobody is born humble; humility must be acquired through confronting vanity. By examining in ourselves that which we might value too highly, that which we might think others value highly, we will question whether this evaluation is justified. Bergson warns how taking care to be humble might be nothing but the fear of ridicule, but says that while these might originate as being the same, humility can develop naturally as an attitude from this fear. Fear from ridicule pushes us towards humility more than to all other virtues, for it is a virtue that originates from social interactions as such.

* I read this work in Dutch (see: Bibliography), however, for referential purposes, I will defer to a publicly available English translation found at <http://www.public-library.uk/pdfs/7/317.pdf> (Bergson, Henri, Cloudesley Shovell Henry Brereton, and Fred Rothwell. “Laughter: An essay on the meaning of the comic.” *Macmillan* (1911) [1900]) I will refer to the page numbers of that .pdf file like so:

¹² Rire: p. 32/82

¹³ Rire: p. 10/82

¹⁴ Rire: p. 70/82

Seeing laughter as a tool for social correction ties in with classical interpretations tending towards the superiority theory, albeit substantiated in a more positive way. The goal is not to affirm one over the other, but to teach the other to elevate himself. While that just sounds like shuffling words around to me, Bergson also notes this himself:

“ [T]he motive, at all events; may be a good one, that we often punish because we love, and that laughter, by checking the outer manifestations of certain failings, thus causes the person laughed at to correct these failings and thereby improve himself inwardly?”¹⁵

But unless we presuppose either an essentially good or evil nature of humans, this question will remain unanswered. It is not the aim of his research to ask why social patterns and behaviours developed the way they did: the goal was descriptive rather than normative. He continues by saying that laughter would miss its mark if it was characterised by compassion and good intent. The goal is social cohesion through pointing out shamelessness and non-adaptive behaviour.

“The comic [...] expresses an individual or collective imperfection which calls for an immediate corrective. This corrective is laughter, a social gesture that singles out and represses a special kind of absentmindedness in men and in events.”¹⁶

Is Bergson therefore a superiority theorist? Perhaps, when looking at the function of laughter, but if we look at a different why, namely the causal question, it might also be safe to say that Bergson maintains a sort of incongruity theory. What causes us to laugh, after all, is the contrast between life, motion, and flexibility on the hand, and rigidity and inertia on the other. This just seems to come down to how far you are willing to push the matter of explanation. Modern incongruity theory is a more psychological explanation that does not answer the underlying philosophical question. ‘Why do we laugh?’ is simply transformed into ‘Why do we laugh at contrasts or incongruities?’

It should come as no surprise that it is possible to some degree to define certain theories of humour in terms of others, sometimes even both ways, given enough stretching of terms like relief and superiority. Alfie Bown also noticed this in his psychoanalytic and literary exposé of laughter. He writes:

“[I]t is easy to see how [incongruity] could be thought of in relation to either of the other two theories; we either laugh to affirm ourselves over the incongruous [...] or we are forced by the incongruity to face the inadequacy of our normal order of things (making it a laughter associated with some kind of release).”¹⁷

Bergson is no stranger to the history of philosophy of laughter as I expounded it in the previous section. Throughout his essay, he comments on some of these theories as well. On Spencer (a contemporary of Kant, who improved the underlying biology of the relief theory) and Kant’s views, which he treats similarly, he comments that while an expectation (a mental effort) that leads to a void is sufficient for certain cases of comical laughter, it is not necessary, as many expectations resulting in absurdity lead to nothing, or an appreciation of beauty of some sort. In response to theories of humour based on contrast he makes the same remark, sufficient but not necessary.¹⁸ So while claiming not to try to put forward a definition of laughter in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions, this is exactly what he criticises others for doing wrongly.

