



Field-level inference lecture 3: Bayesian hierarchical models

Cosmology Beyond the Analytic Lamppost course (2025)

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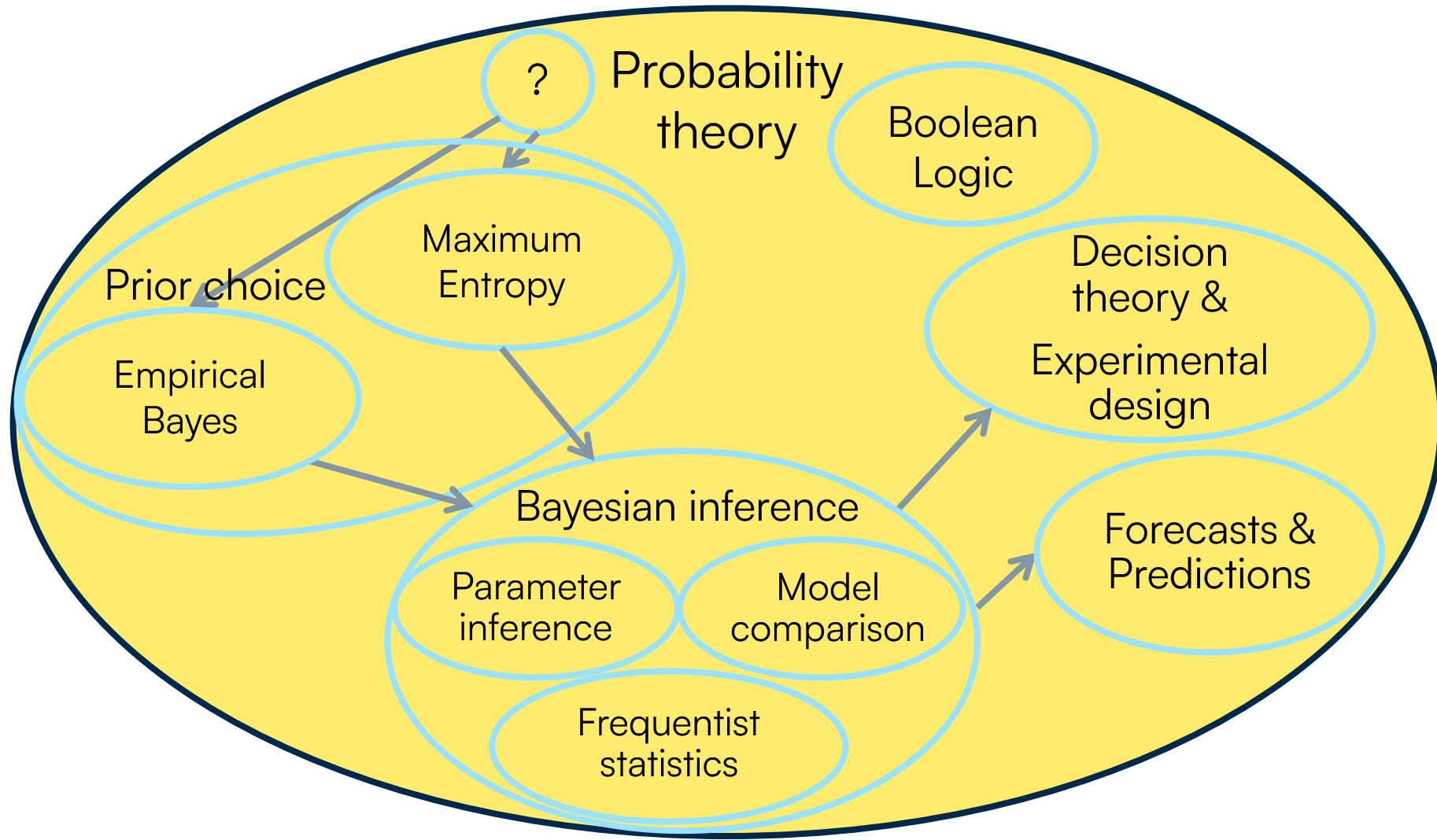
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17 JUNE 2025



Ålesund, Norway

Jaynes's “probability theory”: an extension of ordinary Boolean logic



03

BAYESIAN DECISION THEORY AND EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN

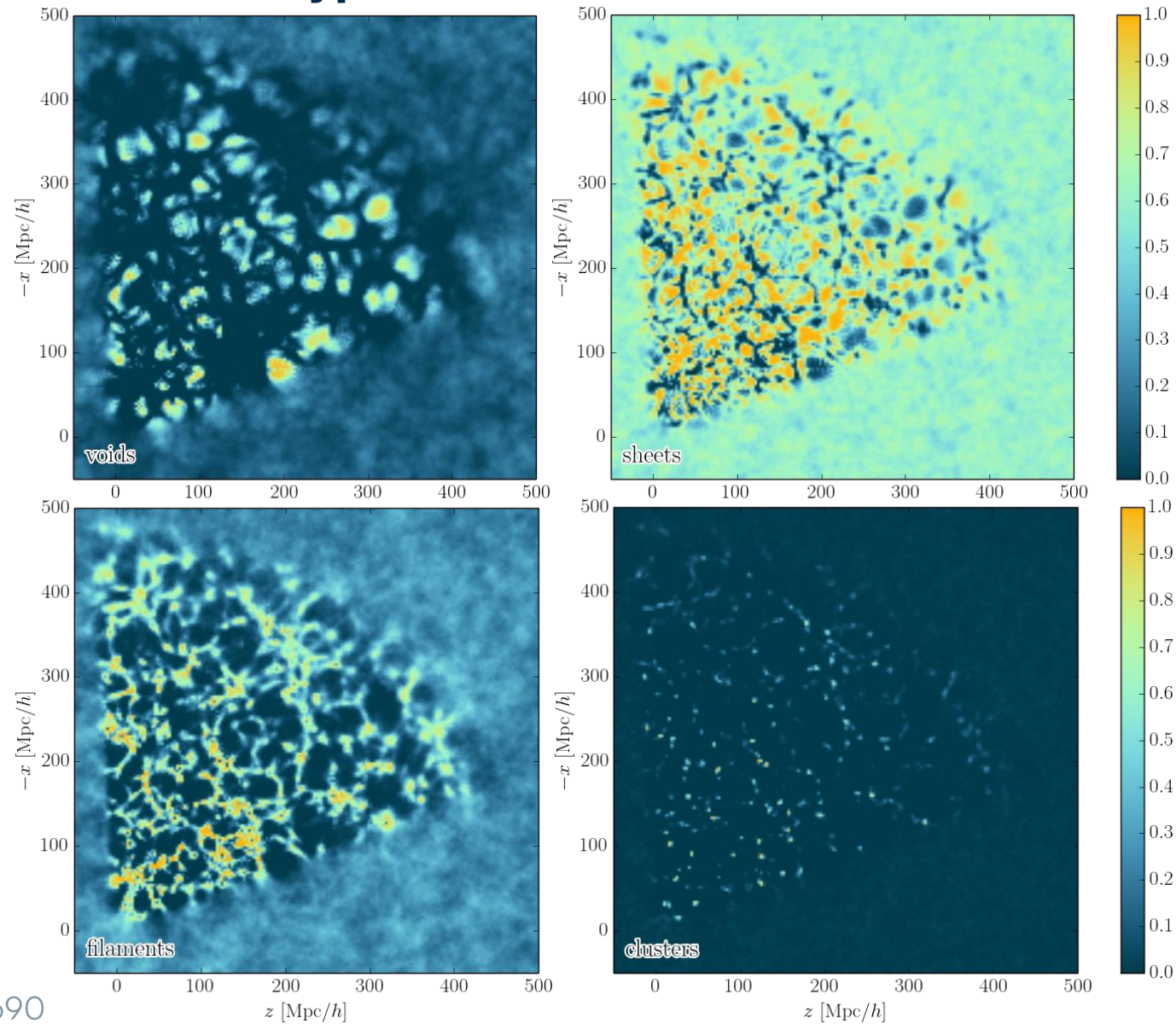
Bayesian decision theory

- Bayesian decision theory is a framework for [optimal decision-making](#), given a set of possible actions and a state of uncertain knowledge, represented by a pdf $p(\theta|I)$ (usually the posterior from a Bayesian inference prior to decision-making).
- Notations:
 - $\{\theta\}$ = set of parameters (observed variables)
 - $\{a\}$ = set of possible actions
- [Expected utility hypothesis](#): Given a set of gain functions $G(a|\theta)$, the optimal decision rule consists of performing the action that maximises the expected utility $U(a|I)$, defined by

$$U(a|I) \equiv \langle G(a|\theta) \rangle_{p(\theta|I)} = \int G(a|\theta) p(\theta|I) d\theta$$

- Thus, one should perform the action $a^* = \operatorname{argmax}_a U(a|I)$.

