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Necessary Fictions:

Epistemic Privilege and the Politics of Knowing

This narrative brings together five essays written across the HUMN MA program under the thesis *Necessary Fictions: Epistemic Privilege and the Politics of Knowing*. Epistemic privilege is having special, authoritative access to the truth. How is this access used and abused in the stories we tell? What happens when what it authorizes becomes a fiction that organizes belief regardless of its truth? Does its authority to persist depend on someone actually knowing the truth it manages, or just on it continuing to work? Read together, the essays trace this problem from classical political philosophy through evolutionary biology, Enlightenment moral psychology, Renaissance humanism, and Marxist political economy, and in so doing satisfy all nine of the program's and institution's stated learning objectives.

My portfolio is organized as a three-dimensional sphere of knowing. Look one direction and find a “fictional truth”; look another direction and find a narrative constructed around epistemic privilege—who has access to the truth? Each artifact functions less like a memory and more like an exhibit: introduced, quoted, and argued for. Each artifact asks the reader to interrogate their own epistemic privilege.

American Public University Systems outlines both institutional and program goals for graduate students in the humanities. The institutional goals include: 1. Specialized/Industry

Knowledge, 2. Broad and Integrative Knowledge, 3. Intellectual Skills, 4. Applied and Collaborative Learning, 5. Civic/Democratic and Global Learning. The program goals include:

1. Critically analyze literary works for their contribution to the body of human knowledge.
2. Articulate written positions on ideas that stem from the great works of human thought.
3. Apply classical logic to historical and contemporary issues of human behavior, society, and civilization.
4. Examine the human experience from multidimensional perspectives from antiquity to modern times through examination of the leading authors and works of each age.
5. Analyze the origins and implications of the concept of individualism as it applies in concepts of tradition, power, society, and culture. The five artifacts below satisfy each of these nine goals.

I begin with The Ancient World, Humn 510. "Post-Truth Society: How Plato's Noble Lie Fosters Perception as Reality" argues that Plato's noble lie lays the groundwork for contemporary post-truth culture. I show that Plato's justification for the noble lie—meant more for social cohesion and the greater good—gives rise to our current post-truth era, where objective facts are less influential than emotion or belief. This is an excerpt from "Post-Truth Society: How Plato's Noble Lie Fosters Perception as Reality:"

Woolf asserts that Plato was not overzealous in his commitment to the truth over practicability. Rather, he inferred that truth was relational to theory and practice and that, at times, the truth must be subverted to avoid harm and bring about the greater good. The overarching goal was to create a society where promoting good behavior took precedence over strict adherence to truth (Woolf 10) (Hoover 2025 p. 2).

This artifact demonstrates Program Goal 3—applying classical logic to a contemporary issue of human behavior and society—by using a structured premise-by-premise argument. It also

demonstrates Institutional Goal 1, Specialized/Industry Knowledge, by utilizing both primary and secondary texts. This essay applies to real-world life because we currently live in a post-truth society. My future plans are to work in a social science or educational field; therefore, I feel having a firm grasp on the prevailing ideology informing our current mood is essential.

Next, we journey on the Beagle to Hymn 551, Evolution of Life and Intelligence, and join Darwin in the Galapagos Islands to uncover why humans are susceptible to conspiracies in “Darwin, the Flat Earth, and a Mustang: The Evolutionary Roots of Conspiracy Theories.” Here I argue that humans evolved to detect both patterns and threats and to value knowledge others do not have, because such knowledge once conferred a survival advantage. I further explain that the drive to belong to an in-group was, for early humans, a matter of life and death, and that this same drive is applicable, albeit in different more subtle ways, today. Here, the necessary fiction becomes a *biological* tool, a byproduct of cognitive evolution. This is an excerpt from “Darwin, the Flat Earth, and a Mustang: The Evolutionary Roots of Conspiracy Theories:”

Misinformation and its evil twin, disinformation, which is the intentional spread of false information, form the foundation for conspiracy theories. As Charles Darwin noted in *The Descent of Man*, “False facts are highly injurious to the progress of science, for they often endure long; but false views, if supported by some evidence, do little harm, for everyone takes a salutary pleasure in proving their falseness” (Darwin chapter IV).

Program Goal 3 looms here this time by applying scientific reasoning—evolutionary theory—to a contemporary social problem. It demonstrates Institutional Goal 5, Civic/Democratic and Global Learning, insofar as conspiracy theories and the spread of misinformation constitute a

global threat to democratic institutions and public health. Its real-world stakes are immediate: misinformation and disinformation are on the rise. Like with Plato and a post-truth society, this intersects with my future plans in a social science or educational field.

From Humn 541, Enlightenment and the Modern World, I apply Rousseau's concept of amour propre—the corrosive, comparative form of self-love that society itself produces—to the construction of identity on social media. In “Rousseau, Identity, and Status: Amour Propre in the 21st Century,” I examine how the public image we curate is a fiction. I ask how much of this fiction reflects our actual identity. Rousseau observed that as people began living in dense proximity to one another, social comparison became unavoidable, and with it, hierarchies of recognition. As such, the self came to be understood through the perception of others.