Another theory he discusses is that of the Scottish philosopher Alexander Bain, who said that the comical is a rebound from seriousness. A degradation of a person or value that bears a certain dignity, without

¹⁵ Rire: p. 79/82

¹⁶ Rire: p. 40/82

¹⁷ Bown, Alfie. “In the Event of Laughter: Psychoanalysis, Literature and Comedy.” *Psychoanalytic Horizons*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, (2019): p. 28

¹⁸ Rire: p. 23/82

causing serious offence or other emotions to arise, is what causes us to laugh.¹⁹ This is, according to Bergson, just a form of transposition, which he detailed as a comical principle himself. He states that:

“A comic effect is always obtainable by transposing the natur[al] expression of an idea into another key.”²⁰

In the case of Bain’s theory this would be the expression of a formal or serious idea in the key of vulgarity. The transposition of an ancient theme in the key of modernity is another example of this rule. Take for example the addition of anachronisms in a historical play or movie depicting *Julius Caesar*, which tends to add a comic relief in modern adaptations of this great tragedy.

Bain draws our attention to another aspect of comedy which Bergson also saw as highly important: Irony. Emotional engagement with the subject of the joke will interrupt or even prevent laughter. One cannot pity and ridicule at the same time. It is not the case that we cannot laugh about someone we feel compassionate for, but when we laugh this compassion is put on stand-by for a while. This can be seen when comparing the titles of comedies and tragedies. Often named after character types and characters, respectively, we find it hard to imagine this to be the other way around. Othello is a complex character, who grapples with his jealousy. Calling Othello ‘The Jealous Man’, however, does away with this complexity and reduces Othello to a laughing stock.²¹

Looking at the next passage concerning this irony reminds us of Kant’s view of laughter, in the sense that the aesthetical idea that causes laughter also does not rely on any emotional interference: it is simply a playful joust of the understanding, grappling with absurdities.

“Now step aside, look upon life as a disinterested spectator: many a drama will turn into a comedy [...] the comic demands something like a momentary anaesthesia of the heart. Its appeal is to intelligence, pure and simple.”²²

Unlike Kant, however, who said the rhythmic shaking of the body is what caused pleasure in us when we laugh, Bergson does not offer a direct explanation as to how a pleasurable emotion arises from a process initially free of emotional attachment. The assertion of one’s own adherence to group normativity and the arising superiority due to that, offer a reasonable explanation, though.

Bergson then continues by saying that this pure intellect, however, must not be separated from others. Which is confirmed by empirical research showing that people tend to laugh more when in the presence of others. Which is not surprising of an action clearly suited to a social purpose.

“[L]aughter always implies a kind of complicity, with other laughers, real or imaginary.”²³

This ‘imaginary’ is also noted in the aforementioned empirical research collected by Provine, which states that people are thirty times more likely to laugh in a social setting, as compared to when they are alone in the absence of stimulating media like books, images, or videos.²⁴ These stimulating media can constitute an imaginary public sphere. The internet works exceptionally well in this respect, because there is actually a digitally present public sphere. However, as Bergson noted and as will become clear in the case of memes, these fellow laughers need not be physically present. Memes almost always appear in a context where it is possible to comment on them and see the comments other people left behind, constituting this idea of a social setting.

¹⁹ Bain, Alexander. “The emotions and the will.” (1859): §39

²⁰ Rire: p. 52/82

²¹ Rire: p. 14/82

²² Rire: p. 10/82

²³ Rire: p. 11/82

²⁴ Provine, Robert R. “Laughter.” *American scientist* 84.1 (1996): 38-45.

6. Bergson's tools for analysing the comical

We can see that his comical theory is grounded heavily in an ontological presupposition of life being a mode of adaptation, which is juxtaposed with rigidity and inflexibility. This might limit the usability of this theory, as we can disagree on these underlying ideas. However, through his analysis of multiple forms of comedy, Bergson arrives at over a dozen general rules, which can be derived to lesser or greater extent from the comical law that he derives from his metaphysical standpoint. For my purposes, I will look at a few of these general rules that could prove to be useful for analysing memes, because most of these rules seem primarily or even exclusively applicable to theatre, like the rule that the comic arises when the public's attention is drawn to the physical manifestation of a person rather than the words they speak.

The first 'tool' I would like to discuss is a more practical application of Bergson's comical principle: something is funny if it draws the attention to an unnaturally automated process or aspect within a greater organic whole. As I previously mentioned, the other rules are all 'derived' from this principle, albeit it to greater or lesser extent. Therefore I shall also attempt to loosely apply this principle in my analyses and see whether or not it leads to similar derivations.

