

Sealioning: A Case Study in Epistemic Vice

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§1. Introduction

With new technology and new ways of communicating come new ways of exercising epistemic agency in social contexts. In this paper I consider a novel phenomenon of the social media world: sealioning. I first discuss background issues involving epistemic virtue and vice in general, and the specific intellectual virtue of inquisitiveness, the “question-asking virtue” (Watson, 2015, p. 282). I then provide a philosophical analysis of sealioning, arguing that it functions as the negative counterpart to inquisitiveness, a specific character trait that uses questions in epistemically vicious ways. This analysis demonstrates some important conclusions about how epistemic vices are more than mere deficiencies or incompetencies, but are instead psychologically rich character traits directed toward epistemically malicious ends.

§2. Intellectual Virtue and Intellectual Vice

According to the Responsibilist approach to virtue epistemology, virtues are the specific excellences of epistemic agents, and possession of a virtue depends on the agent having a robust suite of cognitive and conative dispositions.¹ On one well-developed account of epistemic virtue (Baehr, 2018, pp. 87-94), they have four components:

Motivational Principle (MP): A subject S possesses an intellectual virtue V only if S’s possession of V is rooted in a “love” of epistemic goods.

Affective Principle (AP): S possesses an intellectual virtue V only if S takes pleasure in (or experiences other appropriate affections in relation to) the activity characteristic of V.

Competence Principle (CP): S possesses an intellectual virtue V only if S is competent at the activity characteristic of V.

Judgment Principle (JP): S possesses an intellectual virtue V only if S is disposed to recognize when (and to what extent, etc.) the activity characteristic of V would be epistemically appropriate.

On this view, an epistemic virtue is comparable to a moral virtue: it not only contributes to excellent epistemic activity, it also makes its possessor excellent as an epistemic agent, and is the ground for normative judgements about the agent and their actions.²

Discussion of epistemic vice has, not surprisingly, mainly followed the same contours as discussion of epistemic virtue (Battaly, 2014). However, in discussion whether epistemic vice is simply the negative inversion of the four dimensions of epistemic virtue listed above, Baehr (2020) argues that the epistemic virtue and vices are asymmetrical: whereas the four dimensions epistemic virtue are individually necessary and jointly sufficient for a given epistemic virtue, lacking any of the four dimensions individually can be sufficient for a specific epistemic vice. For instance, a young graduate student may be motivated to do research, enjoy doing it, and be good at it, but nonetheless fail to exercise good judgment about how much research is enough and when to stop, and hence fail to get to the writing stage because they spend too much time researching first. Such a person might satisfy MP, AP, and CP, and yet still have an epistemic vice with respect to their research activity ('distractedness', perhaps, or 'perfectionism'), because they fail to satisfy JP, this means that the standards for epistemic vices are lower, and more variably met, than the standards for epistemic virtue (see also Cassam, 2019; Crerar, 2018; Flood, 2008; Swank, 2000). This accords with an oft-quoted dictum from Aristotle (itself borrowed from the Pythagoreans) that "good people are uniform, bad people are multiform" (1106^b35).

To put things slightly more precisely, we can use the following benchmark to adjudicate our investigation:

Responsibilist Standard: X is an epistemic vice if X is an agency-defective character trait that is deficient with respect to at least one of: motivation, affect, competence, or judgement.

Deficient motivation or affect here can include both apathy toward an epistemic good that should be valued (broadly construed), and also active

disvalue or malintent with respect to that epistemic good.³

In what follows, I will argue that sealioning satisfies the Responsibilist Standard, and will therefore count as an epistemic vice. But before doing so, we must first look at an example of an epistemic virtue which we can use as a foil to sealioning: inquisitiveness.

§3. Inquisitiveness: An Epistemic Virtue of Questioning

Inquisitiveness, as defined by Lani Watson, is the epistemic virtue that is uniquely associated with good questioning, so we can use her account to guide our discussion. To understand inquisitiveness, however, we will need to look more closely at some issues concerning epistemic virtue more broadly.

