

Absurd Memes: Understanding humour through
Heiddegger's anxiety and Wittegenstein's language

Jack Sarick

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If no one ever did anything silly, nothing interesting would ever be done

(Wittgenstein, *Culture and Value*, p. 50e)

Wittgenstein uses language quite cleverly in this quote by making *silly* an active pursuit that must be done, while *interesting* is a passive product that is merely done unto. What he asks of us though, with the clever language, is to laugh. If we hold straight faces and never giggle, how could we possibly expect to understand that which we claim to think about? That being said, there is a time and a place for everything, and while I urge you to laugh at the jokes, it is equally important remember that they are set within the frame of philosophy.¹

Understanding how understanding works is a tricky thing. What constitutes understanding, be it of an object or something abstract, is rarely pinned down, and when it is the definition created is so poor as to be unusable. We can further entangle ourselves by asking if this failure can be understood as success (by some twist of mental gymnastics) and in no time at all we have devolved into meaningless babble about “understanding understanding” and are no less confused. So let us start off with failure. A failure to understand understanding. Two thinkers made the greatest progress in building a philosophy of understanding: Heidegger and Wittgenstein. Heidegger developed a system to think about understanding nothingness, and Wittgenstein wrote a fair bit on both language and understanding. Interpreting Heidegger as Wittgenstein does, especially Heidegger’s work on nothingness, can build a powerful framework of understanding, misunderstanding, and humour. Wittgenstein said, in reference to Heidegger:

If someone says ‘The nothing noths’, then we can say to this, in the style of our way of considering things: Very well, what are we to do with this proposition? That is to say, what follows from it and from what does it follow? From what experiences can we establish it? Or from none at all? What is its role? [...] I am ready to go along with anything, but at least I must know this much. I have nothing against your attaching an idle wheel to the mechanism of our language, but I do want to know

¹I’ve also tried to steer clear of any controversial subjects memes to avoid any added complexity

whether it is idling or with what other wheels it is engaged. (Wittgenstein, *Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle*, 73)²

Wittgenstein initially appears to have quite distaste for Heidegger, so let us first establish that Wittgenstein and Heidegger have their differences, but there is no rift between them. As noted in *Philosophy After Heidegger and Wittgenstein*, “both Wittgenstein and Heidegger reject argument in the familiar sense” (Guignon 653). The metaphorical wheel that Heidegger attaches is not dismissed by Wittgenstein, instead the addition of the wheel is brought into question. *Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and Humility* is an excellent paper on the brilliant parallels between the two, summed up well in the introduction:

Heidegger was [...] the paradigm of the sort of metaphysical nonsense Wittgenstein had dedicated himself to exposing. Nowadays, however, this remark is copiously cited and nearly always as evidence of close affinities between the thinking of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. (Cooper, *Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Humility*, 1)

Both Heidegger and Wittgenstein have their philosophies drastically foreshortened here. We should not judge the former through an attack from the latter, nor the latter through an attack of the former. Seeing each thinker for their weaknesses is less productive than using them for their strengths. We can use Wittgenstein and Heidegger symbiotically. Keeping this relationship in mind, we can carry on to the thinkers themselves. Wittgenstein focuses most heavily on language, such as *Philosophical Investigations* where the bulk of the philosophical content is on language and how we understand it. Wittgenstein spends time crafting a web of philosophy so tightly woven that a thread can be picked up in an section of the book and carried through the rest. How do language and understanding and nothingness all find one coherent thread in Heidegger? Let us take one tiny quote that is so cogent that the text surrounding it is reduced to mere commentary:

Anxiety reveals the nothing (Heidegger 109)

²The paper *Wittgenstein, Heidegger and Humility* sums it up well with a quote from Wittgenstein to a colleague, “To be sure, I can understand what Heidegger means by Being and *Angst*” (Wittgenstein, *WVC*, 68), though I could not find this in my own copy of the text.

Cogent, though neither dazzling or immediate. What the quote lacks turns out to be a good place to start in the investigation of it. It contains no qualifiers. Heidegger proposes that anxiety revealing nothing is a universally applicable law that has no exceptions.

Anxiety, defined by Heidegger as “anxiety in the face of . . .” (Heidegger 109), is equal parts complex and uncomfortable. Complex in how it is formed, and uncomfortable in that it makes us anxious! How do we, as creatures who (presumably) experience anxiety, understand anxiety? Anxiety as a kind of void is how Heidegger initially defines it. The ellipses leave an empty space for the reader to fill as needed. By creating an intentionally incomplete framework, Heidegger can wrap the incomprehensible nothing in a layer that is understandable. This the basis for the possibility of a shared understanding of objects that cannot be understood. Wittgenstein builds anxiety directly into language, going so far as saying “You learned the *concept* of ‘pain’ in learning language” (Wittgenstein, *PI*, p. 384). While a fair bit of *Philosophical Investigations* goes into building this claim, it can be used without having read the text. Consider a headache; if humans did not express pain verbally (through crying and screaming and the like) then it would near impossible to convey pain through language.³ Making either anxiety (a sort of pain, to be sure) or language a side-effect of the other is not Wittgenstein’s goal, but it is to show that language is indicative of understanding. Humour also is indicative of understanding. Consider the following joke:⁴ “What do clouds wear under their pants? Thunderpants!” What makes it funny? What makes it a joke? Delivery definitely matters, as any enthusiastic toddler proves when they bumble the joke after hearing an older cousin tell it first. Regardless of what makes the joke funny (this is the job for the comedian), it requires understanding. This is a simple joke, requiring only an vague understanding of both puns and the absurdity of clouds wearing underpants. Humour, however, can take on other forms.