Repetition is regarded as one of the workhorses in comedy: it is why we laugh at a jack-in-the-box as children and it is why characters in sitcoms have catchphrases. Repetition is also why meme formats work as a joke, because the same image being applicable to describe multiple situations is cleverer than to find a 'funny' image being applied to every situation separately.

In his discussion of *Reversal*, Bergson touches upon an even more important comical rule, the introduction or creation of comical tropes. Though related to repetition, the elevation of a comical scene, a joke, or a meme to a model, points to a repetition of form, rather than a repetition of content.

“When a comic scene has been reproduced a number of times, it reaches the stage of being a classical type or model. It becomes amusing in itself, quite apart from the causes which render it amusing. Henceforth, new scenes, which are not comic de jure, may become amusing de facto, on account of their partial resemblance to this model.”²⁵

This is why sitcoms in the 80s and 90s were rarely forced to innovate. A 'two dates to the prom' scene is almost always going to be funny, a knock-knock joke or a lightbulb joke will be easier to pull off. It is also at the core of many memes. Slight iterations of a given format do not just form a new joke, they are layered on top of the old one, creating an ever greater comical effect.

When discussing language, Bergson noted that creating a special category of word-dependent humour feels artificial because almost all humour is mediated by language. However, he makes a distinction between the comical expressed through language and that which is created by language. This distinction is interesting, because a similar one can be made with regard to memes. Sometimes it is the meme itself that is the content of the meme, just like it is sometimes language itself that is the content of a joke. Think of puns, malapropisms, and witticisms: they play with language the way an actor plays a part. Wit points out the mechanical aspects of our language instead of those in life, like the comical does. According to Bergson, the relationship between wit and the comical is that wit is a passing reference, a rough, quick sketch of a comical scene. Wit is the comical in a volatile state.

²⁵ Rire: p. 43/82

The last rule I would like to discuss, ties in loosely to absurd theatre, as well as with incongruity theory to some extent. The *reciprocal interference of series* is that which occurs when two simultaneous, but mutually exclusive explanations of a single event can be given. In comic theatre this effect is commonly developed into a humorous misunderstanding, two people talking about the same thing while thinking of something completely opposite. In absurdist theatre this interference is either ultimate or gone completely, replaced instead by series occurring at different wavelengths entirely, a dialogue that exists almost solely out of utterances rather than responses. Going back to theories of humour, a single occurrence fitting within two simultaneously opposite narratives, lies at the heart of the incongruity of schemas that modern incongruity theorists talk about.

7. Contemporary counterparts and the tools they offer

In the early 1970s, incongruity theory resurges, with a focus on empirical foundation. Psychologist Lambert Deckers ingeniously created a new way of incongruity research in 1975. In a test, he let subjects estimate the heaviness of little weights and then measured their responses when they picked them up. In this *weight-judging paradigm*, the incongruity lies in the discrepancy between expected and actual weight. This is clearly reminiscent of Schopenhauer's explanation of the incongruity, lying in the difference between the abstract idea about and the actual perception of a certain object. Deckers' experiment was successful, proving at least that laughter could arise solely due to incongruity. He continues to work on this, being both active and critical in the debate about theories of humour, also focusing on relations between different theories.

In the relatively short article entitled *Humor as a response to incongruities within or between schemata*, Deckers explains how incongruity and incongruity-resolution theory work in relation to the psychological concept of schemata.²⁶

“A schema is a cognitive structure for representing generic knowledge in memory. A schema represents stereotypical concepts of objects, situations, and behavior sequences.”²⁷

Deckers gives the classical example of going to a restaurant: being seated, waited on, picking food from a menu, and so on. The variables in this case can be the type of food, the style of waiting, etc. Schemas can be embedded within other schemata, where for example a self-serve buffet restaurant results in different expectations and predictions of situations than a fast food restaurant. Detecting an incongruous instantiation of a variable element of a schema is seen as a necessary and sometimes sufficient condition for humour, like seeing a bowl of toothbrushes next to the potato salad at a buffet, for example. The incongruity can also exist between the currently activated schema, creating certain constraints on expectation, and that of a different schema altogether. This is commonly seen in jokes following the structure of a set-up and a punchline. A famous example of this is Raskin's joke, used to illustrate his Script-based Semantic Theory of Humor (SSTH), a specific variant of incongruity theory:

“Is the doctor at home?” the patient asked in a bronchial whisper.
 “No,” the doctor's young and pretty wife whispered in reply.
 “Come right in.”²⁸

The realisation that this is not a man simply visiting the doctor for health-related reasons, but that he is, in fact, there to sleep with the doctor's wife, perfectly exemplifies the incongruity between different schemata. Incongruity-resolution theory states that this second step is necessary for humour. To find something humorous, you need to ‘get’ the joke, i.e. to fit this incongruity arising from the expectation of a doctor's visit schema into the schema of adultery where it is actually not that unexpected. Taking into account that many memes are linguistic or image based, let us take a closer look at this SSTH.

Raskin proposes a mechanism by which this resolution takes place, the semantic script-switch trigger. This is the part of the joke that forces one to reinterpret the content of the previously held schema in terms of the new one. In a traditional joke following a set-up punchline structure, this trigger usually coincides with the punchline either entirely or partially. So while a ‘young and pretty wife’ whispering might already make you doubt whether or not this is a regular doctor's visit, ‘Come right in’ drives the point home, allowing you to interpret the first line, as well as the incongruent second line into a greater whole. A clever play on this can be found in the classical anti-joke: ‘Why did the chicken cross the road?’ The schema we are lured into being that of a joke, expecting some answer involving human-like

²⁶ Deckers, Lambert, and Robert T. Buttram. "Humor as a response to incongruities within or between schemata." *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 3-1 (1990), p. 53-64

²⁷ Ibid. p.53

²⁸ Ibid. p. 54

intentionality in a chicken. Instead, the excruciatingly normal answer, excluding ascribed intentionality to a chicken forces us to re-evaluate and see that sometimes an act is a goal in and as of itself. We will see in the next section that many memes work with a similar semantic script-switch trigger, sometimes also punishing us for expecting too much, although this trigger is not always textual or easy to pin down.

In 1844, Schopenhauer claimed that the greater the incongruity, the funnier we find something. While weight-judging tests attest to this fact, a greater incongruity between set-up and punchline in linguistic jokes had the opposite effect. Deckers states that this can be explained by making the distinction of incongruity between and within schemata, where a greater incongruity within a schema leads to a greater degree of humour, but the greater the incongruity between schemata, the harder it becomes to detect it as an incongruity at all, decreasing the joke's effectivity.

“[I]ncreasingly discrepant stimuli produce an initial increase followed by an eventual decline in humour. This decline presumably occurs when stimuli leave the domain of the prevailing schema. They are so discrepant as to no longer specifically contradict current expectation.”²⁹

The detection of incongruity might be enough to cause laughter when the resolution is unquestionable and immediately obvious. You do not have to go through any mental acrobatics to explain to yourself why a weight is heavier than you expected. However, incongruity-resolution proposes that the attempt to resolve an incongruity must be successful to appreciate an attempt at humour. When someone has to explain a joke to you, it is almost never funny, or at least does not result in actual laughter. However, as we will see in the case of certain kinds of memes, this resolution might not be necessary.

Different psychologists have attempted to relate this drive to resolve to Freud's relief theory, or to surprise as being the underlying cause for laughter. Both attempts point to the level of explanation I discussed earlier: the direct cause of laughter might not be enough to explain *why* we laugh. In the next section, I will apply the theories discussed in sections 5 and 6 to address what we find humorous about memes on multiple levels of explanation.

Before we get into that, however, I would like to discuss one of the most recent contenders in the field of humour: benign violation theory, which is gaining popularity due to its usefulness in explaining why some people might find something funny and others might not.³⁰ Benign violation theory was built largely on Veatch's theory of humour³¹, by American psychologists Peter McGraw and Caleb Warren. It attempts to explain all cases of laughter, including tickling and playfighting, which they find to be often overlooked in other theories due to their biological, evolutionary basis. It proposes three conditions that are all necessary and jointly sufficient for humour.³²

- a) A violation occurs, which is anything that threatens the way one thinks the world ought to be.
- b) This violation occurs in a context that is safe, playful, or nonserious, in other words: benign.
- c) These appraisals occur simultaneously.

