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A Fallibilist Perspective on Conflictual Inferences and the Possibility of Violence

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Abstract

This article argues that there is a social motivation for fallibilism that is linked to the possibility of violence. In order to show how this is the case, the article presents differences in belief and information as the starting point of processes of conceptual negotiation. However, it also argues that, as such, conceptual negotiation becomes the privileged site of conflict and, potentially, violence. Drawing from the inferentialist tradition in philosophy of language, as well as from the work of José Medina and Hans-Jörg Schmid, this article claims that whether or not conflictual conceptual negotiations overcome the possibility of violence or not will depend on the epistemic meta-attitudes that are being taken on during conceptual negotiation. Based on these conceptual meta-attitudes, the paper then argues that irresponsible epistemic meta-attitudes increase the possibility of violence whereas fallibilism is seen as the best chance for overcoming this possibility.

Keywords: fallibilism, violence, conceptual negotiation, semantic/epistemic interface, inferential topographies

Introduction

People believe different things and also believe that different things follow from these initial beliefs. While this itself may not be a problem, since it is *possible* to have incompatible beliefs, it can become a problem when these beliefs are not only incompatible, but also touch our core values, our sense of meaning, of belonging. In other words, it becomes a problem when incompatibilities touch the very things we see as true, and right, and moral, and good. While there are many ways to tackle this problem, here I will be interested in the relationship between conflictual beliefs and the possibility of

violence. More importantly, I will try to provide a way of understanding that possibility conceptually. I am providing a conceptual understanding because, within the above relationship, I am going to focus on the content of our beliefs and the attitudes we hold towards such content. The conceptual understanding will therefore explore how this content becomes explicit. This does not mean that I am defending a position that is "logocentric," whereby discursive content has a status over and above other possible ways of being conceptual, of communicating experience, or of understanding the world.[1] Rather, I am claiming that this is a fruitful angle to understanding certain problems (while also therefore obscuring others). One main presupposition will be that incompatible beliefs are more likely to lead to violence when such beliefs are structural, that is, when they play a role in solidifying other beliefs, or when other beliefs in some way follow from them. Since I will be arguing *from* this presupposition, I will not present the arguments *for* it. Nonetheless, this presupposition will hopefully be readable off the arguments that I do make. Based on the idea that certain beliefs are structural, I argue that such beliefs lead to the possibility of violence both when people see them as immune to modification or change, when people close themself off from the input of others about these beliefs.

The relationship between beliefs and violence is complicated by what might be called the *semantic/epistemic interface*. By postulating such an interface, my hypothesis is that beliefs (understood as doxastic commitments) play a role in determining meaning (understood as semantic or conceptual content). If this is the case, then a question that needs to be answered is how beliefs, and the accompanying epistemic structures that support beliefs, play this role. The position I defend is based on the idea that meaning emerges, in part, from public social communicational practices of negotiation across differences. I am also presupposing that people enter these negotiations with beliefs and conceptual habits, and that these beliefs and conceptual habits play a role in determining the positions people take on in discourse. These positions, in turn, are going impact what is seen to follow from these negotiations.

However, based on different starting points and based on the non-ideal structure of real concrete societies, these negotiations are going to be seen as problematic and constrained in a number of ways. Recognizing this non-ideal starting point make us attentive to problems at the semantic/epistemic interface and opens a possibility for understanding separate things in relation to violence. First, it helps to understand how we conceptualize violence. Second, the conceptualization of violence helps identify a spectrum going from overt physical forms of violence to more covert structural and symbolic forms of violence, like linguistic violence, epistemic violence, institutional violence. Third, this opens the possibility of recognizing how violence is built into conceptual content according to what might be called *the fundamental entanglement between language and violence.*

In order to tackle the problem between incompatible beliefs and the possibility of violence, this paper will start by tackling violence as a thematic concept in order to provide an operative definition of it. The thematic treatment of violence aims to identify certain problems and questions that come up when conceptualizing violence. This thematic treatment will try to show what is "fundamental" about violence when we conceptualize it. It will also show how aspects of this fundamental character allow us to identify derivative forms of violence. In other words, the conceptualization of fundamental forms of violence provides the minimal criteria for extending notions of violence into the structural and symbolic realm. Using the operative definition that follows from this thematic treatment of violence, I will then look at two models of conceptual negotiation. The first model is the one presented by José Medina, and second, the one presented by Hans-Jörg Schmid. While their positions contain many differences, I nonetheless see a productive intersection in the way they look at processes of conceptual negotiation. Such processes unearth a tension that I claim is characteristic of the semantic/epistemic interface. This is the tension is found at the intersection of believing (pragmatically understood as taking on a doxastic commitment), the content of beliefs, what we see as following from these beliefs, and the analysis and interpretation of the

beliefs of others. This leads to a potential incompatibility in the contents of the different beliefs held by different people and to a potential conflict between these people. I think a promising path for understanding the shape and the scope of such conflict can be found not only in an analysis of the epistemic attitudes people take on towards such content, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in an analysis of the epistemic meta-attitudes that people take on towards their own epistemic practices. Understanding these epistemic meta-attitudes will put us in a better position for understanding the tension at the semantic/epistemic interface and for understanding the epistemic features of conceptual negotiation.

Since this paper is interested in the specific tension between our beliefs and the possibility of violence, the identification of different epistemic attitudes is not only important for understanding this tension, but also for delimiting it, and for explaining why it cannot be eliminated, even if it can be locally overcome in specific interactions. Because I am claiming that it can only be overcome in specific interactions, this opens the question about how, in such interactions, it can be. This paper will therefore defend that fallibilism is a privileged epistemic meta-attitude both for identifying the possibility of violence and for overcoming it locally when it can be overcome. It will also use fallibilism as a way of motivating the hypothesis of the semantic/epistemic interface by claiming that the need for fallibilism emerges out of the conflict found in the content of our beliefs, and more importantly, in the connection between that which we see as following from our beliefs. Based on this claim, and anchored in a broadly inferentialist framework, I propose that a belief be thought of as a doxastic commitment, that is, a kind of pragmatic stance towards a given content. I also propose that that the content of the commitment be understood according to the permissible inferences that lead to or follow from the commitment, on the one hand, and according to the incompatibilities or the inferences that are prohibited, on the other. I furthermore think that, thanks to this understanding, conceptual content can be represented or mapped according to what I will call *inferential topographies*. These inferential

topographies, I argue, play a key role in the conceptual negotiations mentioned above. First, they allow understanding different positions by making conceptual content explicit. Then, they clarify why different positions are conflictual, by showing the scope of incompatibilities. And finally, they provide potential points of contact that can be used to identify the kinds of epistemic meta-attitudes that emerge when we make conceptual content explicit.

Following the elaboration of inferential topographies, I end the paper by applying these claims to different critical perspectives with the hope of further motivating my position. More specifically, I analyze Charles Mill's elaboration of white ignorance and the racial contract, Aimé Césaire's postcolonial critique of the colonial discourse concerning Western rationality, and Amandine Catala's articulation of hermeneutical domination. These different examples as salient test cases for my claims because of how they can be read as staging the semantic/epistemic interface. Indeed, each example can be seen as highlighting how people interpret different things as following from different claims, and how these differences are conditioned both by the network of other beliefs and by the epistemic meta-attitudes that accompany them. Additionally, these epistemic meta-attitudes show both how incompatibilities can lead to increased conflict and violence and how conceptual negotiations are a normative process bearing on the correctness or incorrectness of inferences. In other words, it is a negotiation about which inferences should endorsed and reaffirmed as legitimate or permissible and which should be refused as incompatible, false, or prohibited.

