



SERRC
Social Epistemology
Review & Reply Collective

<http://social-epistemology.com>
ISSN: 2471-9560

Notes of the Rhetoric of Trolling

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Wills, Bernard. "Notes on the Rhetoric of Trolling." *Social Epistemology Review and Reply Collective* 8, no. 5 (2019): 1-10.

Short url: <https://wp.me/p1Bfg0-48y> (provided by WordPress)

The following notes are from my personal observations on the internet phenomenon of trolling. I don't know what a troll is and is not any more than other people do but I've dealt with them enough to see some common patterns.¹ I cannot remember when exactly I started encountering breathtakingly insolent people on the internet but I now feel I have known them forever. At one point I went from being gob smacked to being curious.

Seriously, Who Are These People?

Who are these people? Do they have mothers? Kids? Are they bitter, lonely singletons? Abusive partners? Are they drunk or insane? Unfortunately, the internet gives little opportunity to investigate the matter. In very few instances have I been able to peer behind the trolling mask and glimpse an actual person. My comments then are confined to what I can observe of the troll mask and how that mask functions.

Of course, they represent only the section of the trolling community that I myself have been exposed to. There are many styles of trolling (like in fashion, pop culture and gaming) that I have no significant exposure to simply because of my age, gender and professional interests. I do, though, have an interest in argumentative and rhetorical styles this is the area on which I can comment most usefully (as opposed to motivation which I can only speculate on).

If I am correct about trolling a good deal of what I say will be familiar to the reader though some of it will not: we have probably constructed our own individual, hopefully overlapping, portraits. I invite readers from different disciplines to compile their own notes as many snapshots of the troll may add up to a more coherent picture.

Certainly I have more questions than answers and hope others at SERRC can instruct me. Whether philosophers or literary critics, political or social scientists we have all encountered this figure at some point and no doubt have our own disciplinary 'takes' on the problem.

Before I begin though let me note one important thing. Women experience far more vicious trolling than men. I have at worst been insulted. No one has threatened me with rape or death as in the case of Australian journalist Ginger Gorman or Anita Sarkeesian. These women (and many others) have encountered trolls who go to the edge of psychopathy and beyond and I must say I have never had an encounter of that kind.

Some might (perhaps) reserve the word troll for such extreme cases (I am open to that argument) but for now I will leave it as a family resemblance term covering a continuum of behaviors from mildly annoying to genuinely terrifying.² As a philosopher I no doubt

¹ On some of the confusion on this question see: <https://www.wired.com/story/nobody-knows-what-troll-means-anymore-mueller/>.

² On Gorman's story see her eloquent TED talk (https://www.mprnews.org/story/2019/04/24/miller-inside-the-world-of-an-internet-troll?fbclid=IwAR0GwNbdwqgpxSOqsB90uQeGUREUz1Lhb5rCEqFioAVi-HHP_yKJqXoGtX8). Gorman has actually encountered some trolls in person and attributes to them a so called 'dark tetrad' of narcissism, psychopathy, 'Machiavellianism' and sadism. As I say I don't think I have encountered anyone this bad but were I to go online under a female persona or as a person of color I would

encounter ‘opinion based’ trolls more than others and, as I like arguments, I probably interact with them far longer than I would with any other kind. As ideological or ‘opinion based trolls’ are probably not the worst of the worst I thus have to make the proviso that I am most concerned here with what may be only the middle range of the trolling spectrum.

Fortunately for the utility of my inquiry this may be the range in which, to adapt a phrase from Plato, the ‘curables’ rather than the ‘pure tyrants’ lie. Thus, I will focus my attention on how the troll presents, and particularly the argumentative and rhetorical tricks he uses rather than trying to compete with psychological approaches which are more concerned with underlying personality traits. Thus I will keep my comments on the latter to what I hope is a decent minimum.

The Most Powerful Forces of Irony

My friends in social science no doubt have a good deal to say about the internet phenomenon of trolling. As a philosopher I have a few observations on it myself and in this paper I will follow Plato in hunting the troll. I refer of course to Plato’s dialogue *The Sophist* (218-30) in which Plato goes hunting the sophist, seeking by the method of division to smoke him from his hiding place and fix his nature.