Classification of cosmic web-types



FL, Jasche & Wandelt, 1502.02690

A decision rule for structure classification

- Space of “input features”:

$$\{T_0 = \text{void}, T_1 = \text{sheet}, T_2 = \text{filament}, T_3 = \text{cluster}\}$$

- Space of “actions”:

$$\{a_0 = \text{“decide void”}, a_1 = \text{“decide sheet”}, a_2 = \text{“decide filament”}, \\ a_3 = \text{“decide cluster”}, a_{-1} = \text{“do not decide”}\}$$

- It is thus a problem of [Bayesian decision theory](#): one should take the action that maximises the utility

$$U(a_j(\vec{x}_k)|d) = \sum_{i=0}^3 G(a_j|T_i) \mathcal{P}(T_i(\vec{x}_k)|d)$$

- How to write down the gain functions?

Gambling with the Universe

- One proposal:

$$G(a_j | T_i) = \begin{cases} \frac{1}{\mathcal{P}(T_i)} - \alpha & \text{if } j \in \llbracket 0, 3 \rrbracket \text{ and } i = j & \text{"Winning"} \\ -\alpha & \text{if } j \in \llbracket 0, 3 \rrbracket \text{ and } i \neq j & \text{"Losing"} \\ 0 & \text{if } j = -1. & \text{"Not playing"} \end{cases}$$

- Without data, the expected utility is

$$U(a_j) = 1 - \alpha \quad \text{if } j \neq -1 \quad \text{"Playing the game"}$$

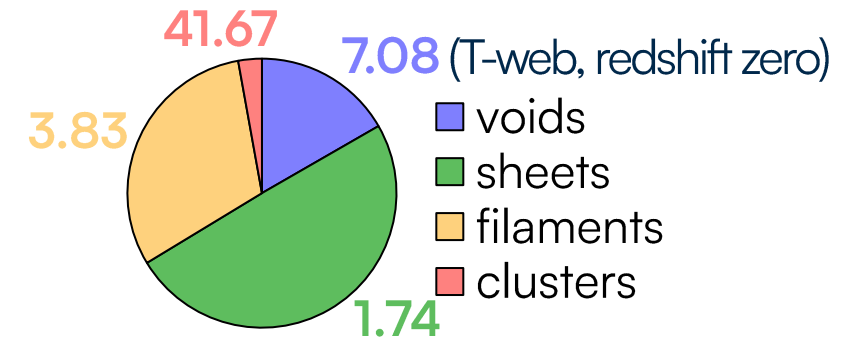
$$U(a_{-1}) = 0 \quad \text{"Not playing the game"}$$

- With $\alpha = 1$, it's a fair game $\Rightarrow$ always play

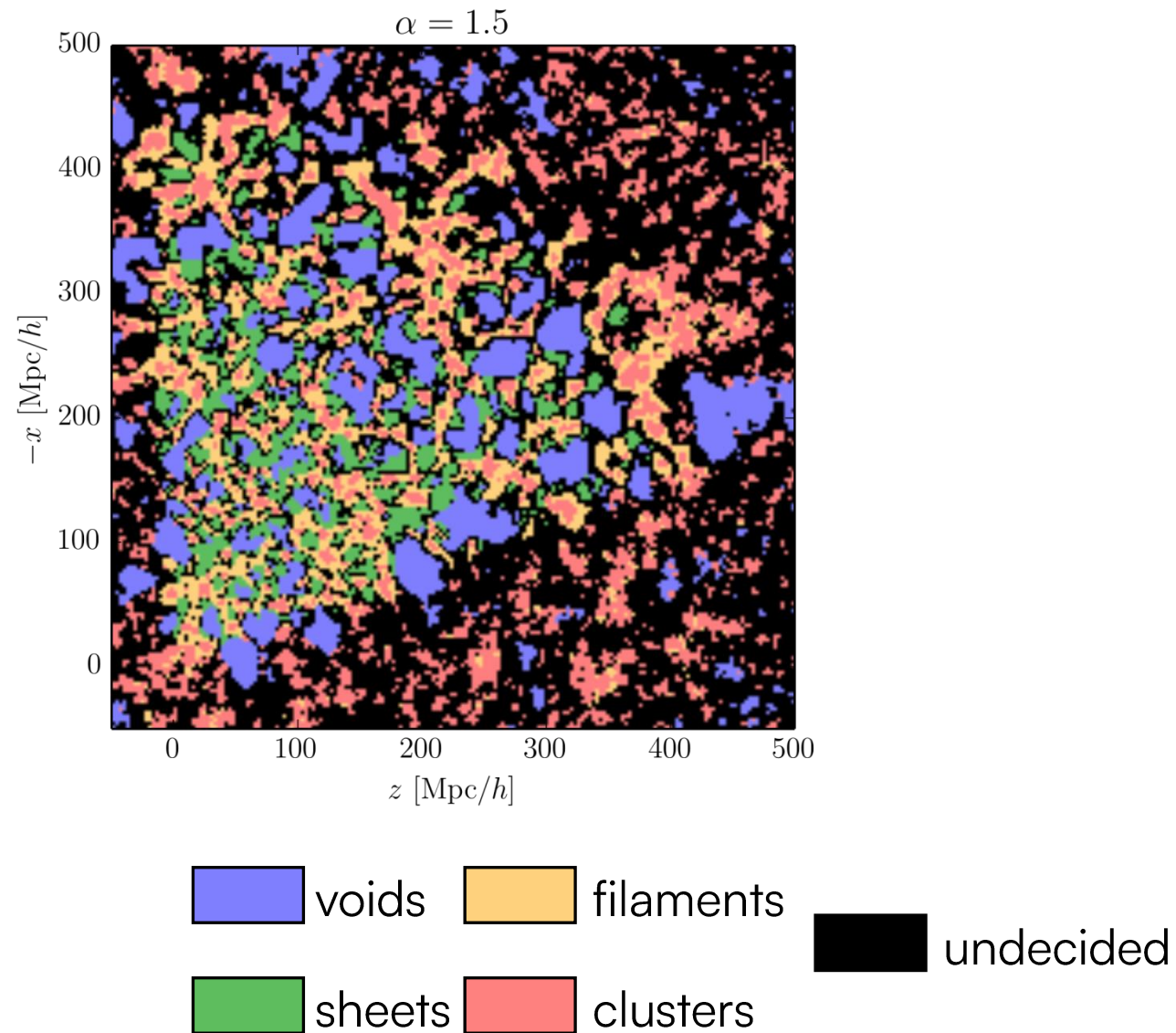
$\Rightarrow$ "speculative map" of the LSS