1. Violence as a Thematic Concept

In order to understand the kinds of violence that this paper is dealing with, it is important to identify a tension between what can be called the thematic treatment of violence and the operative use of violence. This terminology is based on Eugen Fink's distinction, where *thematic concepts* are the concepts we tackle head on in our work of conceptualization. They are the ones that we are actively analyzing and studying, that we are problematizing. *Operative concepts*, on the other

hand, are the concepts we *use* to think these thematic concepts, but that we do not problematize or analyze further (Fink 1981, 59). It is my contention that one of the problems in conceptualizing violence is to be found within this distinction. Indeed, violence is often used as an operative concept, one that is taken to be more or less clear and that can be (perhaps unproblematically) applied to a certain kind of phenomenon. However, this operative use leaves open a lot of misunderstanding about what violence is and how it emerges as an applicable analytical category. This allows certain phenomena to be neglected or dismissed as not actually being violence, even though they might be treated as violence if clear criteria were available. In other words, the operative concept is, whether consciously or unconsciously, downstream from its thematic problematization. It is consciously downstream when it is treated as a thematic concept, as something to analyze, understand, and delimit. It is unconsciously downstream when, in everyday practices, a thematic understanding emerges as being "natural." Here, the conceptual content is taken to be part a thing's everyday definition, as just being what the word used to name the thing means. One of the problems with a concept like violence may be that an operative definition becomes available so early in one's conceptual life that the thematic conceptualization seems superfluous. Another may be that, based on the prevalence of violence in human life, no clear criteria are available. Indeed, in his attempt to develop a robust understanding of the concept of violence, Mark Vorobej starts by acknowledging that "violence remains a complex, unwieldy and highly contested concept that is, frankly not well understood" (Vorobej 2016, 1). Therefore, one characteristic of the use of violence as an operative concept may in fact be the variety of situations to which it is applied. This variety is most certainly related to the variety of forms of violence that are present in human life. This is why providing a thematic understanding is both so difficult and so important. The terrifying human capacity for creating novel forms of violence also entails that the thematization of violence will remain a continual task.

Engaging in this task both provides a diagnostic framework for understanding violence and undertakes a critical analysis of occurrences of violence. In other words, it aims to elaborate the thematic features of the concept and to analyze its operative uses. As a methodological strategy, such an analysis is used to identify incongruencies between the operative uses of the concept (its applications) and the thematic diagnostic framework that aims to define the concept (its normative criteria and epistemic structure). This means that, methodologically, these incongruencies are used to continually critique and modify the framework. This also means that as new thematic understandings of violence emerge, the application of violence will change. Some things that were initially seen as natural, as unremarkable, as problematic but acceptable, will come to be seen as violent, and some things that had initially been seen as violent no longer will be. This also means that the shift from the thematic treatment of concepts to the operative use of concepts is one of the sites where content is modified for new use. Identifying this site underwrites the hypothesis of a semantic/epistemic interface. In other words, when a concept is tackled thematically, the normative criteria for application and the accompanying epistemic structure are modified. This modification then plays out in new applications, which themselves are interpreted by others, not according to any rigorous criteria that might have gone into the thematic development, but according to the open-textured way that use can be interpreted, that is, innovatively and idiosyncratically.

To understand why violence, as a thematic concept, is unwieldy, and to reinforce the hypothesis of a semantic/epistemic interface, it is helpful to look at it as a "thick" concept, in Bernard Williams's sense. According to Williams, thick concepts contain both descriptive and evaluative features that cannot be separated (Williams 2011, 143-144). In other words, when we say something is violent we are both describing and evaluating it, and in its most fundamental form, describing and evaluating it as something that is "beyond understanding." In this way, radical physical violence is taken to be conceptual limit. In this fundamental

form, violence destroys, undermines, or preempts conceptuality. The development of this idea here is anchored first and foremost in the work of Eric Weil (Weil 1950). Weil sees violence as a fundamental limit to discourse, understood as a structured, oriented, use of language, but he also sees the human being as living in a world were violence is an ever-present possibility. The paradox, for Weil, is that even though violence is what limits discourse, he also claims that "[o]nly the content of discourse can show what violence concretely is" (Weil 1950, 29). This implies that discourse discloses violence. According to Weil, this happens because discourse, in order to be coherent, has to exclude specific content, and this content, when it is excluded, is reconceptualized as violent. A concept of justice is built by identifying what is unjust, a concept of nature, by identifying what is unnatural, etc. If violence, however, is to be seen as a conceptual limit, this also means that this exclusion itself must be seen as a form of violence. This is because describing something as unjust or unnatural does not happen in a void but depends on the content of other claims and other beliefs. In other words, for Weil, conceptuality, by limiting possibilities, is grounded on an initial act of violence. This explains how Weil is able to see violence as being fundamentally entangled with our discursive practices. This fundamental entanglement, I claim, is essential for understanding how violent discursive content pragmatically emerges from violent practices. A similar idea is also defended by Daniel Silva, who claims that there is a pragmatic dimension to violence that allows it to "circulate in discourse" (Silva 2017).

Like Weil, Silva recognizes the possibility of conceptualizing violence as a limit. He also highlights, however, that this is not the only approach in the literature on the relationship between language and violence, and examines two main alternatives for conceptualizing violence. The first alternative that Silva identifies argues that "language is not just a vehicle for violence but can also be a form of violence itself" (Silva 2025, 10), as is evident with "hate speech, bullying, racial slurs, and sexist, ageist or anti-LGBTI rhetoric" (Silva 2025, 11). The second alternative that he identifies does not tackle violence as a limit or a vehicle, but as an active force for

destroying the possibility of meaning. In such cases, violence is "produced, intensified, and sustained through the discursive circuits that shape social life" (Silva 2025, 11). Here, Silva claims that certain forms of group-belonging can be predicated on the use of violence and can create "discursive *echo chambers*" that reinforce the possibility of violence (think the manosphere, foundationalist groups, or extreme forms of political commitment, to non-exhaustively list several examples). Crucially here, Silva identifies these discursive echo chambers as "epistemic structures in which participants primarily encounter beliefs and opinions that coincide with their own" (Silva 2025, 11).

I agree with Silva that discursive echo chambers can be understood as epistemic structures, but I also want to make a stronger claim. My claim is that all discourse, as the structured and oriented use of language, is an epistemic structure, one that communicates beliefs, values, prejudices, opinions, etc. Based on this stronger claim, discourse is to be distinguished from language. If discourse is the structured and oriented use of language then language can be seen, broadly and minimally, as what underwrites the possibility of meaning (which allows incorporating non-propositional forms of communication under the banner of language). Discourse, then, can be seen as the site of the semantic/epistemic interface, where language acquires its epistemic dimension by being structured and oriented. Additionally, based on this stronger claim, the three approaches mentioned above should not be seen as mutually exclusive procedures for conceptualizing violence, but rather as different moments of this conceptualization, moments that show how the variety of the operative uses of violence hide certain thematic similarities. These similarities are going to be at the center of my thematic treatment of violence and orient the minimal criteria that I propose for identifying violence.