Alas I am not sure I can follow Plato fully here. I have, if you like, a sketchy phenomenology of the troll but no sure grasp of his nature. I use the masculine pronoun here partly because it is male trolling I find most interesting (it seems part of the broader phenomenon of ‘toxic masculinity’) and because I have no exposure to female troll cultures such as TERFS.

I simply have encountered too few female trolls to say much about them (the ones I *have* encountered don’t differ appreciably from their male counterparts). A consideration of trolling of course will consider, at some point, the relation of contemporary trolling to what Plato called sophistry. My emphasis at the moment though is on the thing I find most interesting which is the rhetoric and style of trolling.

Trolls, I have observed, have a very small rhetorical arsenal though they can employ this arsenal in a surprising variety of ways. Of course they rely on the *ad hominem* fallacy and

likely access layers of depravity I cannot as a middle aged white male. Most of the trolls I encounter are, as far as I can tell, putting on a display for another male and not trying to victimize me. This darker end of trolling has been studied by Buckels, Trapnell and Paulhaus in “Trolls Just Want to Have Fun” (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0191886914000324>) These authors have been able to peer behind the mask more than I have though trolls who respond to surveys about trolling may be select group only. Plus, questionnaires may be, to a surprising degree, a medium in which people construct alternate pictures of themselves rather than deliver unvarnished, direct ones. It is their view (101) that anti-social individuals seek out the internet to troll on though they admit the causality may go the other way: the internet may make us more troll-like. One issue I have with this study is that the authors’ operating definition of trolling “Online trolling is the practice of behaving in a deceptive, destructive, or disruptive manner in a social setting on the Internet with no apparent instrumental purpose.” (97) designates only a subset of troll behaviors: some trolls seem to me to have an instrumental purpose or at least to be furthering an instrumental purpose whatever their actual motivations and that is the furtherance of a political or social aim.

sometimes the fallacy *ad baculum*. This is not what interests me however as these techniques are well known already and fairly crude. I am much more engaged by two techniques (among several I identify) that I think are much more revealing and these are the techniques of hyperbole and irony, the latter usually used in a self-protective mode.

I point them out because I think they reveal something at the heart of trolling that has not been much commented on: which is that trolling is a failure of rhetoric and part of the solution to trolling may be the teaching of rhetoric. People not only need argumentative skills but rhetorical and persuasive skills. Trolling is something people who have to make decisions on the fly about how to express themselves may fall into (and it may then harden into a habit).

In other words, key elements of trolling may be (as a colleague suggested to me) jury rigged (at least in the milder, less nakedly sadistic cases). The immediacy of the web no doubt plays some role here. Social media conversations, even with the edit function (which by the way the troll never employs, perhaps because it could never occur to him to correct himself) are always in the now and in the ‘hotness’ of the moment trolling may be an easy crutch to fall back on.

This is especially the case as the lamentable features of trolling, the invective and ad hominem attacks, may be a natural consequence of the hyperbolic reflex in the troll’s discourse. To be blunt: having pitched his language at 11 (ignoring all the rhetorical registers below it!) the troll may simply have no place to go but insult and abuse. Rhetorically, he has no technique for intensifying his expression and as the discussion heats up so does he.

Venator de Troglodytara / Hunter of Trolls

First off though we need a rough taxonomy. Trolls I have observed come in a fairly small number of shades almost invariably related to some cultural or political stance. I don’t think I have ever encountered a troll who was not staking out an ideological position though the troll’s actual relationship to ideology is somewhat vexed (it is not clear to me if the troll actually has any real beliefs).

Male trolls (the kind I know best) fall readily in the following categories: conservative/libertarian, conservative evangelical, alt- right, new atheist alt-right, new atheist/secularist and campus leftist (whether so-called ‘SJW’ or unreconstructed Stalinist). These are wildly opposed ideological stances but part of my thesis is that these differences are superficial.

Beneath all these ideological masks there is a set of common patterns; a gestalt if you will. It would not surprise me in fact if ideological conversions between these groups happen easily and swiftly for all these people use the same rhetorical techniques and even the same insults. That people with such diverse points of view fall into near identical behaviors may indicate that there is indeed something ‘jury rigged’ about troll discourse as persons facing common

problems tend to converge on common solutions (though of course, by an iron law of dialectic, people *also* come to resemble their opponents).