This theory allows us not only to understand why something is funny, but also why something is not funny. This then falls into two categories, pure or malign violations and benign situations. If there is nothing wrong with a situation, then it is just an everyday situation, but if there is nothing good about

²⁹ Ibid. p. 56

³⁰ Kant, Leo, and Elisabeth Norman. "You must be joking! Benign violations, power asymmetry, and humor in a broader social context." *Frontiers in psychology* 10 (2019): 1380.

³¹ Veatch, Thomas C. "A theory of humor." *HUMOR* 11.2 (1998): 161-216.

³² McGraw, A. Peter, and Caleb Warren. "Benign violations: Making immoral behavior funny." *Psychological science* 21.8 (2010): 1141-1149.

it, then it is just wrong. Different people find different things benign or a violation, however, which is what causes tastes in humour to differ.

In the initial paper outlining this theory, they look at three factors that influence whether or not certain violations can be seen as benign or not. Violations can range from a physical threat, to a breach of linguistic, social, or moral norms. But for them to be seen as benign, the subject should not be very strongly committed to a norm, which comes down to awareness of the existence of a norm, without believing it should be applied in all cases. A second factor is psychological distance, whether that be far away, long ago, or even fictitious distance. The third is the existence of an alternative explanation for the violation that makes it acceptable in that circumstance, like knowing that tickling is not intended to harm you even though it simulates a physical threat.

It is, however, difficult and perhaps shaky science to try and discern these factors. For example, why one person finds a racist or sexist joke funny, whereas another is offended, can be explained by how committed a person is to equality, psychological distance to the ridiculed group, or that someone cannot think of an alternative explanation as to why something can be seen as benign. Whether or not an alternative explanation is acceptable can also be logically subsumed under the level of commitment to a certain norm.

We are now armed with a full toolbox that we can use to analyse different kinds of humour. Using both Bergson and contemporary theories of humour, I will now analyse not only why memes make us laugh, but also in what respects these theories can be found to be wanting as tools for analysing humour.

8. A multi-layered analysis of different types of memes

In section 7. I posited nine types of memes, of which I will now give examples that I will analyse. Starting with an example of a popular meme, the Harlem Shake.³³ In this video and the subsequent dance fad, a seemingly quiet room with people slowly dancing or just going about their business with Baauer's *Harlem Shake* building up slowly in the background turns into a full-blown madhouse, suddenly involving many people dancing wildly or even flailing about when the drop of the song is reached. It started on the internet, but even made it into old media due to its popularity, even being done on the Today Show. As I take it, the humour lies mainly in a sudden incongruity between what is seen before and after the musical drop. These erratic movements are usually not expected or accepted in public, which one could argue constitutes a break with social norms, in line with benign violation theory. Extra layers of this normative breach are added when people you normally expect not to engage in such tomfoolery also participate, as was the case with television hosts or grandparents who made similar videos.



Figure 9. A rage comic involving multiple rage faces.

Figure 9 is an example of a rage comic, which we can look at from different angles. Its main boon is its relatability: if you have a cat, surely you must hate it when this happens. The complicit laughs, in Bergson's terms are fellow cat owners. There is no apparent incongruity, nor would the benign violation theory seem to apply, save for some linguistic norms being thwarted. However, if we look at rage faces in general, something interesting occurs. Messing with facial proportions in depicting emotions and intentions goes back to caricature drawing, which Bergson addresses. According to him, we find it humorous to find someone's organic inner state solidified as if it were a mechanism, plastered onto their face. The transparency of the exterior showing an underlying simple mechanism, is what causes us to laugh.³⁴ Sticking with Bergson, we find the cat's behaviour funnier when we ascribe human-like intentions to it, mocking your effort to clean the litterbox by soiling it immediately after.

³³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8vJISSAMNWw> : A link to the original video. No image is added, because that cannot capture the essence of the joke.

³⁴ p. 18/82

With respect to this topic of animals that we find funny due to their resemblance to humans, let us examine 'lolcats' and 'Advice Animals'. The idea of an animal pretending to be human, is incongruous with our expectations of animal behaviour. No cat will ever use a computer, the mere suggestion hardly constitutes a violation, however, so it is hard to see how benign violation theory can account for mere silliness like this.



Figure 11. A 'lolcat'



Figure 10. Business Cat: a 'lolcat' and an 'advice animal'.

