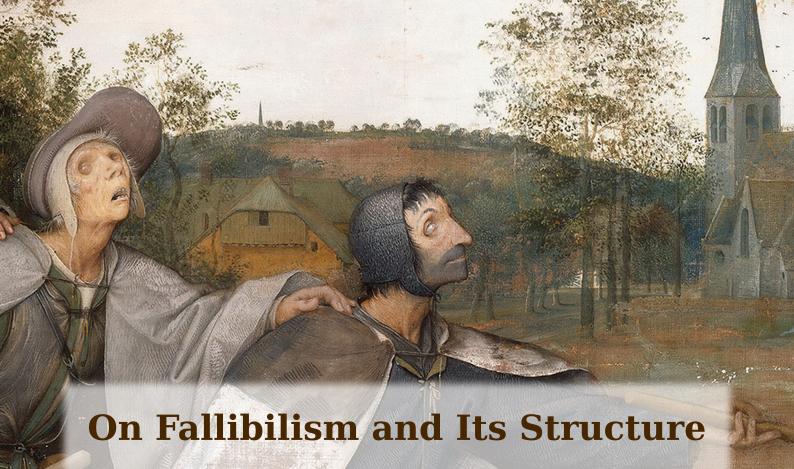# On Fallibilism and Its Structure

international workshop, Prague, September 18-19, 2025

Venue: Academic Conference Center, Husova 4a, 110 00 Praha 1

Thursday, September 18

8:45–9:00   *Opening of the workshop and welcome address*

9:00–10:00   Danielle Macbeth – *Inside Fallibilism*

10:00–11:00   Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer – *Vagueness and fallibility produced by default inferences: On situation-specific generic presuppositions of assertions*

11:00–11:30   *Coffee Break*

11:30–12:30   Vojtěch Kolman – *Fallibilism On Demand: The Case of Music*

12:30–14:00   *Lunch – Caffé Restaurant Adria, Národní 40/36*

14:00–15:00   Paul Redding – *Fallibilism without the form-content distinction in Hegel's philosophy of science*

15:00–16:00   Zoé McConaughey – *Paul Lorenzen's hermeneutical faillibilism in logic*

16:00–16:30   *Coffee Break*

16:30–17:30   Sequoya Yiaueki – *A Fallibilist Perspective on Conflictual Inferences and the Possibility of Violence*

from 19:00   *Dinner – Restaurace Století, Karoliny Světlé 320/21*

On Fallibilism and Its Structure

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Venue: Academic Conference Center, Husova 4a, 110 00 Praha 1

Friday, September 19

9:00–10:00   Andrea Kern – *Wittgenstein on Knowledge of Other Minds*

10:00–11:00   Sybren Heyndels – *In what sense is modal language (non-)descriptive?*

11:00–11:30   *Coffee Break*

11:30–12:30   Ondřej Švec – *The Primacy of Error*

11:30–12:30   *Lunch – Caffé Restaurant Adria, Národní 40/36*

14:00–15:00   Louis Blazejewski – *Immanent Expressive Reasoning*

15:00–16:00   Ondřej Beran – *Happily and self-consciously stuck in the context of delusion*

From 20:00   *Dinner – Restaurace Století, Karoliny Světlé 320/21*

Danielle Macbeth, Inside Fallibilism: According to Sellars, "empirical knowledge, like its sophisticated extension, science, is rational, not because it has a foundation but because it is a self-correcting enterprise, which can put any claim in jeopardy, though not all at once" ("Empiricism and the Philosophy of Mind" §38). One might well think, however, that if absolutely anything we think we know can be called into question then self-correction is not possible; although we might change our beliefs, perhaps even for what seem to be good reasons, there is no reason to think that such changes constitute corrections properly so called. If we can be wrong about absolutely everything, why should we think that we ever get anything right? Maybe we do, but that would be strictly by chance so would not amount to knowledge. Such a worry is easy to sympathize with but, I aim to show, nonetheless mistaken. To understand why and how it is mistaken we need to distinguish between what we can think of as an outside fallibilism, fallibilism that focuses on the fact that we are finite, limited and contingent beings, and an inside fallibilism that focuses instead on our ability to improve our powers of knowing. Sellars says that the traditional foundationalist picture "is misleading because of its static character" (EPM §38). Outside fallibilism is problematic for just this reason, because of its static character. It is inside fallibilism that is compatible with our knowledge of things as they are. Adequately understood, inside fallibilism is constitutive of such knowledge.