Rousseau places vanity and the need for recognition from others above the pursuit of material gains. As such, this relationship creates an oppressive nature between those crafting an identity and those they depend on for recognition and validation of that identity (Ossewaarde-Lowtoo 22).

This artifact demonstrates Program Goal 5—analyzing the origins and implications of individualism as it relates to society and culture—through its treatment of self-construction and social comparison. It demonstrates Institutional Goal 2, Broad and Integrative Knowledge, by uniting Enlightenment moral philosophy and contemporary social psychology under one roof. In today's world of social media and influencers, identity construction and the perception of the self are an ever-evolving processes. Professionally, I hope to mitigate some of the harms social media exerts, especially on young people and comparison culture.

In “Three Humanists Walk Into a Bar: A Conversation With Michel de Montaigne, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thomas More” from Humn 530, The Renaissance, I ask what Renaissance humanism is. This essay is written in a dialogue form as an invented debate between Machiavelli, More, and Montaigne on Montaigne’s podcast, *What Do I Know? (Que sais-je?)*. The debate centers what it means to be human and how one ought to live. Machiavelli argues for viewing the world as it is and crafting a fiction in service of the polis. More argues for living in accordance with how the world ought to be and creating a fictitious world. And Montaigne looks inward, questioning the fictions each person carries within. This is an excerpt from “Three Humanists Walk Into a Bar: A Conversation With Michel de Montaigne, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Thomas More:”

Montaigne: Let’s go back a bit. Tom, you said you intentionally made *Utopia* a place where the people arrive at a virtuous society by reason alone. If this is the case, then why do you need Christianity at all? More: Because while reason can give you a just society, it cannot give you salvation or the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity (Lipscomb “Sir Thomas More”). Christianity doesn’t replace reason; it *elevates* it.

This artifact demonstrates Program Goal 4—examining the human experience from multidimensional perspectives, a multi-voiced narration through some leading authors of the Renaissance. It demonstrates Institutional Goal 3, Intellectual Skills, by constructing a coherent, historically grounded dialogue with a modern twist among three distinct philosophical positions. Understanding how humans structure the way they live or how they believe they ought to live is foundational to any profession I may enter.

My last artifact is from Humn 561, Society, Class and Wealth. In "Joker and the Cult of Alienation: A Marxist Critique of Estranged Labor at the Box Office," I apply Marx's theory of alienated labor, drawn from the 1844 Manuscripts, to the film *Joker* and its protagonist, Arthur Fleck. Here the necessary fiction is not a belief or a bias but the economic system itself, which structures alienation as an inescapable condition of commodity production, Marx and Alienated Labor. This is an excerpt from "Joker and the Cult of Alienation: A Marxist Critique of Estranged Labor at the Box Office:"

Brooks contends that one flaw in Hochschild's theory is that she leaves ambiguous the notion that away from the workplace one is free from alienation (Brooks 21). He points out that for Marx and his idea of commodity fetishism—when social relations between people appear to be like social relations between things—there is no escape from alienation in a society based on commodity production (Brooks 21) (Hoover 2023a p. 3).

This artifact demonstrates Program Goal 2—articulating a written position on ideas stemming from a great work of human thought—through my interrogation with the 1844 Manuscripts. It demonstrates Institutional Goal 4, Applied and Collaborative Learning, by taking a nineteenth-century economic theory and interpreting it in a twenty-first-century context. It's relevant to both my personal and professional life since labor under capitalism continues to structure alienation as Marx described it, albeit in new ways.

Lastly, I smuggle in a few hidden gems, or "Easter Egg dialogues." These include a dialogue between Fred and Wilma Flintstone discussing Plato's Allegory of the Cave, a dialogue between Miss Piggy and Kermit the Frog discussing Margaret Mead and gender ideology, a dialogue between Calvin and Hobbes discussing community and Robert Bellah's *Habits of the*

*Heart*, a dialogue between Thelma and Lousie discussing the music of the spheres. These four dialogues intersect with ideas of necessary or constructed fictions—the nature of reality in Plato’s cave, constructed gendered characteristics, the stories we build around individualism vs. community, and the stories we build around our cosmos.

Across five eras and five disciplines, these essays ask the same question: what happens when the fictions a society constructs stop requiring anyone to know they are fictions at all? Plato's noble lie, evolutionary conspiracy-thinking, Rousseau's *amour propre*, the competing strains of Renaissance humanism, and Marx's alienated labor all share the common feature of “constructed fiction.” Together, the five artifacts satisfy all nine institutional and program learning objectives. They showcase a body of work capable of moving across periods and disciplines as they orbit around the truth and remain anchored to epistemic privilege and a “fictional” argument about the politics of knowing.

Works Cited

- Hoover, Michelle. *Darwin, the Flat Earth, and a Mustang: The Evolutionary Roots of Conspiracy Theories*. APUS: Humn 551: Evolution of Life and Intelligence. 2024.
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