Here, though, I must confront an issue that has come up again and again. Progressive friends often get upset at me if I suggest trolls are denizens of the political left as well as the political right. Ironically, left wing trolls troll me ferociously when this issue comes up. This is because they think I am asserting moral equivalence between themselves and Fascists which I am absolutely not.

Let me clarify then: right wing trolls are dangerous to others (even physically) where left wing trolls are (with some exceptions) merely exasperating. It is, I must add, a feature of ideological trolling that my 'side' (however defined) never trolls: trolling is what the other side does. This is what I tell progressives who deny to me (in spite of the direct evidence of my senses!) the existence of a left leaning troll culture: you don't see the trolling on your own side in the exact same sense that a fish does not see water.³

This raises the vexing question of whether and to what degree the troll sees himself as a troll or self-describes as 'passionate and committed to truth and justice'. The troll may be systematically deceiving himself about this and genuinely believe he is a 'voice crying in the wilderness' in which case a heuristic for trolls (if we could find one) might help some people to self-knowledge.

Self-Illusions of Integrity

Now who is the troll? In one sense there is a very direct answer to this question. The troll is Socrates minus the Socratic ignorance! By this I mean that the troll thinks of himself as embodying a basic archetype of western culture: the gadfly. The basic attitude behind trolling may be summed up as follows: the emperor has no clothes. Conversation has congealed into stale conventionality and bad faith. The troll is the person who has the courage and directness to cut this Gordian knot with his plain speaking and blunt integrity. This at least is the *persona* of the troll.

Western culture reveres the figure of the gadfly, the heroic man who goes against the grain of society to say what needs to be said.⁴ The gadfly is a mode of male heroism and the troll is

³ On the general problem of toxicity among progressives see Asam Ahmad:

<https://briarpatchmagazine.com/articles/view/a-note-on-call-out-culture>. Mr. Ahmad has the virtue (rare in our day) virtue of being brutally honest with his own side.

⁴ I suppose one source for this 'archetype' is comedy. Comedians like George Carlin or Ricky Gervais trade in biting, satiric commentary on politics, society and religion. These individuals, and others like them, perform a useful 'gadfly' function. I wonder, however, if some internet trolls are taking this style for substance. Individuals like the aforementioned are no doubt very funny. However, I suspect some younger male trolls think that being a caustic, biting comedian also makes one an intellectual and an omni-competent one at that. Young males want the shortest, easiest path to respect and a scoffing manner is one of several forms of cheap grace now on offer. Certainly it is easier than problem solving or other forms of intellectual labor. At any rate the satirist and heckler are two functions the troll seems to combine and however inept we think his efforts are in this vein he does seem to please his audience: the echo chamber which witnesses his performance. "Joker"

eager to claim this mantle for himself. That the troll is often ridiculously under-equipped for this task in terms of ability and education matters little because the primary pettifoggers and obscures of truth are traitorous intellectuals. The stance of the troll can thus be fitted comfortably into the democratic tradition of anti-elitism and anti-intellectualism.

This also explains the attraction of blunt positivism and direct realism in epistemology: knowledge is fact and facts are what the troll is in possession of thank you very much. That the troll is also a perspectivalist and relativist will emerge later but that *may* have more to do with his underlying self and less to do with how he presents online. It is essential to the self-presentation of the troll that truth be not a matter of controversy and that everyone is engaged in the dishonest task of denying the obvious.

If the truth is obvious and not a matter of controversy this determines the rhetorical patterns the troll must follow. In short the troll must begin by shouting, perhaps typing in capitals. In terms of the ‘hotness’ of the internet medium this also conveys the urgency and immediacy of what the troll has to say. Of course ‘hotness’ has its dangers. The troll, usually being a younger male, suffers from the universal failing of young men: no matter how intelligent he is he always rates himself as slightly more so. This, I am told, is called the testicular quotient.