Following Zagzebski's account of the structure of epistemic virtue, Watson posits two central features of epistemic virtue: a *motivation component* and a *success component* (Watson, 2018a, pp. 156-157; Watson, 2015, pp. 274-279. See also Baehr, 2013; Zagzebski, 1996). Epistemic virtue in general is characterized by a motivation of pro-attitudes towards epistemic goods, and by an ability to successfully put these pro-attitudes into action by pursuing these epistemic goods. Individual epistemic virtues can then be individuated by their distinct motivation and their distinct success conditions.⁴ Open-mindedness and epistemic courage, for instance, might both involve the same kinds of situations but different motivations and success conditions.⁵ Both involve balancing individual commitment to a belief with the perspectives of others. But open-mindedness is focused on not under-valuing the epistemic perspective of others, whereas epistemic courage is concerned with not under-valuing one's own epistemic perspective. Succeeding as an open-minded person might involve deferring to peer disagreement, whereas successful exercise of epistemic courage may involve not doing so. Yet despite these asymmetries, open-mindedness and epistemic courage are structurally similar species of the same genus.

We can use this understanding of epistemic virtue to better understand two closely related but distinct virtues, curiosity and inquisitiveness. Curiosity is motivated by a desire to improve one's epistemic standing by acquiring worthwhile epistemic goods that one lacks or believes that one lacks.⁶ One is epistemically successful in this regard to the extent that one engages in the kinds of behaviors that tend to lead toward improvements in one's epistemic standing.

Inquisitiveness, on Watson's (2018a, pp. 160-161) account, is an epistemic virtue distinct from curiosity. It is defined by the motivation to engage seriously in questioning as a way of acquiring the worthwhile

epistemic goods that can improve one's epistemic standing, and by success at being able to do so by asking good questions. Inquisitiveness is one way of demonstrating curiosity, but it is not the only way; one could improve one's epistemic standing through a variety of methods, such as research, experience, apprenticeships, or careful thinking. But one important way of behaving as a curious person is by being inquisitive; this is especially important for children and in educational settings.⁷ In other words, inquisitiveness is the "question-asking virtue", the specific trait that one exhibits when using questions to improve one's epistemic standing in an epistemically virtuous way (Watson, 2015, p. 282).

§4. Sealioning

Like inquisitiveness, sealioning is specifically focused on asking questions; it is a species of trolling with that exact defining feature. The label is adapted from a popular webcomic, Wondermark comic #1062, "The Terrible Sea Lion."⁸ In this comic, a sealion overhears a conversation between a couple, and attempts to debate them about this conversation, becoming increasingly intrusive of their personal space and private time as the comic proceeds.⁹ All the while, the sealion appeals to civility and politeness, insisting it is the victim who is mistreated and having its good faith questions ignored. The sealion in this comic represents a common pattern of online behavior, and so was quickly made a symbol for this behavior by fans of the comic, and hence 'sealioning' became a verb to describe this behavior.¹⁰

Oxford Reference's *A Dictionary of Social Media* defines 'sealioning' as "A disparaging term for the confrontational practice of leaping into an online discussion with endless demands for answers and evidence" (Chandler and Munday, 2016).¹¹ Another description is "Sealioning is an intentional, combative performance of cluelessness. Rhetorically, sealioning fuses persistent questioning—often about basic information, information easily found elsewhere, or unrelated or tangential points—with a loudly-insisted-upon commitment to reasonable debate" (Johnson, 2017, p. 13); it has been likened to a denial of service (DoS) attack that shut down computers or networks via an overload of information (Johnson, 2017, p. 14). It has also been described as "the process of killing with dogged kindness and manufactured ignorance by asking questions, then turning on the victim in an instant" (Stokel-Walker, 2018). What these descriptions have in common is that they recognize sealioning as a practice of using questions not to elicit information, but rather to derail or disrupt a conversation.

There are two features that make sealioning unique as a species of trolling. First, it is characterized by the use of questions; this distinguishes

it from other forms of trolling that rely on, e.g., insults, inappropriate humor, non-sequiturs, or self-aggrandizement. Second, sealioning depends on the superficial appearance of being a good faith interlocutor: it is not combative or demeaning or flippant as other forms of trolling are. This appearance of good faith is essential to the strategy of sealioning: a bad faith interlocutor can be ignored, while a putatively good faith interlocutor deserves acknowledgement. The sealioner hijacks the respect appropriate for a good faith interlocutor and uses it to undermine the conversation from the inside.

