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[Aristotle], *On Trolling*

That trolling is a shameful thing, and that no one of sense would accept to be called 'troll', all are agreed; but what trolling is, and how many its species are, and whether there is an excellence of the troll, is unclear. And indeed trolling is said in many ways; for some call 'troll' anyone who is abusive on the internet, but this is only the disagreeable person, or in newspaper comments the angry old man. And the one who disagrees loudly on the blog on each occasion is a lover of controversy, or an attention-seeker. And none of these is the troll, or perhaps some are of a mixed type; for there is no art in what they do. (Whether it is possible to troll one's own blog is unclear; for the one who poses divisive questions seems only to seek controversy, and to do so openly; and this is not trolling but rather a kind of clickbait.)

Well then, the troll in the proper sense is one who speaks to a community and as being part of the community; only he is not part of it, but opposed. And the community has some good in common, and this the troll must know, and what things promote and destroy it: for he seeks to destroy. Hence no one would troll the remotest Mysian, or even know how, but rather a Republican trolls a Democratic blog and a Democrat Republicans. And he destroys the thread by disputing what is known to be true, or abusing what is recognised as admirable; or he creates fear about a small problem, as if it were large, or treats a necessary matter as small; or he speaks abuse while claiming to be a friend. And in general the troll says what is false but sounds like the truth—or rather he does not quite *say* it, but rather something very close to it which is true, or partly true, or best of all merely asks a simple question about the evidence for climate change. Hence the modes of trolling are many: the concern-troll, the one who 'sees the other side', the polite inquirer into the obvious. For the perfected troll has no need of rudeness or abuse, or even of fallacy (this belongs rather to sophistic or eristic, and requires making an argument): he only makes a suggestion or indication [*sêmainein*].

And this is how the troll generates strife. For what he indicates is known to be false or harmful or ignorant; but he does not say *that* thing, but rather something close. In this way he retains the possibility of denial, and the skilled troll is always surprised and hurt, or seems to be, when the others take his comments up. And so he sets the community apart from each other, and introduces strife where before there was scarcely disagreement. For each person who takes up what was said grasps only a part of it, and insists on that, and is annoyed when others affirm something different. For some indeed see that the troll trolls, and

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are harsh; but others think that they ought to be more gentle, and others again do not even see the falsity, but grasp the truth which is nearby and insist that the troll 'has a decent point'. And this is excess of charity and the death of the board.

The end of the troll is not in his own speech, then, but in that of the others, when they take up his comments in as many ways as bring regret. For there is excess or deficiency in each response, and then more again in each response to that; and every responder chooses his own words lightly but demands exactitude from the rest, and while correcting the others he introduces something new and questionable. And so resentment is built up, and the slighting begins; and the strife is the work of the troll but the origin is not clear.

Trolls differ primarily in their for-the-sake-of-which: at any rate some troll for amusement, and a few for profit, but most as enemies and members of a faction. (Hence the troll is thought to be weak, and one who sits in pyjamas: for the advantage to the faction is not worth much, and a courageous enemy would fight in some other way.) And of these the amusement-troll is in a way the worst, for he aims only at his own gratification. But this one is also the least harmful; for he is careless and easy to discern, coming close to being a lover of controversy. And since trolling is in each case a matter of choice, no one is ever a troll involuntarily or by accident, but only an idiot who has posted in the wrong thread.

One might wonder whether there is an art of trolling and an excellence; and indeed some say that Socrates was a troll, and so that the good man also trolls. And this is in fact what the troll claims: that he is a gadfly and beneficial, and without him to 'stir up' the thread it would become dull and unintelligent. But this is incorrect. For Socrates was speaking frankly when he told the Athenians to care for their souls, rather than money and honors, and showed that they lacked knowledge. And this is not trolling but the contrary, exhortation and truth-telling—even if the citizens get very annoyed. For annoyance results from many kinds of speech; and the peculiarity [*idion*] of the troll is not annoyance or controversy in general, but confusion and strife among a community who really agree. And since the one who does this on every occasion must act with knowledge, and on the basis of practice and care, he has a kind of art—just as one might speak of the art of the hack or of the grifter. But it is not really an art, being without any function; and it belongs not to the serious person to be a troll but to the one who lacks education.

What the troll is, and in what way he trolls and for what, has now been said. And it is clear from this that there can be trolling outside the internet. For every community of speakers holds certain goods in common, and with them the conversation [*dialegesthai*] as an end in itself; and the troll is one who seeks to damage it from within. So a questioner can troll a political meeting, and academics troll each other in committees when they are bored; and a newspaper columnist may be a profit-troll towards a whole city. But blogs and boards and forums and comments sections are where the troll dwells primarily and for the most part. For these are weak communities, and anyone may be part of them: and so their good is easily destroyed. Hence the saying, 'Trolls <are> not to be fed'. But though

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everyone knows this, everyone does it; for the desire to be right on the internet is natural and present to all.

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