If the first moment of violence is a conceptual limit to discourse, the second moment shows how identifying this conceptual limit reveals the violence inherent in language, and the third moment shows how discourse and language become the target of violence in order to limit interpretative possibilities. To develop a thematic understanding of violence

that will ground the operative definition that I will work from, I claim that when we describe and evaluate something as violent we are recognizing its potential for harm. This, in turn, is shorthand for saying that it reduces agency, forecloses possibilities, destabilizes the individual, creates a context of vulnerability, limits self-determination, self-definition, and self-realization. In this thematic treatment, the potential for harm becomes a necessary condition for violence, but it is not immediately obvious that it is a sufficient condition. In fact, my claim, which will hopeful be confirmed and supported by my other arguments, is that there is no sufficient condition for naming, recognizing, or determining violence. This is, in part, because violence is seen here as something that is transformed in and through discourse, and so new ways of thematizing violence are constantly being developed in order to understand the harm that violence produces. This also means that there is no single definition of harm because identifying harm is a retrospective process that modifies both the notion of harm itself, and therefore, also the notion of violence.

This explains why the operative use of violence is downstream from its thematic development. New ways of conceptualizing violence lead to identifying new harms that in turn leads to applying the concept to new situations. This also implies an asymmetry between the lived experience of violence and the conceptual grasp of violence. As a lived experience, the conceptual limit that violent imposes often leaves us unable to grasp what is happening to us, and requires that we conceptualize concrete forms of violence after they happen. This highlights the asymmetry that is often present between those that are subjected to violence and those that produce violence. Those that produce violence are often analyzing the situation in such a way as to be insensitive to the harm that they produce, either because they are following and reinforcing dominant norms, acting according to what they see as being within their rights, or defending an order that they see as natural. Those that experience violence are thus often those that are also responsible for conceptualizing the violence that they undergo. This means that they often have the additional responsibility of trying to make the experience of violence intelligible to those

who produce it. This, in turn, often subjects them to new subtler harms in the process. While the gap between the thematic development and the operative use of violence does not map perfectly onto the gap between the lived experience of violence and the conceptual grasp of violence, nor onto the asymmetries between those that produce violence and those that are subjected to violence, the intersection of these different aspects show why it is so difficult to provide sufficient conditions for naming violence: no static understanding of violence is possible because violence is a dynamic aspect of human life. This also means that conceptualizing violence remains an ever-open problem. This open character is what motivates my attempt to develop the semantic/epistemic interface. More specifically, it motivates tackling the conceptual problem epistemically, with a defense of fallibilism.

2. Fallibilism, Semantic Negotiation, and Violence

By fallibilism I will mean two things. First, procedurally, I will mean that, in principle, any belief can be modified given the right kind of evidence. Second, conceptually, I formulate fallibilism as a specific kind of epistemic meta-attitude. Following José Medina, I will use the term epistemic meta-attitudes to refer to "second-order epistemic attitudes" (Medina 2013, 58). In other words, epistemic meta-attitudes are the attitudes we adopt towards our first-order knowledge-oriented attitudes, such as doubt or belief. More specifically, fallibilism is going to be seen as part of a general meta-attitude of open-mindedness that, for Medina, involves an "attentiveness to the perspectives of others, to cognitive and interpretative differences" (Medina 2013, 51). Fallibilism is also, conceptually, taken to include the procedural element. In other words, it is to be grasped as the constant procedural re-evaluation of the goodness of belief against the goodness of information, with the aim of remaining open to what other perspectives add to the content under evaluation.

Based on the general definition, fallibilism becomes a privileged meta-attitude for overcoming violence because, from the ground up, it aims to grasp the kinds of incompatibilities that emerge from different perspectives and different

commitments. In this way, fallibilism does not see incompatibility to be an epiphenomenon of discursive practices, but as a structural feature. So, if fallibilism is to be seen as a privileged epistemic meta-attitude facing violence, it must, however, also be noted that it is not the only one that people can adopt. In fact, there are a variety of meta-attitudes that can be held facing concrete content. This will include the refusal to enter into, or to continue, a given discursive interaction. This will also include violent attitudes that seek to destroy alternative understandings. Using the vocabulary of meta-attitudes, and following Medina, the first possibility can to be seen as part of the meta-attitude of closed-mindedness. Medina characterizes closed-mindedness as "as an avoidance strategy [that] is typically an unconscious defense mechanism. It does not result from a decision or a conscious effort to ignore, but from a socialization that leads one to be insensitive to certain things and immune to certain considerations" (Medina 2013, 36). The second attitude can be seen as following from closedmindedness, but as also needing to be distinguished from it. Indeed, this violent use of closemindedness requires qualifying Medina's claim. While there are certainly many cases where closed-mindedness is unconscious, it must also be seen as a possible conscious meta-attitude. When it is a conscious meta-attitude, this meta-attitude can is predicated on the use violence to eliminate the possibility of alternative understandings. Unconscious and the conscious closedmindedness can be mapped onto two of the separate moments of violence. Unconscious closedmindedness maps onto the violence that circulates in language, whereas conscious closedmindedness maps onto the use of violence to destroy meaning.

Understanding unconscious closemindedness is important for understanding why fallibilism should, at least in part, be seen as a response to the possibility of violence. Understanding conscious closemindedness is also essential, however, because it underwrites another claim I want to make, which is that there is a limit to fallibilism. *Intersubjectively*, fallibilism is only productive when all parties are entering into discursive practices in good faith. When people enter discursive

practices with the goal of destroying, instead of examining and modifying, possible interpretations and understandings, then fallibilism may not be the answer. In fact, there may be no single answer. Indeed, real concrete individuals must decide in real concrete cases how to act facing real concrete violence. Because these decisions are made by concrete individuals in concrete situations, it nonetheless remains helpful to see their decisions as fallible contextual judgments. Thus, fallibilism, as an epistemic meta-attitude, can still be seen as a productive *personal* commitment for judging the choices that one makes within conflict, even if fallibilism is not always the right choice in other-facing *intersubjective* situations. When other-facing intersubjective situations are structured by real violence, fallibilism can only be used as a retrospective criteria for judging how we actually acted in these past situations. This, I think, does not undermine fallibilism, it merely identifies its limits and qualifies it. This is why fallibilism remains the normative attitude endorsed here. If the goal of this paper is to motivate fallibilism, then I see identifying the possibility of other normative attitudes as the best way of doing so. In order to identify how these attitudes emerge, I think we can turn back to José Medina's work, and more specifically, to his idea of epistemic friction.

In its most basic form, friction is an index of the impact that differences in perspectives have when they come into contact. For Medina, friction is structural to our epistemic practices and is "something broader and more basic than reaching agreement" (Medina 2013, 10). In his development of this concept, he distinguishes between beneficial and detrimental friction. These two kinds of friction play opposing roles in our meta-attitudes. Beneficial friction encourages individuals to become more lucid about themselves and their relationship to others, thus encouraging positive epistemic meta-attitudes and encouraging epistemic virtues (Medina develops three main virtues, humility, curiosity/diligence, and open-mindedness). Detrimental epistemic friction reinforces negative epistemic meta-attitudes and encourages epistemic vices (here he also develops three main epistemic vices, arrogance, laziness, and closed-mindedness). According to

Medina, detrimental friction leads to "censoring, silencing, or inhibiting the formation of beliefs, the articulation of doubts, the formulation of questions and lines of inquiry, and so on" (Medina 2013, 50). This lines up with Kristie Dotson's definition of epistemic violence and shows the link between epistemic friction and epistemic violence. For Dotson, epistemic violence is determined by "reliable ignorance, harm, and […] [a] failed linguistic exchange" (Dotson 2011, 241), where the main harm is "practices of silencing"(Dotson 2011, 242-251). Epistemic friction therefore becomes a site where violence can enter discursive practices.