If the questions succeed in eliciting a series of responses also given in good faith, then the sealioner has succeeded in either derailing the conversation, often to basic background information or other starting points which the conversation is then prevented from moving beyond, or to another topic more preferable to the sealioners. If the questions do not work, however, and the sealioner is ignored or chastised for derailing the conversation, the sealioner can then confront their interlocutors and accuse them of being the ones acting in bad faith instead. This requires a conspicuous level of apparent civility and politeness from the sealioner, which they can then contrast with the putatively disrespectful behavior of others in the conversation. This makes the sealioner an especially insidious form of trolling: it can be superficially indistinguishable from a good faith effort at self-improvement by an ignorant but well-meaning interlocutor. It also allows the sealioner to appeal to what are presented as shared values of good faith communication, to defend themselves and make others look like the conversational malefactor.

The harms of sealioning are numerous. As with any kind of trolling, sealioning is, at minimum, an annoyance and a distraction, even when they are ignored. When a sealioner successfully derails a conversation to other topics, one is prevented from making one's original point, and one's communicative aims are thereby frustrated. If one is tricked into focusing on retreading basic points or confirming minutiae, one can waste one's time and effort.

Critically, the sealioner also shifts the epistemic burden, demanding epistemic labor from others that they are not willing to show for themselves. Johnson (2017, p. 14) writes that

Sealioning also fits into a larger set of rhetorical marginalization practices. Refusals to understand can be subtle forms of erasure. Questions—shaped by explicit or implicit expectations about who has the right to question and who can be questioned about what—impose labor by demanding the questioned party either answer or appear indifferent; providing explanations and maintaining patience takes time and effort.

Sealioning can also lead to one's epistemic self-confidence being undermined if the sealioner's questions require answers that one cannot immediately provide. If decides not to humor the sealioner, then one must deal with the attacks on one's epistemic character by the sealioner. This can be especially fraught in a group setting, because (a) good faith questioners can be mistaken for sealioners, and treated unfairly as a result, and (b) the sealioner can appeal to the values and norms of communication in defense of their activities, using their superficial appearance of reasonableness to mask their underlying bad faith and hypocrisy.

The superficial resemblance between the good faith questioner and the sealioner makes sealioning especially pernicious as a form of trolling. The standard advice of 'don't feed the trolls' is less helpful here, because it is hard to see the troll for who they are until it is too late: a strategy of ignoring possible sealioners is likely to result in rudeness towards good faith interlocutors, and in failure to use one's higher epistemic standing to educate others and so improve their epistemic standing. This is especially true in environments where one does not know one's interlocutors, or at least know them well enough to make inferences about their sincerity and motivation. One may fail to show epistemic benevolence, and perhaps even fail to discharge epistemic duties to others, by mistaking a good faith interlocutor for a sealioner.¹² This is both an individual failing and a harm to others, one which can lead to increasingly widespread acrimony and mistrust. By mimicking the practices of good faith interlocutors, the sealioner can not only disrupt a particular conversation, but also undermine epistemic communities more generally (Johnson, 2017, p. 14).

§5. Sealioning as an Epistemic Vice

We have already seen that sealioning is both annoying and epistemically harmful. But does it raise to the level of epistemic vice? I believe that the answer is 'yes', and moreover that this answer reveals some interesting things about character epistemology and questions.¹³

To say that sealioning is a vice requires that sealioning be a character trait, not just a behavior one might engage in. Is this the case? Can one be described as a sealioner, the same way one might be described as open-minded or close-minded, honest or dishonest? Despite the novelty of using such a recently coined term as 'sealion' in this way, it is not as strange a proposition as it may sound at first.¹⁴ After all, 'troll' is a personality trait, as evidenced by commonly used statements like "Don't be a troll" or "They are such a troll." The idea that one can *be* a troll, and not just perform the act of trolling, is a natural one, at least once the concept of 'troll' became widely understood. If trolling falls within the category of 'character trait,'

then we would expect sealioning, which is a species of trolling, to likewise fall within the same category. The structure of epistemic character traits is such that one trait can be a species of another trait: inquisitiveness and curiosity are a case in point.