Pirmin Stekeler-Weithofer, Vagueness and fallibility produced by default inferences: On situation-specific generic presuppositions of assertions: There are two main myths in contemporary Philosophy of Language, the myth of literal meaning and the myth of well-defined speaker's intention. They neglect the open genericity of content, both on the level of the expressions of a language and on the level of particular utterances (in French: the level of parole). The fallibility of virtually all our assertions thus rests on the limitations to control their presupposed fulfilment conditions. However, these conditions are vague due to the limitations of shared conditions for differentially conditioned inferences, predictions and expectations. Incidentally, the usual separation of 'merely pragmatic questions' of understanding actual utterances from a semantics of words and sentences overlooks the fact that the practical forms of applying general forms of language belongs also to the level of general semantics.

Vojtěch Kolman, Fallibilism On Demand: The Case of Music: This paper explores the fallibility on demand as a phenomenon developed systematically in art, in which a mistake is evoked to become part of the resulting meaning of the event. It is claimed that this is of epistemological significance, in which the paradox of fallibility—the fact that one must treat something wrong, such as a mis-take, in positive terms, as right—is overcome not by being removed, but by being understood in its indirect nature. The paper demonstrates this through the examples from music, following Meyer's book on musical meaning.

Paul Redding, Fallibilism without the form-content distinction in Hegel's philosophy of science: From around the middle of the twentieth century, the foundationalist or infallibilist project of attempting to demonstrate the certainty of science has been on the defensive. However, in relation to the earlier period of "logical empiricism", many fallibilist opponents of foundationalism have concentrated mostly upon the empirical side of the conjunction of logical form and empirical matter. This paper examines the consequences for fallibilism of Hegel's earlier rejection of the ultimacy of such a presupposed form-matter distinction, in both mathematics and logic. Hegel's rejection, it is argued, was based in a rejection of the "Platonism" often assumed by philosophers of logic and mathematics. But while many philosophers have rejected Platonism, Hegel's was unusual in being based in the metaphysics of the later, post-Parmenides, dialogues of Plato himself.

Zoé McConaughey, Paul Lorenzen's hermeneutical faillibilism in logic: How can we reconcile certainty with the ever present possibility that we overlooked something? How can we be absolutely sure of ourselves and yet keep the door open to unpredicted cases? This question is all the more pressing in logic, which identifies norms of rational thought, which should be universally applicable and beyond any possible doubt. Paul Lorenzen, one of the founders of the "Erlangen Constructivism," answers this problem by a complete reconceptualization of logic and all the other branches of knowledge, theoretical as well as practical. This new approach to human knowledge is based on dialogical principles: once positions are presented and argued for, the burden of proof switches to the audience, that is, objections are welcome, thereby leaving the door open to unpredicted cases, but until such cases are brought forth, one is entitled to certainty. This approach is highly influenced by hermeneutical reflexions. Lorenzen proposes a "hermeneutical spiral" (instead of Dilthey's circle), which progressively zeroes in on a stable interpretation. This interpretation can then be considered as the right one, until new grounds for pursuing the reflexion are brought forth. For logic, this means that logical systems are embedded in historical developments, and that studying ancient logics is both a way of better understanding other systems, and of developing new tools for contemporary logical systems. In this talk, I will focus on the history of logic in order to link fallibilism, dialogues, and Lorenzen's hermeneutical method.

Sequoya Yiaueki, A Fallibilist Perspective on Conflictual Inferences and the Possibility of Violence: The fallibilist tradition starting with the early pragmatists pushes us to see knowledge as a socially embedded practice. Like any social practice, however, this implies recognizing that our knowledge practices are deeply imperfect. This is not an anomaly, rather it is one of the motivating ideas. Using the possibility of error as a starting point is a strategy to integrate corrections and modifications within on-going social processes. In ideal situations, this should allow the best information to emerge and guide future research and discovery. There is however much debate about how to understand these practices in non-ideal situations. This question has led to important literature that deals with epistemic injustices and the epistemology of ignorance. Within this literature, there is the idea that unjust knowledge practices lead to structural problems that compound the epistemic marginalization of certain groups. Drawing from this literature, notably from the work of José Medina and his idea of epistemic friction, this paper will apply this idea to the way semantic content is constituted within a broadly inferentialist framework. More specifically, this paper will claim that not only can different conceptual starting points and different socially situated perspectives lead to epistemic friction, but this friction is a point on what I will call a Content Incompatibility Continuum (CIC), which also includes conflict and violence. The goal therefore of this paper is to provide diagnostic tools to help understand how certain conceptual incompatibilities can both lead to structural injustices, but also open the possibility of violence.

Andrea Kern, Wittgenstein on Knowledge of Other Minds: Doubt about the possibility of knowledge that could be expressed by saying, "I know that ..." regardless of whether this concerns objects of the so-called external world, the meaning of expressions or the mental life of other people - pervades all of Wittgenstein's writings. I argue that doubt about the possibility of knowledge is at the center of Wittgenstein's philosophy because he conceives doubt about he possibility of knowledge - both in its skeptical and anti-skeptical form - to consist in a radical denial of the human form of life that threatens this form of life from within. Skeptical doubt - and thus the denial of the human - represents a way of inhabiting the human form of life that this form of life cannot prevent. Rather, the possibility of denying the human form of life shows that the human form of life is dependant upon a form of „knowledge of itself" without which is cannot be what it is. This denial of the human comes to be particularly pertinent in the skeptic's conception of our knowledge of other minds which will be at the center of my talk.