Superiority theory could also explain in part why we laugh at silly animals, as a way to affirm ourselves over them. Especially when they are shown attempting human activities or using bad grammar. Most advice animals are analysable through incongruity-resolution theory, Business cat being a great example. The semantic script-switch trigger is the bottom text, causing the reader to switch from a corporate boss script to a cat script. The incongruity is here resolved in combination, it is not a businessman nor a cat, it's business cat. Advice animals, which usually do not differ greatly in theme, are not funny for long, as one can recalibrate their expectations, causing incongruities to occur to a much lesser extent over time.

Surreal memes pose a greater challenge to theories of humour. Often being self-referential, containing some other meta-implication, or simply being a bunch of vague nonsense, it is hard to imagine in some cases why one should even laugh. Granted, it might be a very specific taste, but that there is a web-community with nearly 750 thousand members dedicated to them attests to the fact that they can be found humorous.

have you been scrombled?



SYMPTOMS INCLUDE:

- experience of dust
- vast energies
- insight into the illusory nature of self
- big jug hot cheese
- satellites crashing into your house killing you instantly
- entities in your room at night

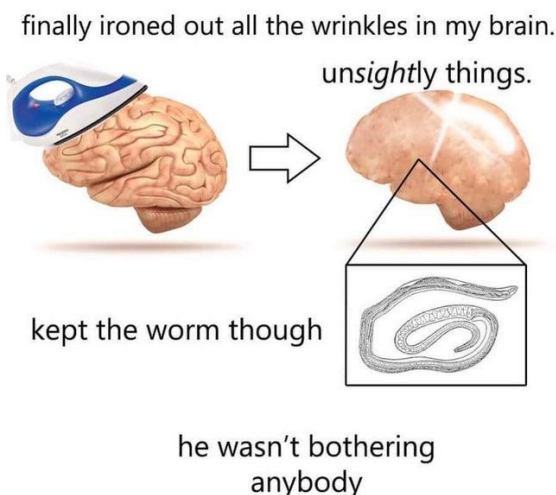


Figure 12. Surreal memes

As is perhaps quickly apparent, it is hard to say what is quite going on in these pictures. One seems to be describing a headache, but the symptoms are nonsensical. Incongruities on top of incongruities, with expectations leading nowhere but to more confusion, being humorous seems to prove that resolution is not a necessary element for appreciation of humour. However, the realisation that the absence of resolution is intentional, may constitute a resolution in and as of itself. Reversal and repetition, as discussed by Bergson are present to a much lesser degree in these examples than in other memes, Bergsonian superiority and incongruity are also hard to detect. Superiority theory could, however, explain why a meme that is so disengaged from its content is funny. Because it is an acquired taste which not a lot of people find humorous, the laughter could be directed at those ‘who simply don’t get it’, the laughter justifying itself as an affirmation not only over the other, but also over a previous self who did not get it.

Something similar could be said about deep-fried memes, although they have an added layer of making fun of the content itself, as well as the people who usually laugh at the portrayed unedited content. The ironic usage of emoji asserts the viewer as being above such banalities as well as playing with the usual rules of emoji in a textual context.



Figure 133. A deep-fried meme ironically mixing several aspects of different meme sub-cultures



Figure 14. A deep-fried surreal meme

This jumbled mess is hard to appreciate out-of-context, which points to an important aspect of benign violation theory. Without an accepting community surrounding it, or a website with more of these kinds of images, this just looks like a steaming pile of violations and nothing to make it benign. References to conventions in other meme-based web-communities are the main workhorse of deep-fried memes. This can be seen in Figure 14. which is a deep-fried version of a surreal meme. The heavy editing and emoji overlay is the digital equivalent of pointing and sneering.

Virgin vs. Chad memes, as I previously mentioned, are a much more direct example of superiority theory. Countless memes like this exist, positing one group’s superiority over that of another. Figure 15. is obviously intended to mock anybody who has children, while patting antinatalists on the back for their efforts. The exaggeration of the criticised and glorified aspects also adds a humorous effect due to the change in tone: it is an example of Bergsonian transposition. It aligns with Bergson’s theory very nicely in another sense, namely that what is mocked, is considered to be inflexible behaviour to a very

high degree. Life is adaptive motion, but being unable to change behaviour (having children) because there is an instinctual drive or a tradition saying so, while adapting and exercising the flexibility that all living beings possess to better society, is a very Bergsonian reason to laugh for an anti-natalist.