One common way of thinking about character traits, ultimately Aristotelian in influence, is that character traits are active and persistent dispositions to reliably think, feel, and act in certain ways, a disposition which is a deep, characteristic feature of one's personality (see Annas, 2011, pp. 8-15 for a particularly useful treatment of this topic). A person who regularly engaged in sealioning when the situation allowed for it, because of a settled disposition to enjoy or be otherwise motivated to disrupt conversations, could be described as a *sealioner*, rather than merely one who engages in sealioning behavior from time to time. So long as the adjective 'sealioner' can be understood in a way that describes someone's character, then sealioner can be a character trait for the kind of person the adjective truly describes. Again, inquisitiveness provides a useful comparison: we might be tempted, pretheoretically, to think of inquisitiveness as merely a kind of behavior that involves asking lots of questions. And while it is true that one can act inquisitively, it is also true that one can *be* inquisitive. The same should apply, *mutatis mutandis*, for sealioning. Nothing stops us from recognizing a homonym, and making finer-grained distinctions between sealioning as an individual action, a habit, a disposition, and a character trait.¹⁵

Supposing, then, that sealioner could qualify as a character trait, would it reach the level of epistemic vice? Recall that epistemic character traits involve motivation, affect, competence, and judgment, and an inappropriate orientation towards any of the four dimensions can be sufficient for making a trait an epistemic vice. But rather than simply lacking or failing to properly express these dimensions, I argue that sealioners possess negative versions of them:

Motivation: A sealioner is motivated by a desire to obstruct pursuit of the epistemic goods that others might acquire in their productive conversations.

Affect: A sealioner enjoys or takes pleasure in disrupting the productive conversations of others.

Competence: A sealioner is skilled in asking questions in ways that can disrupt conversations while appearing to follow epistemic norms and values, without revealing their bad faith.

Judgment: A sealioner can recognize good opportunities and methods to disrupt a conversation through questioning, and how far they can go without revealing themselves as a sealioner.

Hence according to the Responsibility Standard we established in §1, sealioning can count as an epistemic vice.

One noteworthy feature of sealioning is that it does not exhibit many of the hallmarks of bad questioning that we might expect. Watson (2020, pp. 243-247) provides a taxonomy of bad questions, which can fail in virtue of either their content or their performance.¹⁶ However, it is notable that Watson (2020, p. 239) describes what she calls the ‘vices of questioning’ as “intellectual failing often expressed in intellectual vices such as negligence, closed-mindedness and arrogance” rather than specifying a specific, unique vice of bad questioning. Moreover, the deficiencies Watson describes are all understood with reference to the primary function of questions, eliciting information, rather than at the level of an epistemic agent’s character traits:

Bad questioning is not an intellectual vice itself, just as good questioning is not an intellectual virtue. Rather, good questioning is an intellectual skill found in the exercise of many of the intellectual virtues.... In much the same way, bad questioning is an intellectual failing found in the exercise of many intellectual vices.... (Watson, 2020, p. 242; Watson expounds on this point further on pp. 255-256)

I would suggest that this way of thinking about bad questioning is incomplete. It is true that bad questioning can be a lack of skill. But it can also go beyond that: one can *be* a bad questioner, not in the sense that one is bad *at* questioning, but in the sense that one is the sort of person who regularly expresses their epistemic agency by using questions for epistemically vicious ends.

Sealioning is one example of how this can happen. Sealioners are

not, as such, unskillful at asking questions. If anything, they have to have at least some skill in order to meet their ends successfully. Rather the problem is that the ends themselves (disrupting conversation) are bad. This suggests that sealioning is more than just a deficiency when it comes to question-asking skills. Sealioning can be a trait of its own, the negative counterpart to the epistemic virtue of inquisitiveness. Inquisitiveness is defined as the 'question-asking virtue.' Sealioning can be understood as a question-asking vice.¹⁷

§6. Conclusion

I've argued in this paper that sealioning counts as a Responsibilist epistemic vice. Sealioning is not just an annoying way of trolling online, but also an epistemic orientation that involves using the skills of good questioning toward the epistemically malicious end of disrupting conversation. This short investigation reveals that there is more to bad questioning than just a lack of skill. One can, in certain psychologically deep ways, *be* a bad questioner, and sealioning is one example of what this can look like.