Based on the hypothesis of a semantic/epistemic interface, friction can be seen a product of the incongruence between individual personal epistemic attitudes, the commitments of these attitudes, and publicly available, intersubjectively articulated, meanings. Following from this, and from the thematic development of violence given above, detrimental epistemic friction can be seen as producing epistemic violence because of the way that closedminded epistemic meta-attitudes are used to impact the understanding and circulation of these publicly available, intersubjectively articulated, meanings. In this way, detrimental friction and closeminded epistemic meta-attitudes are to be seen as mutually reinforcing producers of violence. To further understand why this is the case, we can analyze the kind of conceptual negotiation that happens at the semantic/epistemic interface. Conceptual negotiation, as it will be understood here, will first be analyzed by Medina's characterization of polyphonic contextualism, and then according to Hans-Jörg Schmid's notion of co-semiosis.

To develop polyphonic contextualism, Medina starts by postulating an irreducible plurality and heterogeneity of viewpoints and contexts. He then develops the semantic, epistemological, and practical extension of this postulate. Consistent with his polyphonic contextualism, Medina claims that meaning, knowledge, and agency are most intelligible when multiple viewpoints and contexts are taken into account. To show why this is the case, Medina provides a theoretical diagnosis of semantic skepticism, or the worry about "whether

our meanings are determinate enough to support genuine communication" (Medina 2006, 2). Medina refuses semantic skepticism and characterizes it as depending on two problematic criteria: the *Determinacy Requirement* and the *Immutability or Fixity Requirement*. According to the first, meanings need to be fully determined for there to genuinely be meaning. According to the second, meanings must have some immutable feature that remains unchanged over time otherwise meaning falls apart. Medina thinks semantic skepticism depends on forcing people to choose between such all-or-nothing constrained alternatives. To overcome semantic skepticism, Medina attacks these two requirements. First, he attacks the determinacy requirement by distinguishing between underdetermination and radical indetermination. For Medina, the skeptical challenge only holds if meaning is radically indeterminate, if no determination can be given, but he insists that there is always contextual determinacy, whereby underdetermined meanings leave space open for differences of perspective and interpretation. Second, he attacks the immutability or fixity requirement by showing that semantic change is always happening within real communication. In other words, meaning is always emerging from processes of signification and resignification that maintain some part of previous meanings without needing to guarantee an immutable core. For Medina, meanings emerge from *pragmatic contexts of communication*, which involve the material, performative, social, and temporal elements of actually communicating, and which aim, first and foremost, at coordinating human action.

In other words, communication creates shared contexts where different perspectives are coordinated and negotiated. This coordination and negotiation create what he calls *communities of action* that start from language acquisition, and that condition our social normativity. Within communities of action people learn to assess others and to share perspectives in order to coordinate the action that defines the community. In other words, communication creates shared contexts where different perspectives are coordinated and negotiated. The negotiation and coordination of different perspectives is, for Medina, both the source of semantic stability and the space for

semantic innovation, which, when combined, are his response to semantic skepticism. Later, he folds these insights into his concept of *chained action* (Medina 2013; 2023). For Medina, chained action involves "an action with individual elements, the significance of which can only be properly understood within a chain of actions, being thus crucially dependent on the actions of others, indefinitely many others, but always particular others and not (at least not necessarily) entire collectives or social groups" (Medina 2013, 226). Defining chained action allows Medina to claim that semantic stability happens by situating meaning within a chain of previous uses, where each use becomes a link in a history of action. As one link, it is independent, which is what allows the use to be modified or reinforced. As part of a chain, each use that endorses previous uses does so by reproducing them. However, because it cannot perfectly reproduce previous use, every new use also transforms the previous one. In other words, every signification involves resignifications that shape norms of application. No single use, nor single individual, then, fixes meaning. Rather, each use, and each individual, impacts how meanings will be used. Repeated uses reinforce specific meanings and thus determine what is seen as "natural" within the meaning.

Medina develops the semantic elements of his polyphonic contextualism out of his reading of John Dewey and Ludwig Wittgenstein and centers on the idea that "meanings are dynamic structures […] [that] cannot be rigidly tied to particular contexts and fixed once and for all" (Medina 2006, 27). This claim, as Medina notes, raises the question of how meanings can hold across time and across contexts. Medina thinks Dewey provides an important answer for this by seeing that "what is most characteristic of human praxis is the *semiotic mediation* of our agency: signs mediate the relationship between our practical engagements with things and their consequences" (Medina 2006, 27). For Medina, the repeatability of a sign becomes of the utmost importance because, in each new context, when speakers repeat the use of a specific sign, they allow this to carry over into the new context. This, then, is the origin of stability and change: repetitive agency both "*reproduces and yet transforms*" the core sign

(Medina 2006, 28). This, according to Medina, happens because any consensus about how to use and reuse signs cites previous uses while also re-signifying them. In this way, we can look at this as having a jurisprudential structure.[2] Each time someone uses a term, they refer back to a history of use, but by inscribing themself in this history of use, they modify the term in different ways. These can be slight modifications that make the interpretation more precise, or these can be radical resignifications that themselves have to be argued for. This is why, at any time of use, any term or utterance is both stable and innovative. It cites previous uses to modify future uses. A non-semantic analogy can be found in the way evolution happens across generations. Every offspring resembles its parent in important ways, but is also different from them in important ways. If you took a cross-section of descendance, any parent and offspring would be identifiable as adjacent individuals. If you compared distant cross sections, however, the resemblance between two individuals would be more or less recognizable. Just like there is no first horse, but there is a clear moment when there are horses, there is no first meaning, but there is a clear moment when certain determinate meanings have the shape that they do. This balance between stability and change is going to be fundamentally important for understanding how detrimental epistemic friction can reinforce certain epistemic meta-attitudes. It is also going to be important for understanding violence in produced in communicative exchanges and why conceptual negotiation is a site where violence becomes a part of the meaning that is able to circulate in discourse by being reproduced and shared.

To better understand this process, I will now mobilize Hans-Jorg Schmid's concept of co-semiosis, where co-semiosis "is the activity of negotiating and establishing mutual beliefs of the mutual understandings of an utterance in a given context" (Schmid 2020, 30). Co-semiosis happens in what Schmid calls a "usage event," which is the intersection of an actual utterance, of the communicative goals of the participants, of the cognitive and interpersonal activity required for producing the utterance and understanding its contextualized meaning, and finally, the linguistic, situational, and social context. Thus, there is an

overlap between co-semiosis and usage events, on the one hand, and Medina's pragmatic context of communication, on the other. Within usage events, co-semiosis refers to how speakers and hearers aim at minimizing the non-relevant factors of a usage event by adapting to each other, thus co-constructing understanding and meaning by taking stances and attributing roles, which in turn licenses certain conventions. Importantly, these processes do not happen exclusively at the level of propositional content, but rather happen across usage events. Co-semiosis thus transmits social conventions and reinforces them through repetition, but also contests and weakens them when it ignores them, or proposes alternative and novel interpretations. Changes in conventions are understood by speakers from non-verbal cues, from different constructions, and through propositional content. Co-semiosis can therefore be seen as another privileged site of epistemic friction, and thus as structural to the semantic/epistemic interface. Both Medina and Schmid insist on the way individuals have different perspectives, different commitments, and different goals. If co-semiosis is the site of negotiation and coordination where differences and incompatibilities become visible, then these processes are also always sites of friction, conflict, and potentially, violence. Looking at pragmatic contexts of communication and co-semiosis as compatible theoretical positions in relation to conceptual negotiation, I will now focus on the epistemic character of such negotiation. More importantly, I claim that understanding the epistemic structure of the process of negotiation will help understand the defense of fallibilism presented here.