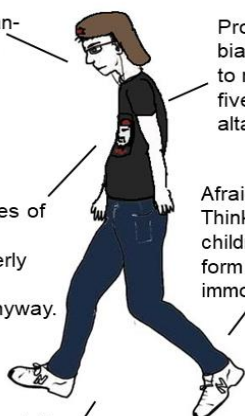
Virgin vs. Chad memes can also be seen as an example of incongruity, as the two opposites are quite literally juxtaposed, usually with a comment's similar position referring to a comment on the other side. Note how in Figure 15. selfishness and selflessness are juxtaposed, as well as economic insight. The suggestion that these opposite characteristics are all present in a similar juxtaposition of a whole testifies to incongruity's function in humour.

The Breeding Virgin (oxymoronic, eh?)

Selfish. Thinks an overpopulated, human-raped world requires another mini-me.

Invests significant finances in the hopes of getting a personal servant in their elderly years. Rots in a retirement home anyway.

Unempathetic, solipsistic tendency, as demonstrated by their failure to consider another being's POV.



Prone to optimism bias. "It won't happen to my kid" is recited five times a day to the altar of procreation.

Afraid of death. Thinks having children is a form of immortality.

The Antinatalist Chad

Relatively selfless. Considers the perspective of the unborn over their own hormonal desires.

Saves up enough money to hire the children of the breeding virgin as personal support workers.

Takes one for the unborn team. Looks death square in the eyes and says "about time you showed up."



Has a greater appreciation of philosophy than the average human.

Figure 145. A 'Virgin vs. Chad' meme

The last memes I would like to discuss are two highly abstracted versions of the 'Loss' meme. The former works on the idea that 'Loss' has become so recognisable that it can be seen even in simple explanations of low-level mathematics. The incongruity-resolution theory works very well to explain 'Is this 'Loss'?', although, being image-based, there is no identifiable semantic script-switch trigger. The point at which one realises that what they are looking at is actually a reimagining of the 'Loss' comic differs from person to person.

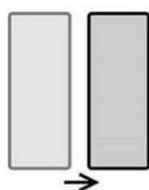
Figure 1: The three most common 2D transformations.

We will be using this rectangle to demonstrate each function.

Scaling



Translation



Rotation

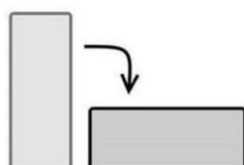
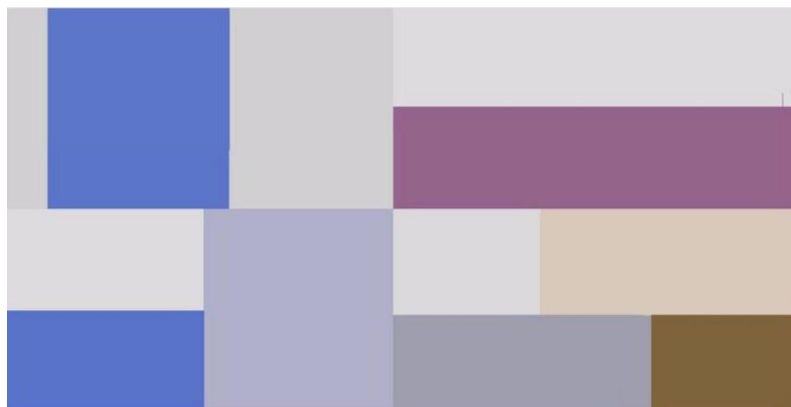


Figure 16. An 'Is this 'Loss'?' meme.



Apoleiasexual - when one's sexuality is strongly affected by loss.

Comes from the Greek root for the word loss, Apoleia.

Figure 1715. An abstract version of 'Loss' jokingly meant to represent a 'sexual orientation'.

Abstract and meta-memes like this depend heavily on reversal and repetition, they refer back to a whole archive of humour that caused people to start recognising this pattern in different locations. Similar to deep-friend and surreal memes, there is an aspect of superiority that can be tied to the resolution of the spotted incongruity. Whether that is superiority over those that do not get it, or a previous state of self, is open to interpretation.