Notes

¹ The Responsibilist approach is contrasted with the Reliabilist approach, which sets a lower standard: on this view, an epistemic virtue is whatever regularly makes a positive contribution to the intellectual activity of its possessor. This can include character traits, but also skills, capacities, and functions for which an agent is not responsible and (presumably) not praiseworthy, just as good vision or good memory. See Sosa (2007) and Greco and Reibsamens (2018) for discussion of the Reliabilist view.

² See, *inter alia*, Baehr (2011), Code (1987), Montmarquet (1993), Zagzebski (1996, 2018).

³ See Baehr (2010) for more on the idea of epistemic malevolence.

⁴ This model is distinct from, but compatible with, the four dimension model Baehr later developed, which we discussed in the last section. We can think of MP and AP as falling under the rubric of motivation, and CP and JP as falling under success.

⁵ See Riggs (2018), and Kidd (2018a) for a more detailed look at open-mindedness and epistemic courage, respectively.

⁶ See Watson (2018a, pp. 157-159) for a fuller explication and defense of this position.

⁷ Watson (2018b). Watson (2019) also argues that good questioning is an important skill for democratic citizens.

⁸ See: <http://wondermark.com/1k62/>.

⁹ This comic has been read to suggest that the woman in the comic is

prejudiced against sealions, which turns the sealion itself into a more sympathetic character defending its own dignity. The author, David Malki, clarifies his original intent with the comic here: <http://wondermark.com/2014-errata/>.

¹⁰ Malki gives a brief account of the history of the webcomic's jump into the popular consciousness here: <http://wondermark.com/sea-lion-verb/>.

¹¹ See also the discussion at Merriam -Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/sealioning-internet-trolling>.

¹² Most of the literature on epistemic duties has focused on an individual's duty to believe in light of evidence (as in Cliffordian Evidentialism). These duties are either absolute, third-personal duties, or perhaps duties to oneself *qua* epistemic agent. But there is some grounds for belief in having epistemic duties toward others, comparable to but distinct from moral duties. Fricker's (2007) discussion of epistemic injustice is one influential avenue for this line of thought. See also Basu (2019) and Kawall (2002).

¹³ It is worth mentioning that sealioning clearly counts as an epistemic vice according to the lower standard of the Reliabilist approach, discussed in n. 1 above. On this view, a vice can be anything that regularly obstructs epistemic activity, and this includes behaviors. So even if one is not persuaded that sealioning might be a character trait, we can still call it an epistemic vice.

¹⁴ So understood, sealioning would fall under the category of what Kidd labels 'esoteric vices', which are "those that do not feature in prevailing vocabularies, despite their tracking genuine forms of epistemic viciousness" (2018, p. 50). He goes on to describe how a trait and its label can become more or less important across time or across cultures, and how some vices may be dependent on specific historical or cultural background facts. It would not be surprising that a family of epistemic virtues and vices emerged with the advent of social media and other forms of online communication.

¹⁵ As a point of comparison to further motivate this strategy, note that Cassam makes the same distinction when discussing the vice of epistemic insouciance. He distinguishes from lying or bullshit as acts or behaviors, from being a liar or bullshitter as what he calls a *stance* or *posture* (Cassam, 2018, p. 3). Cassam is approaching things from a slightly different angle than we are here, but stances function analogously to character traits: they are belief-, value-, and norm-motivated dispositions to think, feel, and act in regular ways.

¹⁶ Among the many features of the performance of bad questions, Watson gives *distracting*, *inept*, *misdirected*, and *misplaced*. Any of these might seem to apply to sealioning (these features are only listed, not described in any detail, so it is difficult to say).

¹⁷ Though not necessarily the only one. To recall the Pythagorean/Aristotelian dictum mentioned above, perhaps the virtue of questioning is uniform (inquisitiveness), whereas the vice of questions is multiform, with sealioning as one notable example.

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