As already claimed, conceptual negotiation presupposes differences. Thanks to the elaboration of detrimental epistemic friction, we should now be sensitive to the fact that not all differences can be resolved and that not all negotiation is fruitful. In other words, pragmatic contexts of communication and co-semiosis are not only sites of potential conflict, they are also sites of possible distortions, abuses, and domination. More strongly, I am claiming that processes of conceptual negotiation are where such distortions, abuses, and domination enter discourse, and that our epistemic meta-attitudes play a

mediating role in their semanticization. This is because responsible epistemic meta-attitudes, such as those that include a form of fallibilism, will be attentive to identify such distortions, abuses, and domination. Irresponsible meta-attitudes, on the other hand, will look to reinforce these problems in order to not adapt to *specific* others within processes of conceptual negotiation, Such irresponsible, or willfully problematic, attitudes may even encourage people to bar these specific others from the process of conceptual negotiation. This can create harm by reinforcing and circulating problematic meanings, by undermining or destroying the possibility of producing alternative liberatory meanings, or by acting violently towards those that propose alternative meanings.

Since conceptual negotiation is the point of contact between different people with different perspectives, these perspectives can differ for a variety of social, political, and cultural reasons. These reasons can also in turn motivate the kind of epistemic meta-attitudes we take on. One of the insights that I see in both Medina and Schmid's work is that meaning-making is a shared social process. As a shared social process, people enter into it with certain overlaps in understandings and certain differences, and with different epistemic baggage. Using this insight, but situating it in a broadly inferentialist framework inspired by Robert Brandom (Brandom 1994; 2001), we can analyze these overlaps and differences, and our epistemic baggage, as being shaped by the way we commit to specific contents, what we see as inferentially following from these contents, and the way we identify with our discursive communities. Thus, the overlaps and differences present at the beginning of the process of conceptual negotiation can be seen as overlaps and differences in a collection of inferential commitments, or what I will call *inferential topographies*.

3. Inferential Topographies

An inferential topography is going to refer to how a concept is mapped according to what, from a given perspective, are seen as its permissible inferences and its incompatibilities. In addition to being situated within a general inferentialist

framework, this is going to be built off of two different inferentialist ideas: the first is Huw Price's difference between e-representations and i-representations, and the second is Jaraslov Peregrin's development of inferential potential. In his critique of classical representationalism, or what he calls (big R) Representationalism, Huw Price claims that many of the problems of such representationalism stem from a confusion. According to Price, (big R) Representationalism is "a kind of proto-theory about language, […] a useful informal model of the relation of language to the world" (Price 2013, 24), where the goal is to match language to an independently meaningful world. (Big R) Representationalism leads to a confusion because it runs together two very different ideas. The first bears on semantic content, on meaning, and the second bears on the correspondence between semantic content and the external world. To pull apart these different ideas, Price suggests that we distinguish between two different kinds of representation. On the one hand, there is what he calls e-representations, which are the kinds of representations that natural creatures use to track their external environment. On the other hand, there are i-representations, which are the representations that conceptual creatures use to track inferential connections. According to these distinctions, i-representations relate to semantic content, whereas e-representations relate to the way, as natural creatures, environmental features affect our sensory apparatus, which in turn allows postulating a correspondence between semantic content and objects in the world. E-representations therefore remain an important part of our understanding of the world. Nonetheless, within the context of meaning, i-representations have priority. This is because within i-representations "something counts as a representation in virtue of its position or role in some cognitive or inferential architecture." (Price 2013, 36). Price uses the distinction between i-representations and e-representations as part of his defense of pluralism, and more specifically, his defense of a "plurality of *ways of world-making*" based on the idea that there is a "plurality of potential applications, associated with a plurality of possible assertoric language games" (Price 2013, 54). If conceptual negotiation happens within a concrete context

of communication, then the kind of plurality that Price is defending helps to understand how people enter these contexts of communication with various claims. Different language games imply different forms of discourse with different sets of permissible inferences and incompatibilities. Such differences therefore have a concrete impact on the kinds of factual claims we take as obtaining in specific contexts, based on specific kinds of discourse. My claim here is that mapping i-representations as inferential topographies allow us to grasp the contours of different discourses.

When Price speaks of different language games, he is above all claiming that scientific discourses, moral discourses, esthetic discourses, etc., have different domains of application and different goals. Inferential topographies thus combine two of Price's ideas. First, it endorses Price's basic idea that different discourses imply different language games with different factual claims. Second, it endorses his idea that when talking about meaning and content, we are above all representing these different factual claims as different permissible inferences and different incompatibilities according to their roles within the inferential space of these language games. There is a difference however. Price also claims i-representations are internal, that they happen subjectively. I argue that i-representations be thought of as only derivatively internal. Their real home, so to speak, is within the overt public communicational practices that define pragmatic contexts of communication and co-semiosis. To show why this is the case, I am going to lean on Jaroslav Peregrin's concept of inferential potential.

For Peregrin, meanings emerge from public use and are "instituted" when they acquire an intersubjective shareable character. This sharable character is grounded in what he calls *propriety conditions* (Peregrin, 49). Propriety conditions describe how, within given situations or contexts, it is proper to utter certain sentences or words, and improper to utter others. When it is proper, we can say that one has a license to say certain things, whereas when it is improper, that license is not present, or more importantly, there is a prohibition from saying certain things. These propriety conditions in turn determine the

inferential potential of sentences, where inferential potential tracks what can be inferred from a sentence and that from which a sentence is inferable. These potentials make up inference patterns that are more or less determinable in contextual situations, and might here be thought of as public versions of i-representations. They can be thought of as public version of i-representations because, for Peregrin, the instituted norms that determine propriety conditions depend on the actual concrete use of a relevant community. By insisting that this falls to a *relevant* community, Peregrin shares Price's commitment (as well as my own commitment) to pluralism because he accepts that there might be multiple relevant and potentially conflictual communities. This, I think, reinforces the need for a robust understanding of how these potentially conflictual communities interact, which can be found in pragmatic contexts of communication and co-semiosis. Remember, pragmatic contexts of communication and co-semiosis both insist on the way that plural publics negotiate meaning and coordinate action in real interactions. Building off Price and Peregrin, I now argue that one of the things being negotiated within pragmatic contexts of communication and co-semiosis is the propriety conditions that determine inferential potentials. I am also arguing that we initially implicitly understand these potentials based on how they are regularly deployed within a relevant community thanks to their inferential patterns (which is analogous to their operative use). These patterns then become explicit thanks to the epistemic friction that emerges from conceptual negotiation (which opens the possibility of their thematic treatment). Finally, I am arguing that the passage from implicit operative use to explicit thematic treatment is conditioned by the epistemic meta-attitudes that we take on. This final claim reinforces my hypothesis of a semantic/epistemic interface and my defense of fallibilism.