Figure 17. includes some form of Bergsonian superiority, making fun of a tendency people have on a website called tumblr (which we can see this meme is from because of the lower captioning's font) to take liberties in sexuality and gender perhaps a bit too far. Every orientation one can think of is accompanied with an elaborate name and an often self-designed flag. The rigidity of thought in this case being that if gender is a spectrum, any point on this spectrum could and should be named and respected. Why we laugh at this is because these other points on the spectrum claiming a similar level of respect to that of more established positions, actually weakens the claim that these other positions (i.e. the letters in LGBTQ) have. The flag in this case is actually a minimalistic interpretation of 'Loss', the semantic script-switch trigger is present here, namely either at the first or the last mentioning of the word loss, causing one to reinterpret the colours of the flag as being abstractions of the original comic.

Benign violation theory and incongruity theory might not do too well at explaining meta-humour when it is found in a medium largely dedicated to humour of this type. When a fourth-wall break was still unexpected and 'not done' in theatre or television it could still be seen as a violation of social and cultural norms regarding these media. However, when a fourth-wall is intentionally ignored and the memes are made to communicate directly and not internally, it becomes difficult to say in what sense a violation still occurs without theorising about the existence of memetic norms.

9. Closing remarks on irony, memes, and our attempts to theorise

This analysis of different types of memes has shown that no theory of humour can adequately cover on all fronts, except perhaps the benign violation theory, which only succeeds in this due to its vague and broad notions. The incongruity theory seems to explain most cases: however, it offers the least amount of depth in its explanation. We are still left wondering why we find an incongruity laughable. Incongruity-resolution seems to break down at some points, but where it does apply, it offers a better explanation than mere surprise. Superiority theory found its way back into an explanation of all memes based on an in-group understanding of them, but that relies on a stretching of the term superiority, as well as speculating about intentions behind laughter.

Elements of Bergson's theory could be found in many memes and even throughout all memes, but without necessarily affirming the central premise. Historically, this makes sense. Technological advancements, as well as great cultural differences between now and the fin-du-siècle in France make it almost inevitable that we laugh at different things than Bergson and his peers used to laugh at. However, Bergson's main supposition is also flawed. Building on a realist conception of theatre, Bergson directs his attention mainly to comedies. The irony he overlooks here, is that a written and performed text will always exert a kind of mechanical demand on living actors. The play is always automated, no organic flexibility is present. Theories based on this might not be applicable outside of theatre and as such bear no explicatory value.

A systematic problem that all discussed theories of humour run into, even the one that purports not to do so, is their limitations due to the discussed examples they take into account. Paradigmatic examples are chosen in all theories, testing paradigms are developed, tickling and playfighting in primates are even analysed, but the problem is that humour continues to develop and people keep finding new things to laugh at. Humour might be too pluriform to catch in its entirety in an overarching theory.

From the point of view of the benign violation theory, a problem with memes on the internet is that the 'benign' condition is perhaps too easily fulfilled. One could always say it is just a picture on the internet, it cannot hurt you. But if we are laughing at an image of miscarriage, can we fool ourselves so far as not to care? Is the anonymity and distance that the internet provides a curse, rather than a blessing? I will not dive into the ethics of laughter, but in my research I have come across a few ghastly corners of the internet whose users would probably be better off without the protective shields of their anonymity and the screen in front of them.

An unparalleled level of irony has allowed people to disengage from not only the content of a joke, as Bergson stated it to be a necessary condition for laughter, but to disengage from content as such. The idea of abstract images causing mental acrobatics and thereby causing pleasure in the minds of their viewers, turns out to be closer to a Kantian conception of humour, than any modern equivalents we have right now. Unless we accept that realising that there is no resolution to an incongruity can constitute a resolution as such, no theory has made it to the finish line. If it is really the case that humour cannot be caught in a single definition, shape, or form, perhaps we should appreciate theories of humour for what they are worth and stop trying to fit them all together. A theory of humour can explain a type of humour perfectly well, and as long as they are not mutually exclusive, we can keep theorising until we have covered all subsets of humour with plausible explanations.

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