- Values $\alpha > 1$ represent an aversion for risk

$\Rightarrow$ increasingly "conservative maps" of the LSS

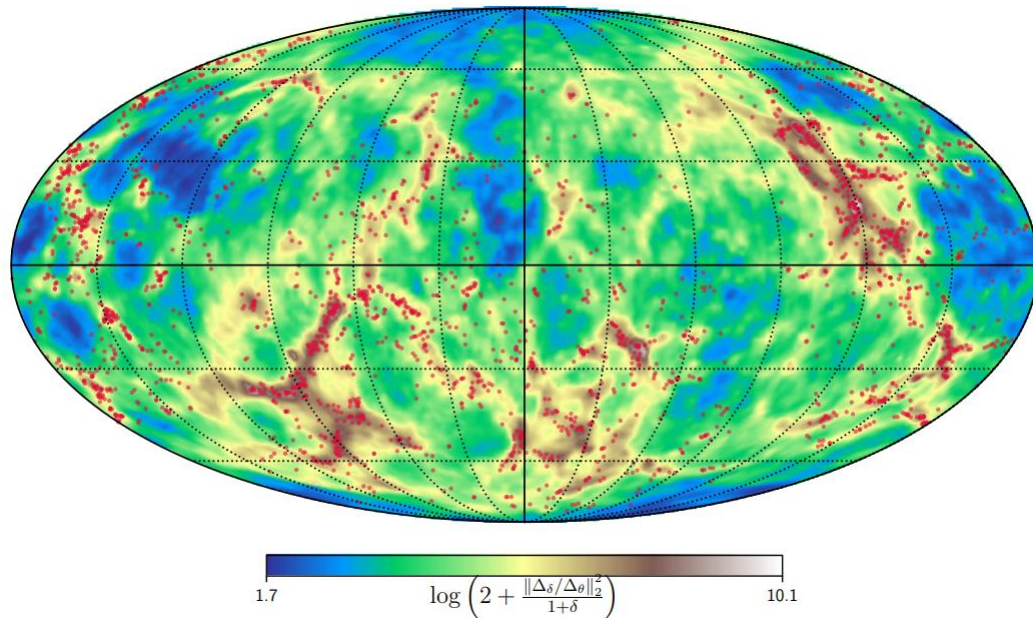


Playing the game...