Another way of understanding this final claim is to look at the relationship between epistemic meta-attitudes and propriety conditions. Here it is helpful to think of propriety conditions as being both immanent and transcendent in our discursive practices. They are immanent in our practices

because, as we are trained into conceptuality, we learn to interpret from a variety of cases, to generalize, to limit, to associate, etc. This allows us to better understand the possible meanings that are *suggested* by inferential potentials. We see a range of things that might follow from different cases, and we play an active role in either endorsing or refusing these possibilities (think about what was said about stability and change above). Propriety conditions are also transcendental in social communicational practices in the sense that no single individual decides the evaluative criteria for establishing them. Rather, they emerge from the public, shared, intersubjective practice of conflictual conceptual negotiation. Based on this, we also assert our belonging or lack of belonging to a relevant community by the propriety conditions that we endorse or refuse. In other words, being part of a relevant community means adopting the appropriate propriety conditions for that community. Because of this, our inferential topographies both play a role in signaling which communities we belong to and what these communities defend, encourage, reinforce, punish, retransmit, all according to different inferential possibilities. This thus creates an idea of what "naturally" follows from something, because we are learning inferential potentials at the same time that we are learning how to navigate conceptuality and discourse. This also helps us to understand why pragmatic contexts of communication and co-semiosis are potentially conflictual. Different communities, and within different communities, different individuals, have different inferential topographies. Based on this, one of the goal of the processes of negotiation and coordination that happen in pragmatic contexts of communication and co-semiosis can be seen as an attempt to identify the shared features of different topographies. These features can be used as reference points that allow comparing, correcting, and co-creating a new consensus of use, as well as identifying people with whom discussion is potentially impossible. This is where our epistemic meta-attitudes come back to the fore. Faced with friction, conflict, and the possibility of violence, responsible epistemic meta-attitudes are beneficial because they aim at opening us up to new possibilities and to new information. This enlarges our social imagination; it

creates new horizons of understanding and of action. Conversely, however, irresponsible meta-attitudes are detrimental because they close off our social imagination and foreclose potential horizons of understanding and action. This limits our possibilities of understanding, and at the same time, reinforces limiting ways of grasping the world. Based on these elements, we can better understand the relationship between propriety conditions and epistemic meta-attitudes and hopefully understand the mutual exchanges that happen at the semantic/epistemic interface.

4. Critical Perspectives on Conflictual Inferences

Now that I have presented the theoretical position that I am defending, I will now try to further motivate my claims. I will do this by using them to analyze a cluster of related positions, each of which stages a disagreement about how to interpret the content of discourses and practices concerning different racial and cultural perspectives. These positions include Charles Mills's treatment of white ignorance and the racial contract, Aimé Césaire's critique of colonial discourse, and Amandine Catala's concept of hermeneutical domination. I am thus going to use these positions to corroborate my claims about the semantic/epistemic interface. The semantic/epistemic interface is where violence enters into discursive practices and, in doing so, becomes fundamentally entangled with language. The conflict between these different positions will also be used to show how epistemic meta-attitudes, with specific determined understandings, can both increase the possibility of violence, but can also be used to promote alternative understandings. This both anchors my claim that fallibilism should be seen as the privileged position for overcoming violence, when it can be overcome, and that violence can be a limit to fallibilism.

To develop these perspectives, Mills's position can be analyzed to show the reinforcing relationship between propriety conditions and epistemic meta-attitudes by showing the historical processes that make propriety conditions immanent and transcendent in our practices. For its part, Césaire's position provides a concrete historical example of conceptual negotiation since his arguments are a direct response to

eminent public French intellectuals such as Ernest Renan and Roger Caillois within the public debate around colonialism. In this way, public debate and the public production of opinions and arguments aim to orient conceptual negotiation by normatively impacting how we should understand propriety conditions and inferential potentials. Recognizing that all of our communicational interactions play a role in modifying and reshaping propriety conditions and inferential potentials opens a perspective for a theory of discursive action. Such a theory would demand that we take seriously the role that we play in endorsing or refusing certain understandings. It would also remind us that the stances we take in discourse orient future inferential potentials. If Mill's position helps us better understand the historical processes of conceptual negotiation, Césaire's participation in the intellectual debates of his time provides a way of recognizing how these processes translate into individual responsibility. Catala's position, in its analysis of the historical heritage of colonialism within contemporary practices, overlaps with Mills's and Césaire's positions. It also providing a clear analogy with my claims about how epistemic practices translate into propriety conditions and inferential potentials, thus corroborating my hypothesis of a semantic/epistemic interface.

In my reading of Charles Mills, white ignorance is to be seen as a specific cognitive disfunction caused by the deliberate management of memory and reinforced by specific intellectual vices that allow white people to remain ignorant about racialized perspectives. In order to develop his argument, Mills starts by providing a definition of ignorance, which covers "both false belief and the absence of true belief" (Mills 2007, 16). He then uses this definition to examine racial asymmetries in knowledge. He will claim that for a variety of societal reasons, racialized individuals know far more about white people than white people know about them. However, what is important for our use here is that part of this asymmetry is born out of a willful commitment to not learn about the lives of racialized individuals. In other words, white ignorance can be looked at as following from specific epistemic meta-attitude whereby one refuses to learn about unfamiliar perspectives or to use

differences to broaden their own beliefs. This meta-attitude is reinforced and legitimized by the management of memory, which here describes how social memory is curated in such a way that white perspectives remain ignorant about racialized perspectives. This, according to Mills, is possible because social memory is "inscribed in textbooks, generated and regenerated in ceremonies and official holidays, concretized in statues, parks, and monuments" (Mills 2007, 29). In other words, it makes up the part of the context that determines the propriety conditions that people will see as obtaining when they enter into conceptual negotiation, conditions that will then be inscribed into the chained action that determines social meanings. Mills's development of white ignorance is supported by his earlier development of the "racial contract." In fact, using the theoretical vocabulary developed in this paper, we can read Mills's theorization of the racial contract as detailing how the repetition of certain associations creates a history of use that orients inferential potentials. This history of use charts specific problematic inferential licenses and the way they have be reaffirmed and reinforced, thus making them appear not only legitimate, but also natural.

To see how this works we can examine what we might call his "spatial argument" about the foundations of the racial contract. According to this argument, the racial contract "norms" space by "racing" it. In other words, it defines certain spaces as having certain kinds of bodies. To race space, the racial contract creates a guiding norm through negative ostensive self-definition. Here, negative ostensive self-definition is to be understood as a process of defining oneself by providing examples that can be pointed out, and then affirming that you are not what that is. The negative ostensive self-definition that characterizes the racial contract starts by presenting those outside the racial contract as being unequal, irrational, immoral sub-persons and so, negatively, those within the racial contract as equal, rational, moral, and more importantly, fully persons. Mills then distinguishes the racial contract from more classical contract theory using a sociopolitical understanding of spatial and temporal homogeneity. According to these concepts, spatial homogeneity happens when geographic space and

political space are one and the same. Temporal homogeneity claims that all human time is sociopolitical.