Due to their short life-cycle and general temporality, memes are lacking a good classification system. As such, anyone talking about a certain kind of meme finds themselves at a

³A broad claim, and one that Wittgenstein brilliantly defends in a manner that reads like it could be a response to Heidegger’s thoughts on moods.

⁴It is by no means implied that this is a funny joke, however

loss for a pre-existing vocabulary to use. It would therefore seem to hold that before we talk about memes, we talk about talking about memes.

...We can draw a boundary – for a special purpose. Does it take this to make the concept usable? Not at all! Except perhaps for that special purpose. No more than it took the definition: 1 pace = 75 cm to make the measure of length 'one pace' usable. And if you want to say “But still, before that it wasn't an exact measure of length”, then I reply: all right, so it was an inexact one – Though you still owe me a definition of exactness! (Wittgenstein, 69)

When you tell a dog to stay, the dog is allowed to wander within a small boundary, though you do not squabble with your dog over the exact line which they cross. In exactly the same way, absurd memes are a subsection of memes. And in the same way a pointed finger accompanies the word stay, there is a colon at the end of this sentence:⁵



Figure 1: An absurd meme

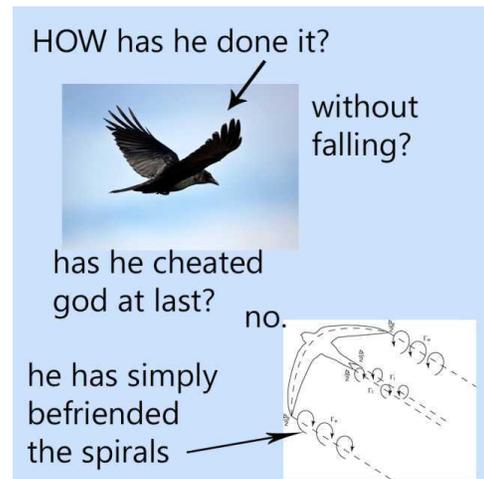
What makes this an absurd meme? This is simply answered with “It deals with absurd ideas,” though this answer adds as little as the question. How do we know (or what makes us think, if we

⁵Link to more memes?

are wrong) that it is an absurd meme? What differentiates this meme from just being an image? Here are the good questions, and this harkens back to Wittgenstein asking if Heidegger's metaphorical wheel was idle or not. Just as Heidegger brings multiple arguments to the table, a few more memes are required to fully construct this concept with the pre-existing philosophy:



(a) A meme based on Spongebob comparing philosophers



(b) A meme based on birds, and the various things that concern them

Figure 2: Two completely different memes

From a strictly visual standpoint, the memes (2a) and (2b) are similar.⁶ Both follow a layout familiar to anyone who regularly navigates advertisements, comic books, or visual art of any kind. It is the content (in this case, though not necessarily) in which these two diverge. Someone who does not understand the memes might not find them humorous. In fact, it can even be hard to recognize them as memes at all! We can say that (2a) is certainly a meme, and it is

⁶It is interesting to note that the conic blur in the final panel of (2a) is one of the foundational visual transformations that helped to start the absurd meme movement with the advent of deep-fried memes

relatively simple to analyse from a humour perspective. The joke is laid out quite clearly, and if you understand the philosophers, the joke might even make sense.⁷ On the other hand, the humour in absurd memes like (2b) and (1) can be harder to dissect.

What separates absurd memes from others is the lack of understanding. Memes like (2a) rely on a shared understanding of the subject, be it thunderclouds or philosophers, and in this sense they are normal humour. Absurd memes are the complete inverse. The humour in absurd memes comes from the fact that there is nothing to understand, let alone find funny. Where (2a) requires an understanding of philosophers, (2b) requires an understanding that there is nothing in the image you can understand. Voids have been intentionally cut into the memes to prevent you from understanding them. Any and all humour in abstract memes is derived from an abject failure to understand the the memes themselves. If this makes you squirm on some level then I commend your honesty! It should induce some sort of uneasy not knowing, a sort of *anxiety* perhaps? This is in fact precisely what Heidegger speaks of when he speaks of anxiety, and yet we have found it through humour. Heidegger's statement that "anxiety reveals the nothing" (Heidegger 109) is identical to our discovery through absurd humour. Where Heidegger seems to wring a philosophy out of anxiety, with Wittgenstein we can find the philosophical value within humour to reveal the nothing. To put it in the same terms Heidegger uses, where anxiety is the fear of . . . , absurd humour is the enjoyment of Absurd memes have conquered the nothing. Even the nothing, at whose mere incomprehensibility we wavered, can be laughed at. It is our shared *misunderstanding* that we find in the absurd. Though no one can understand the absurd, everyone can share in their misunderstanding of it.

⁷There is a second level of humour for those who recognize the characters as Spongebob and Mr. Krabs, and still more humour can be found in the origin of those images as memes

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