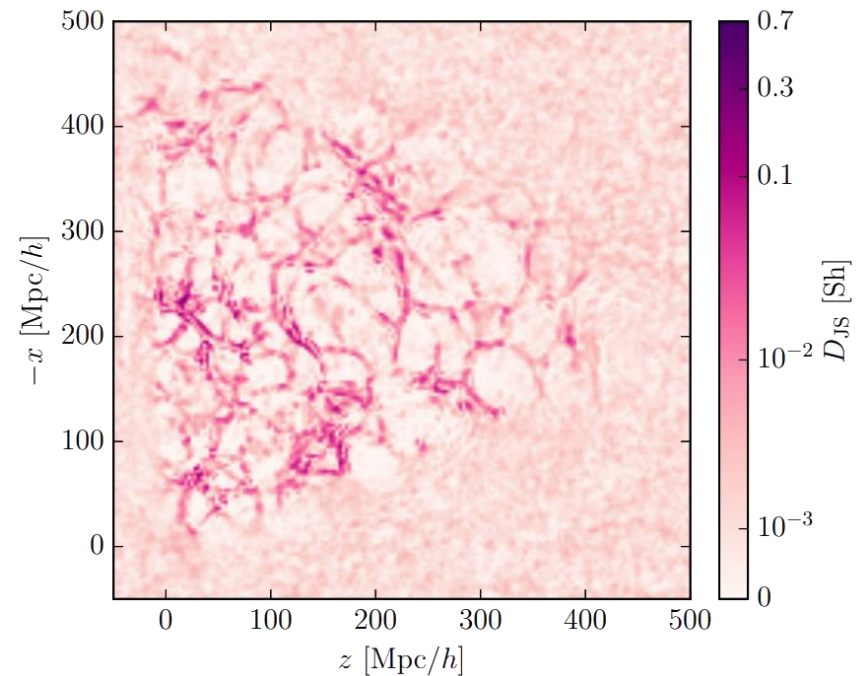


Bayesian experimental design: Information-optimal or entropy-maximal acquisition of future cosmological data

- This is where to look if we want to measure cosmological parameters of Λ CDM...
- And this is where to look if we want to learn about dark energy...



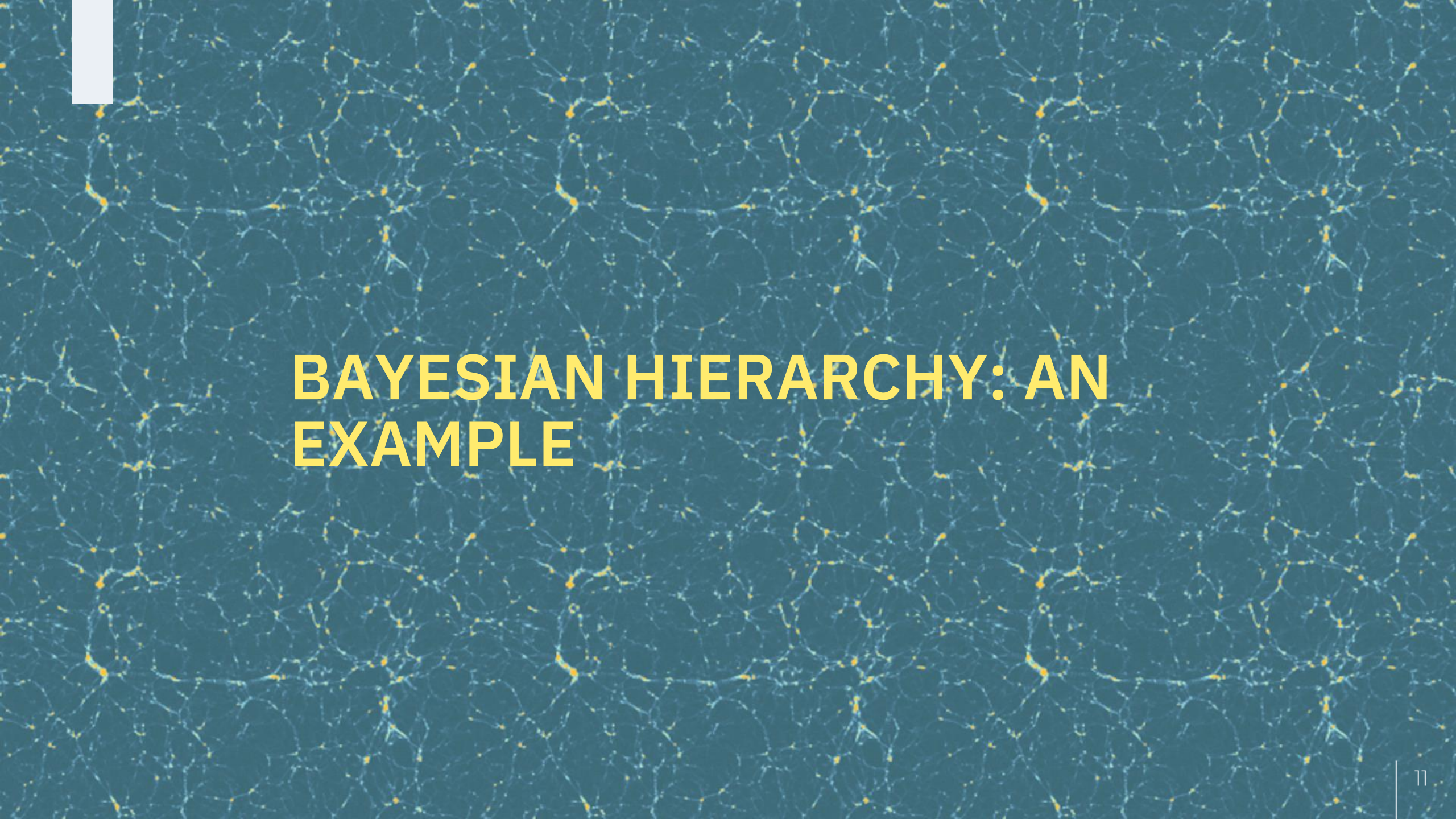
(Fisher information map for perturbative changes in the cosmological model)