Sybren Heyndels, In what sense is modal language (non-)descriptive?: There is a family of views about modality, rooted in the works of Wittgenstein and the logical positivists, which has at times been labeled 'expressivist', 'conventionalist', or 'normativist'. In recent decades, such views have received renewed attention in the works of (among others) Brandom (1994, 2008), Sidelle (2009), and, most recently, Thomasson (2020), who has developed in considerable detail a position she calls 'modal normativism'. This position consists of two claims: first, that the function of modal claims is to convey norms of inference; and second, that the function of modal claims is non-descriptive. This talk focuses on the second claim. I distinguish between three senses in which modal language has been said, both historically and in contemporary debates, to be non-descriptive. I label these as the 'No-Information View', the 'No-Proposition View', and the 'No-Truthmaker View'. I argue that each of these views faces important challenges and suggest that modal normativism is best understood as a promising explanatory project in metasemantics, one that is fully compatible with mainstream truth-conditional and truthmaker semantics for modal propositions.

Ondřej Švec, The Primacy of Error: My paper proposes a fallibilistic account of rationality in which truth and error are conceived as interdependent terms, each defined through its relation to the other. Drawing on French historical epistemology and analytic pragmatism, I argue that science is not rational because it avoids error, but because it develops the means to identify, reinterpret, and overcome its own past errors. In Bachelard and Canguilhem, truth never comes first; knowledge begins with an initial, often erroneous projection that is only subsequently recognized as such, rectified, and reinterpreted from a new epistemic standpoint. In the Sellars–Brandom tradition, the authority of knowledge stems not from apodictic foundations, but from the ability of discursive practices to revise both their content and the norms governing what counts as true. Truth, on this view, is not the disclosure of a pre-given reality to an already rational subject, but the normative outcome of historically situated inquiry, through which both objectivity and the community of inquirers are continually transformed.

Louis Blazejewski, Immanent Expressive Reasoning: Brandom's inferentialism assigns logic a pivotal function in the constitution of conceptual reasoning. In recent publications Brandom and his collaborators have sought to develop a logical system that implements his epistemological tenets, absent in his earlier work. Nevertheless, there is no explicit dialogical generation of the rules of such a system. To date, no formal system has been formulated in the object language that provides a dialogical framework from which expressive logic emerges. The main purpose of our paper is to instigate the development of a framework in the object language, which we call Immanent Expressive Reasoning. This framework is designed to establish the dialogical rules that give rise to the principles of expressive logic Additionally, it possesses the capacity to be expanded to encompass a comprehensive array of logics, wherein local reasons, roughly verifiers, are integrated into the object language. This facilitates the articulation of anaphoric structures and communicative chains of varying complexity. In these preliminary explorations we will focus on how to generate the inference rules for the logical connectives of expressive logic, and how to switch from one understanding of a connective to another depending on the underlying context, while being rooted in the same core of dialogical meaning explanations for that connective. We will also aim to discuss some points on defeasibility concerning the semantic formation rules, the play level and the inference level. If time we will also analyse some anaphoric constructions involving modalities.

Ondřej Beran, Happily and self-consciously stuck in the context of delusion: Recognition of one's error, delusion, or failure of understanding is typically taken for both a spontaneous stimulus to improve one's understanding and/or action and a reason for improvement. In this way, self-reflection of one's errors is naturally embedded in perfectionist projects of a moral or epistemic kind. In comparison, for Adornoian dialectics, the point is perhaps less of making a substantial change through the self-reflection, and more of identifying clearly the material and intellectual preconditions of one's present 'delusion'. Both the perfectionist and the dialectical response rely, however, on a profoundly critical insight into one's present situation, and both, in effect, amount to a certain dissatisfaction (unease) with it. My aim is to explore to what extent one can clearly identify one's past mistakes, errors, or shortcomings, yet – without having made any (perfectionist) move away – remain happily seated in this self-reflection and simply build on it further without any sense of unease. As a discussion example, I will use the characters from Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice: Elizabeth Bennet (frequently used in discussions of moral perfectionism) and Mr Bennet (largely ignored by moral philosophy). While Mr Bennet's attitude represents a resolute anti-perfectionism (possibly, something like 'happy negative dialectics'), I would argue that his constantly retained sense of his failure and deludedness avoids being 'self-effacing' equally effectively as Elizabeth's perfectionism. More generally, instead of the move of overcoming the delusion through humility, this alternative suggests avoiding (further) errors by resolutely not disowning one's errors in any other way than being aware of them.