This means the troll can blunder and lose the position of dominance in the conversation. For instance, he can be called out on a gross error of fact. This does not phase the troll one bit however as he has another card under his sleeve and that is self-protective irony. The troll, of course, is trolling and the joke is on you for taking him seriously and getting ‘triggered’. Trolling manages the remarkable feat of being heroic truth telling AND an exercise reflexive irony at the same time!

The Posture of the Hero, the Martyr

The troll also uses a rhetorical technique that, for want of a better term, I call moral posturing. Though the troll is possibly amoral and cynical he will gladly wield morality as a stick with which to bludgeon others. The troll is making (it seems) an impassioned appeal to conscience and integrity.

This is best illustrated by an example drawn from atheist and alt/right atheist trolling. In any argument with an insufficiently atheist person (and that is most of us- true heroism must be rare to be valuable so the troll has to stake out a more extreme position than others) the atheist troll will mention pedophilia. He will *especially* do this if he is also an Islamophobe (on account of the Prophet’s marriage to Aisha). The impression he is creating is that he is committing an act of moral heroism by calling attention to a profound injustice the rest of us are trying to cover up or ignore.

and “trickster are two other archetypes that have been suggested for the troll. (Buckels, Trapnell and Paulhaus: 97)

Does the troll feel deep anguish at the tragedy of sexual abuse in churches and other institutions? Is he actually upset over child brides in Yemen? Is he traumatized by reading about the 7th Century with its distant, repugnant mores? This is highly unlikely. Examining the troll's overall behavior, it is plain that he is the very opposite of a sensitive man who deeply feels the pain of the world.

In short, he is in most other instances devoid of empathy so that his appeals to suffering children are, like Ivan Karamazov's, probably hollow pretention.⁵ They are a prop to his argument, a rhetorical stick with which he bludgeons or 'owns' his opponent.⁶ In fact, this aggressive rhetorical ploy is meant to force the interlocutor to either agree with the troll or say she supports pedophilia and his use of it may be compared best to the fallacy of complex question.

Though the troll *moralizes* incessantly, however, he is not a moralist. For instance, he has few if any firm categories for ethical reflection. Like another archetype, the libertine, he scoffs at the hypocrisy of the pious and good but not from the standpoint of any thought out morality of his own.

This raises the question of the troll's relation to victim culture in general and to Nietzsche's analysis of slave morality. People who are traumatized (legitimately) can lash out and display behaviors meant to tear down the life force of others rather than restore the victim's own. This is lamentable but it is, as Nietzsche might say, all too human and, for me at least, readily forgivable. For us in North America however this problem can be amplified by a culture of victimhood which makes a claim to victimhood a source of power and status as well as an instrument to tyrannize over others.⁷

⁵ Ivan, in *The Brothers Karamazov*, denounces God for the suffering of children but unlike his brother Alyosha he never nurtures an actual child. Dostoevsky here is brilliantly contrasting abstract moralism with practically effective love.

⁶ 'Owning' someone, with its suggestion of rape and enslavement, seems to come from the culture of computer hacking though it has spread to gaming (where one can 'rape' an opponent). One thing at play in trolling may well be the agonistic culture of video games: combative display transferred to the sphere of verbal sparring. Plato distinguished *eristics* (martial display in the form of argument) from dialogue but even many academics impose a culture of male display on what ought to be a common quest for truth. This is a particular problem for academic philosophy which remains male dominated partly for this reason.

⁷ People who don't talk regularly to evangelical Christians may not realize the degree to which they appropriate the ideology of victimhood for themselves, particularly in the form of a persecution complex. White Evangelicals have suffered a significant loss of cultural status since the high-water mark of the Moral Majority days. This is part of the reason they are so bitterly resentful of gays and especially Muslims as they perceive these people as being granting privileges denied to them. Though this perception is not quite founded in reality (it's not like being gay or Muslim in North America is so great) it no less deeply felt for that. Evangelicals have always had an inferiority complex towards mainline churches and now they have an even deeper one towards secular 'liberal' culture. When events like mosque shootings occur one will always find friends and acquaintances in those communities proclaiming that Christians are the 'real' victims and that sympathy should be directed towards them. Victim-envy is a significant motivating factor in Evangelical Islamophobia which is now a virtual article of faith in Evangelical communities ranking just below the Trinity and atonement.