(Jensen-Shannon divergence between cosmic web-type posteriors for different values of the dark energy equation of state)

03

BAYESIAN HIERARCHICAL MODELS



BAYESIAN HIERARCHY: AN EXAMPLE

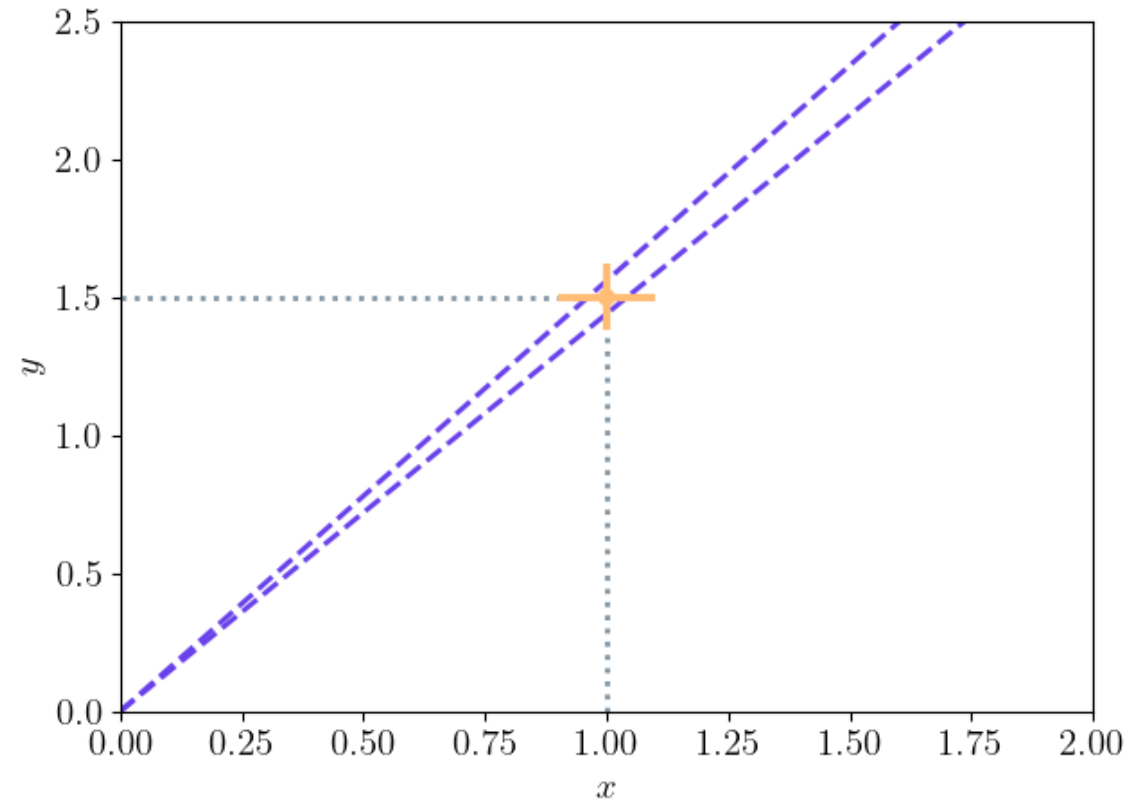
Bayesian hierarchy from latent variables