Using these distinctions, Mills claims that, within classical social contract theory, there is spatial homogeneity, but not temporal homogeneity. In other words, geographic space and the political space are one and the same. There is not, however, the same overlap temporally and so there is a pre-sociopolitical time and then genuine sociopolitical time. The social contract is, thus, what imposes sociopolitical time. Within the racial contract, however, there is lack of both spatial and temporal homogeneity. The possibility of a political space only exists because full, rational, agents have brought it with them. In the context of imperialism and colonialism, this means that, pre-conquest, there was only geographic space and no political space. This allows ignoring pre-existing norms and claiming that space is "empty" or "wild." This spatial and temporal rupture reinforces European claims to rationality and justifies differential treatment where (Western) rationality is presented as a universal value and those that do not follow this value are excluded from universal moral, social, and political consideration. Europe is presented as the "*global locus of rationality*" (Mills 2022, 45) and all non-European space is pre-political, non-rational, and empty. There is nothing of value in pre-conquest lands because the conquest itself is what creates space and value. This space, however, is imaginary, and if it does not conform to the (European) imagination, it can be taken in order to be tamed and civilized.[3] The racial contract therefore remodels geographic space to make a Europeanized political space, thus giving whites the right to decide who gets to be included and excluded within that space. For Mills, this process has no single foundation act. Rather, it is regularly rewritten through diverse acts and arguments that aim to maintain the racial contract in place. So, when people accept these arguments, or promote them, or do not actively resist them, they are ratifying the racial contract. The idea of rewriting and ratification helps us to understand how long histories of use shape specific inferential topographies and encourage certain epistemic meta-attitudes. The racial contract, and the white ignorance that accompanies it, conspires to present specific

inferential potentials as correct and thus to restrict propriety conditions. These restricted propriety conditions, starting from those found within negative ostensive self-definition, make such inferential potentials seem natural, especially to those who belong to the communities that are privileged within colonial narratives. Conversely, the process of negative ostensive self-definition is a form of violence for those who do not belong to such privileged communities. For those outside of these privileged communities, the racial contract produces harm at multiple levels. First, it aims to limit racialized populations' capacity for creating alternative understandings. Second, it circulates problematic and harmful contents within discourse itself. Third, it justifies the further violence committed against racialized populations, either because the producers of violence are unable to see their violence as violence, or because they interpret racialized populations' resistance to their violence as itself being violent, as being an unjustified attack against a "natural" order, against polite society, etc.

Different communities therefore favorize different inferential topographies. This provides a way of understanding how different forms of belonging, which are accompanied by different lived experiences, create different standpoints. This also contextualizes why different communities provide radically different readings of problematic social realities, such as colonialism. These insights can be reinforced by Aimé Césaire's analysis of French defenses of colonialism, such as those presented by thinkers like Ernest Renan and Roger Caillois. Césaire uses these thinkers to show how certain groups, specifically colonized groups, are excluded from the "universal" discourse of Western rationality. In a sense, Césaire's analysis is a situated example of the historical processes that Mills describes the racial contract. We can look at Césaire's position as a specific individual cross-section in a history of use. It is at such individual cross-sections that epistemic meta-attitudes define personal responsibility and play a role in future inferential potentials. In the theoretical vocabulary developed to discuss inferential topographies, Renan and Caillois can be seen as both trying to actively determine the inferential potentials of concepts like science, universality, etc., by trying

to define the scope of these terms to only include European perspectives. To do so, they defend overtly racist positions in the name of Western rationality, thereby providing a further example of how violence enters into, and circulates within, discourse. Because their arguments aim to restrict possible interpretations about Western rationality, they refuse any alternative interpretations, thus setting up problematic propriety conditions that limit inferential potentials. Additionally, the very language that they use creates a double harm. First, it creates a hierarchy between Europeans and Non-Europeans whereby Europeans are naturally masters and Non-Europeans naturally subjects. This is then used to create a hierarchy to dehumanize Non-Europeans. Second, it encourages others to also dehumanize them and justifies the use of any violence against them. By presenting arguments that critique such positions, Césaire refuses to endorse the content of Western colonial discourse and does so by show that this discourse rests on problematic claims. This makes Césaire's inferential topography not just radically different from those of such French writers, but also incompatible. This incompatibility is what allows Renan's and Caillois's claims to be grasped as violent. It also allows us to provide a new reading of the idea of violence as a conceptual limit. If Césaire were to accept the constraints that these two French thinkers placed onto discourse, he would have limited tools for understanding and conceptualizing the harm to which their discourse tries to subject him. Their discourse is thus both the site of harmful inferential potentials and the vehicle of their problematic epistemic meta-attitudes. The positions that they take in discourse suggests that they would be impermeable to any demands for reconceptualization made by Non-Europeans. Mills's and Césaire's work provides us with examples of conceptual negotiations at two different levels of analysis. One at the structural level, the other at the individual level. It also shows us how problematic epistemic meta-attitudes become visible within the process of conceptual negotiations. The link between epistemic practices and conceptual negotiation can be further illustrated in Amandine Catala's recent work on epistemic agency (Catala 2025).

Building off of Miranda Fricker's work in epistemic injustices (Fricker 2007), Catala develops the concept of hermeneutical resources in such a way that will allow us to have a better understanding of the processes I am trying to grasp. According to Catala, a hermeneutical resource is "part of the pool of available interpretive tools" (Catala 2025, 98) that a society has at its disposal. Hermeneutical injustice is therefore linked to the way that available hermeneutical resources create inaccurate or distorted social understandings. Using this, she is going to develop the concept of *hermeneutical domination*, where a "minority is subjected to a public discourse on […] a social practice or experience that is shaped by putatively collective understandings that are in fact wholly formulated and imposed by the majority" (Catala 2025, 136). Situating her argument in an example that is close to Césaire's, Catala uses hermeneutical domination to examine disagreements about shared social meanings concerning the heritage of colonialism around "Black Pete" (or *Zwarte Piet* in Dutch). For context, Black Pete is part of the winter tradition in Dutch and Flemish regions similar to that of Christmas in English speaking regions. Black Pete is Saint Nicholas's servant and is presented as a "buffoonish Black man dressed in Renaissance pageboy attire, who either walks alongside his master's horse or stands next to his master's throne, acts clumsy or dumb, and speaks in broken Dutch" (Catala 2025, 133). The disagreement that Catala sees as central to her example of hermeneutical domination is between two understandings of Black Pete. As she notes, "[b]lack citizens perceive [Black Pete] as a remnant of the Dutch colonial past and Dutch involvement in slavery" whereas white citizens "seem to express a genuine (if slightly annoyed or amused) puzzlement at the suggestion that the portrayal of the otherwise much-beloved figure of Black Pete is racist" (Catala 2025, 133).

For Catala, hermeneutical domination is the consequence of both testimonial injustice and hermeneutical injustice. Catala builds off of Fricker's definition of these two concepts, where testimonial injustices are "caused by prejudice in the economy of credibility" and hermeneutical injustices, "by structural prejudice in the economy of collective hermeneutical resources"

(Fricker 2007, 1). She does so to show how hermeneutical domination affects available hermeneutical resources. Specifically, in the case of Black Pete, the testimonial injustice occurs when "the majority wrongfully dismisses the minority's testimony which, in this case, is the minority's attempt to contribute to the mainstream hermeneutical resource by providing an alternative understanding or description of a given social practice or experience" (Catala 2025, 136). In the same case, the hermeneutical injustice occurs when "the minority is deprived of the opportunity to contribute to the mainstream hermeneutical resource, which is the pool of interpretive tools or descriptive labels used to characterize or make sense of that social practice or experience" (Catala 2025, 136). This reading of Black Pete is going to lead Catala to propose a new form of hermeneutical injustice which she thinks is *associative*. According to the concept of associative hermeneutical injustices, "the hermeneutical injustice or intelligibility deficit stems from the fact that certain associations of the phenomenon or practice with certain existing terms are unduly imposed or dismissed" (Catala 2025, 139). Catala sees this disagreement as one that comes from competing understandings of Black Pete. However, it is not just the central commitments of the concept itself that are problematic. Rather, upstream, it is what informs these commitments, and downstream, what is seen as following from them. This is important because it also reveals a disagreement about the harm of such commitments, and therefore their violence. For white citizens, Black Pete is a seasonal tradition that promotes harmless fun and brings joy to children. Whereas for black citizens, Black Pete is more than just a constant reminder of colonial violence, it is perpetuation of physical, structural, and symbolic violence. Black Pete also provides an additional illustration of the transformation of violence. The visual and cultural representations that vehicle harmful stereotypes impact the propriety conditions that condition correct and incorrect ways of representing marginalized communities, and in this way impact the inferential potentials of these representations. In other words, when groups are treated in harmful ways, it becomes okay to continue to do so.