Troll culture is not victim culture however. The troll may take the side of the victim if and when it gives him an edge but he may equally rubbish and abuse victims as ‘snowflakes’. His relation to the victim is entirely opportunistic. And here we see another side to the troll. He is a dogmatist and a stern moralist but only as it suits him for the Troll also needs flexibility and wiggle room.

Thus the troll needs to be able to deny anything he has said as soon as it becomes a hindrance to him. Here the troll has a couple options, one of which is flat out denial of course. When this is impossible though, when the troll is confronted by his own words (easily done on *Facebook*) he becomes a subtle hermeneutist! The troll engages in remarkable feats of eisegesis as he explains how you have taken him out of context and completely misunderstood his words.⁸

The master of this particular technique is of course President Trump or, more properly, Sarah Huckabee Sanders. This is one way in which the troll resembles the Sophist; he always reserves a hiding place and always has an out if the discussion turns against him. Thus we see the same pattern as above. Exactly as the troll is at once utterly serious and utterly ironic so is he also a man of principle though, at the same time, malleable and cynically dishonest.

Again, like the Sophist, he is everything and nothing at once. This is further revealed by the fact that while the troll will pose as an intellectual in some circumstances, he will equally employ the rhetoric of anti-intellectualism, calling out ‘academics’ on their pseudo-intellectual ‘bullshit’ (the troll often resorts to this trope when he is out of his depth in a discussion).

Winning by Performing Having Always-Already Won

There are two other powerful weapons in the rhetorical arsenal of the troll and one is his constant victory dance. The troll is ALWAYS winning. It has been suggested to me that the troll only THINKS he is winning but this is not true. For him victory is radically self-constituting. By constantly saying 'I am winning, I am winning' the troll actually does win and not just in his own imagination. His constant declaration of victory actually is meant to induce a feeling of paralysis and helplessness in his opponent: the feeling that no matter what one says and what one does the troll will still assert dominance and declare you 'butt-hurt' (anally penetrated?)

Of course what the troll does not (perhaps) notice is that he has defined the parameters of the game so narrowly that winning is tautological. The game is also worthless on its face which raises the difficult question of what the troll actually gains from it. Does the troll invest so much energy for the sake of a fleeting feeling of victory? Is the fact that victory is so fleeting and uncertain the root of his desire to keep trolling?

⁸ Here is where the fact that the troll does not use the edit function plays surprisingly to his advantage. The troll often eschews grammar and punctuation particularly in longer posts. Indeed, he often produces word salad that makes one wonder if his thought processes are disordered. However, this has the happy result for the troll that, as his words are often unclear, he can force any construal on them he needs to.

Here one wonders what significance the echo chamber has for the troll: can a troll troll with no one to reward his trolling with 'likes' 'LOL's' or laughing emoticons? Is he rather performing in the theater of his own brain for an audience of one?

The second weapon is projection. If there is any heuristic test for a troll it is probably projection. Every troll without exception says "you are the troll not me"! That the troll projects his own hostility and aggression onto others is no doubt well known. What is more interesting is what happens when the troll is called out on his projection. Resourceful trolls will, without missing a beat, accuse you of projecting your own projection thus miring the conversation in a bad infinity.

Now of course the troll will say things like "I trolled you good" but his use of the verb in a positive sense does not bind him. Nothing binds him. He is not beholden to the law of non-contradiction and as such can be genuinely insulted by your 'trolling' towards him. Plus, he can always use that move because at some point (almost certainly) he has goaded you into intemperance or impatience which he then uses as evidence of how aggressive and unfair you are.

Still, it is a weakness of the troll that, in spite of doling out dollops of abuse and invective he is hypersensitive himself and one sometimes wonders if he is genuinely wounded by criticism. A hard core cynic, he may also be as innocent as a child. This may be a function of the fact that the troll has no self-awareness and cannot actually see himself trolling. Perhaps too he does not see the contradictions his behavior embodies: sincere ironist, moralizing cynic, anti-intellectual intellectual and so on. Or perhaps, in a Whitmanesque gesture, he embraces all contraries at once!