While Catala does not analyze this example in terms of epistemic meta-attitudes, nor in terms of inferential potentials, I think it would be helpful. At first glance, it may seem that both sides of the Black Pete argument are adopting a problematic meta-attitude of closed-mindedness because both sides refuse the interpretation of the other side. However, I think a closer look tells another story. As already mentioned in Mills articulation of white ignorance, in hermeneutical domination there is an asymmetry in knowledge. Through this domination, minorities or marginalized groups have to know more about the dominant culture than members of the dominant group have to know about them. Thus, through a process of domination, their position is already open to at least one other perspective, that of the dominant group. Thus, in the language of epistemic meta-attitudes, part of the domination that is found within hermeneutical domination is that marginalized groups are required to maintain their epistemic meta-attitude open towards claims and beliefs of the dominant group. This also allows me to show the limits of the meta-attitude of open-mindedness.

No epistemic meta-attitude is fully open or fully closed. In fact, this is why it is possible to resist specific determined content and to reshape propriety conditions, inferential potentials, epistemic-meta-attitudes, and the inferential topographies that accompany them. Incompatibilities only emerge by refusing specific inferential potentials. As I mentioned before, this is a first site of violence. It is also, however, the reason that I see the possibility of violence as a direct justification of fallibilism. In unequal social conditions, marginalized groups are often pushed into an initial obligatory openness. Faced with this obligation, a certain amount of resistance or closed-mindedness becomes not only legitimate, but also necessary on the side of the marginalized group. Such resistance is itself what provides the tools that will allow them to resist problematic interpretations and so also counteracts the harm that accompanies dominant interpretations. Remember, resistance is an ambiguous mechanism that has both negative and positive effects, which in turn depend on the stance we take in discourse, on our discursive commitments. When we commit

to certain inferences as being permissible, we are also defining the shape of our conflict. This means that no conflict if predetermined. Rather, each conflict is shaped by the historical processes that condition our individual stances, and then are reshaped by the way each of us, as concrete individuals, endorse or refuse both the inferential potentials that we are raised into and those we work to conceptualize and understand. This is also why there are no sufficient conditions for defining harm and violence. It may be legitimate (or even essential for their survival) for certain groups to refuse or resist certain formulations of conceptual contents, but it is not easy to know when this is the case. This is one of the consequences of seeing conceptual negotiations as following from historically defined viewpoints. Most individuals enter conceptual negotiations convinced of the "naturalness" and this legitimacy of their position. Unless people adopt a fallibilist meta-attitude this naturalness leads us back to the problem of fundamentally incompatible contents and the possibility of violence. The possibility of violence, as it is sketched in this paper, might however also provide the criteria for identifying the problem, and in certain local cases, overcoming it. Theorizing that violence enters language though epistemic and discursive practices also means that language implicitly already holds the potential for harm. It also means that certain harms are transmitted through a history of use that defines inferential potentials and that become a part of the very propriety conditions that guide people in their use. Faced with conflictual beliefs and incompatible contents, the potential for harm may be a good criteria for judging inferential topographies. If an inferential potential is downstream from violent practices and continues to rewrite and ratify these violent practices in new and subtler forms, it is a reason to refuse the propriety conditions that support that inferential potential. If conceptual negotiation touch problematic inferential potentials, then we should see as legitimate the aims to correct, diminish, or overcome violence by modifying the propriety conditions. This leaves us with additional material and temporal constraints that also, for me, justify fallibilism. Conceptual negotiation is a difficult and problematic process strewn with obstacles. Even if

we look at the reduction of harm and symmetry as meta-criteria for determining whether such negotiations are happening fairly, the problems we have signaled above show that we may be mistaken. This, encourages us to take on fallibilism as an epistemic meta-attitude. If we do not take on a fallibilist meta-attitude we are more likely to participate in distorted negotiations, as is the case with hermeneutical domination.

5. Conclusion

This seems to leave us with a new paradoxical result, violence is a fundamental aspect of human life, but a fundamental aspect that itself is ambivalent. It is against a background of real concrete violence that the actual determined conceptual content gets the shape it does. In other words, violence, as the thing that we are trying to conceptualize, plays a role in determining the inferential topographies of our understanding. Thus concrete demands of fairness, of justice, of care are responses to concrete forms of inequality, injustice, and violence. This leads to a situation where no single position, no single content, has *prima facie* authority. Rather, whatever epistemic authority any position has, it is conferred by public social processes. At the level of content, meanings are negotiated. At the level of meta-attitudes, our attitudes towards these meanings are evaluated. The interaction between these two levels constitutes the semantic/epistemic interface that I postulated at the beginning of this paper. Based on the interaction between content and meta-attitudes, there is no absolute criteria for content, just as there are no absolute criteria for open-mindedness and closemindedness. Instead, both are situated in complex social interactions that define conceptual negotiation. However, this does not mean that there are *no* criteria. Rather, I am claiming that at each level of conceptual negotiation contextual criteria emerge. At the point of contact, where two people enter into real conceptual negotiations, inferential potentials and propriety conditions act as such criteria. Since nothing guarantees overlap between different propriety conditions and their inferential potentials, the coherence of inferential topographies becomes a criterion for evaluating the goodness of content. While, in some cases,

inferential topographies can be used to find points of contact and to overcome differences by showing that, deep down, individuals share similar i-representations, this is also not guaranteed. Mapping inferential topographies can also reveal incompatibilities and real conflict by showing problematic differences between propriety conditions and inferential potentials. Faced with such differences, the problem can no longer be resolved at the level of content, but depends on the kind of epistemic meta-attitudes that people hold. However, here again, identifying meta-attitudes can just as easily lead to conflict as to its resolution. This is at the center of my defense of fallibilism. At every level of analysis, the problem of violence reappears and at every level fallibilism seems to be the best option. This is why I argue that the privileged path to overcoming the problem of violence is to see our conceptual content as modifiable; to see the stances we take towards that content as modifiable, and to see the meta-attitudes we use to evaluate these stances as also modifiable. This underwrites the relationship between fallibilism and the possibility of violence. The possibility of violence, as well as histories of harm, can be used as criteria at every level to decide which propriety conditions, which inferential potentials, and which epistemic meta-attitudes to endorse or refuse. However, based on the dynamic nature of harm and violence, we always have to be prepared to revise our positions, otherwise we risk participating in the production of new violence precisely because we are no longer sensitive to our potential for doing so.

NOTES

[1] By calling this "logocentric" I am endorsing Amandine Catala critique of logocentrism (Catala 2025).

[2] I am using this term as a nod to Robert Brandom's reading of Hegel, specifically where he develops a jurisprudential model of the evolution of the concepts of common law (Brandom 2020, 565).

[3] This lines up with Edward Said's concept of "imaginative geography" in (Said 1979, 49-72).).

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