I suppose I have shown that the troll defies categorical definition as having no fixed nature of his own but is all things by turn and whatever he needs to be in the moment to gain the advantage (the *libido dominandi* being the closest thing he has to a principle). This is why I think trolling is more a style than anything else and why it crosses ideological barriers otherwise impassible.

There is a further complexity. Pure trolls are probably not as common as one thinks because trolling designates a continuum of behaviors. Some people are probably situational trolls reacting defensively to a perceived threat. Plus, and this is a melancholy reflection, we are probably all guilty of at least some behaviors that lie on this continuum.

Some trolls may simply be people who are poor at reading their own tone and may simply be passionate and overenthusiastic. Some may be assholes to invoke another problematic category or having a bad day.⁹ Plus, I have encountered trolls whose thinking seemed so

⁹ It is difficult to say whether the troll is an asshole or not as it is hard to tell whether his online persona is a reflection of his offline one or embodies its suppressed tendencies. I have in fact managed to talk trolls down to a normal conversational level but only by the extraordinary means of revealing to them that I was writing a paper on trolls. The troll always wants to fix his opponent as an object, essentialize her and dismiss her as a 'regressive leftist' say or some other tag. This rite of naming and dismissing is basically the rite of exorcism.

disordered that I had to suspect that either mental illness or substance abuse was paying a role in their behavior (though I had no way of confirming this).

I have one more observation to make. I, being who I am, an associate professor and a fairly privileged person can shrug off trolling in a way other people cannot. I can keep trolls out of my head though there are some physical reactions to dealing with them like increased stress and fatigue. When trolls call me an idiot or say I am incompetent I have a professional record that tells me I'm not. However, if I were not privileged in this way and I did not have the self-confidence that comes with privilege I cannot imagine how devastating it would be to interact with such toxic people.

Can the Madness End?

This raises the question of 'de-trolling' the internet. There is probably a core of committed trolls who must simply be ignored or banished (i.e. the ones who are sadists and psychopaths). A heuristic for identifying trolls, if we could find one, would be helpful in allowing us to identify such people before we have spent time and energy talking to them. I'm not sure I can offer such a test though irony and multi-layered projection (used in combination) may come close. I will say that to the extent that the pressures of the internet medium *shape* trolling behaviors something can no doubt be done to alleviate if not eliminate them.

This is also true if some of the techniques of trolling reflect not inherent viciousness but helplessness in the new to many people task of arguing in the digital/print medium. Better logic and better rhetoric may well have some civilizing influence though the history of print controversy since the Reformation should lead us to be cautious and restrained in our expectations. Reading the dreary theological controversies of the Early Modern period reveals that bad intellectual manners is not the contemporary thing it may seem.

Here a new medium (print) combined with the stress of a new social and religious situation produced some of the most abusive exchanges between scholars in recorded history. Are we facing a similar challenge today? Is the troll an inexpugnable feature of our current environment? Can we do more than try and de-troll ourselves by identifying habits we may have that are triggering to others (especially people who don't know us)?

This raises the moral quandary that the result of trolling should *not* be tone policing for its victims (especially for categories of victims who legitimately seek empowerment). Still, the lack of face to face contact with social media interlocutors has probably led many of us to be sharper than we need to be and, to adapt a line from Phillip Larkin, "Something troll-like squats in all of us."¹⁰

When the troll is revealed to be himself an object being 'essentialized' he is certainly (in my experience) wrong footed, at least briefly.

¹⁰ We all like to win and part of the fun of winning is glee at discomfiting one's opponent. In a healthy culture of competition these feelings are suitably sublimated though they sometimes rear their head. My own participation in the (very male) culture of war gaming has had the useful function of educating me in the nature

What's worse, dealing with trolls may make us less not more sensitive to others which would be a tragic result indeed and one that gives the troll the final victory. I leave this up to further discussion however as philosophers are probably better at diagnosing problems than solving them.

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of such reactions. I found that culture (though far from perfect) reasonably healthy because most people had the capacity to recognize when they had crossed a boundary and 'man up' and apologize. Those who didn't were in various ways ostracized. For the troll however winning is clearly a pathological aim pursued in a scorched earth fashion.