- Model: $y = mx$
- We measure X, Y , but they both have measurement errors. What is the posterior for the slope m ?
- Applying the first rule (“write down what you want to know”): we want to know $p(m|X, Y)$
- There are two unknown (“latent”) variables in the problem: the true values x, y
- Full joint pdf of the problem:

$$p(m, x, y, X, Y)$$

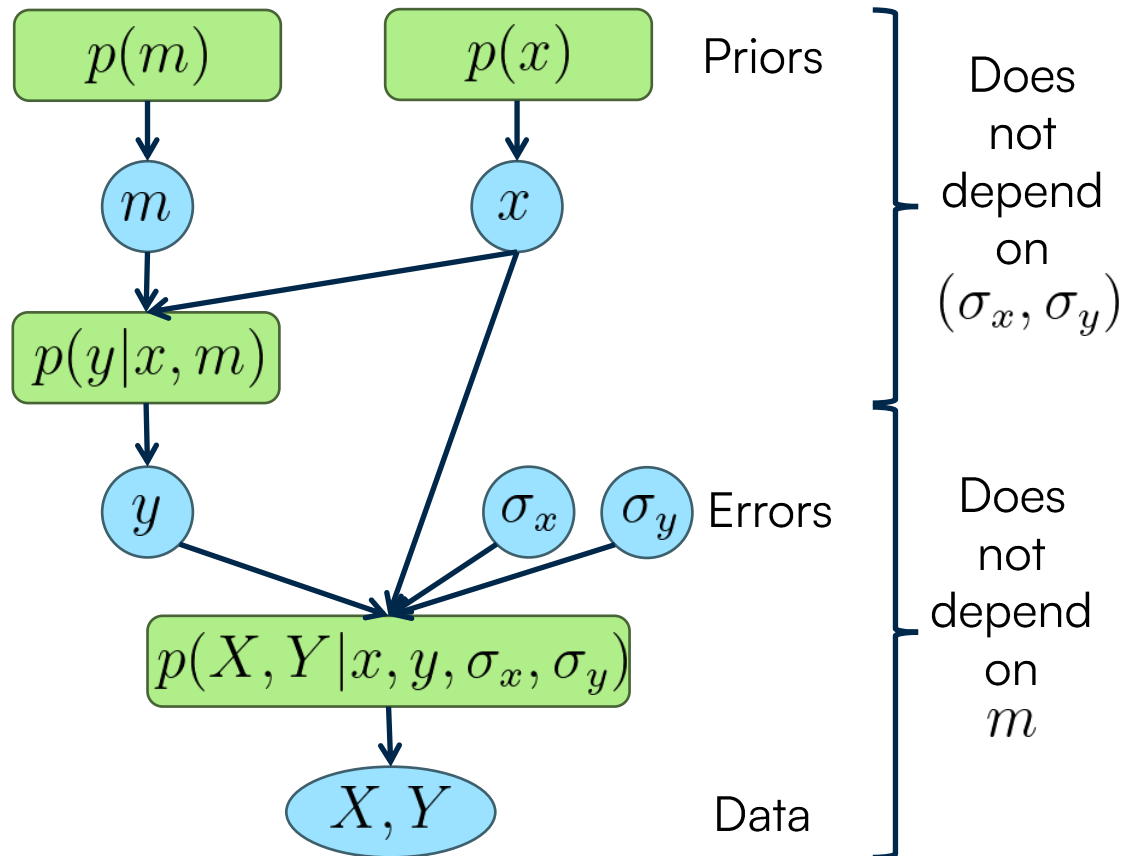
- Joint pdf of the target and observed variables:

$$p(m, X, Y) = \int p(m, x, y, X, Y) dx dy$$



Building the statistical model

- We construct a forward (generative) model of the data graphically:



- Apply Bayes' theorem:

$$p(m|X, Y) \propto p(X, Y|m)p(m)$$

- Introduce the latent variables and marginalise:

$$p(m|X, Y) \propto \iint p(X, Y, x, y|m)p(m) dx dy$$

- Expand first probability with the product rule:

$$p(m|X, Y) \propto \iint p(X, Y|x, y, m)p(x, y|m)p(m) dx dy$$

- Expand second probability with the product rule:

$$p(m|X, Y) \propto \iint p(X, Y|x, y, m)p(y|x, m)p(x|m)p(m) dx dy$$

- Simplify conditional dependencies:

$$p(X, Y|x, y, m) = p(X, Y|x, y)$$

$$p(x|m) = p(x)$$

- Apply physical relation: $p(y|x, m) = \delta_D(y - mx)$

- Integrate to get the final result:

$$p(m|X, Y) \propto \int p(X, Y|x, mx)p(x)p(m) dx$$

Inferring the slope

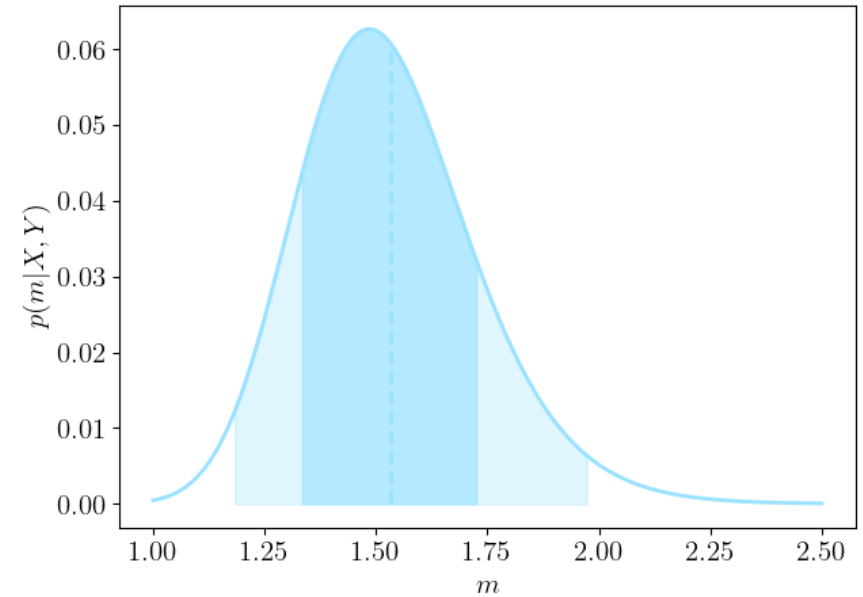
$$p(m|X, Y) \propto \int p(X, Y|x, mx)p(x)p(m) dx$$

- If the error distribution is Gaussian with zero mean, and if we take uniform priors on x and m :

$$p(m|X, Y) \propto \int_{-\infty}^{+\infty} e^{-\frac{1}{2} \frac{(X-x)^2}{\sigma_x^2}} e^{-\frac{1}{2} \frac{(Y-mx)^2}{\sigma_y^2}} dx$$

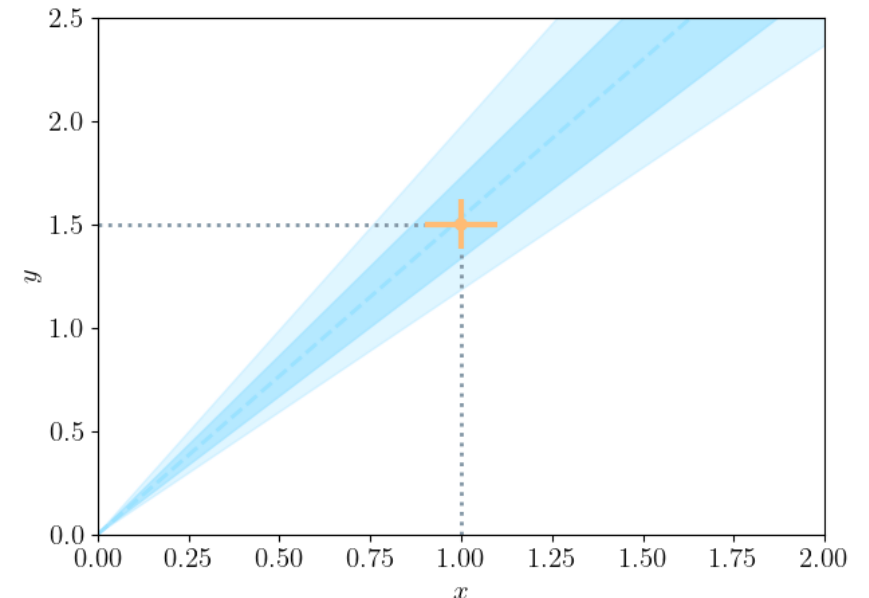
- Completing the square and integrating gives the marginal posterior for m :

$$p(m|X, Y) \propto \frac{\sigma_x \sigma_y}{\sqrt{\sigma_y^2 + m^2 \sigma_x^2}} \exp \left[-\frac{1}{2} \frac{(Y - mX)^2}{\sigma_y^2 + m^2 \sigma_x^2} \right]$$



$$X = 1.0, Y = 1.5$$

$$\sigma_x = 0.10, \sigma_y = 0.12$$



Inferring the full model and sampling

- The joint posterior for (x, m) is:

$$p(x, m|X, Y) \propto p(X, Y|x, m)p(x)p(m) \\ \propto e^{-\frac{1}{2}\frac{(X-x)^2}{\sigma_x^2}} e^{-\frac{1}{2}\frac{(Y-mx)^2}{\sigma_y^2}}$$

- At fixed x :

$$p(m|X, Y, x) \propto \exp \left[-\frac{1}{2} \frac{x^2(m - \frac{Y}{x})^2}{\sigma_y^2} \right]$$

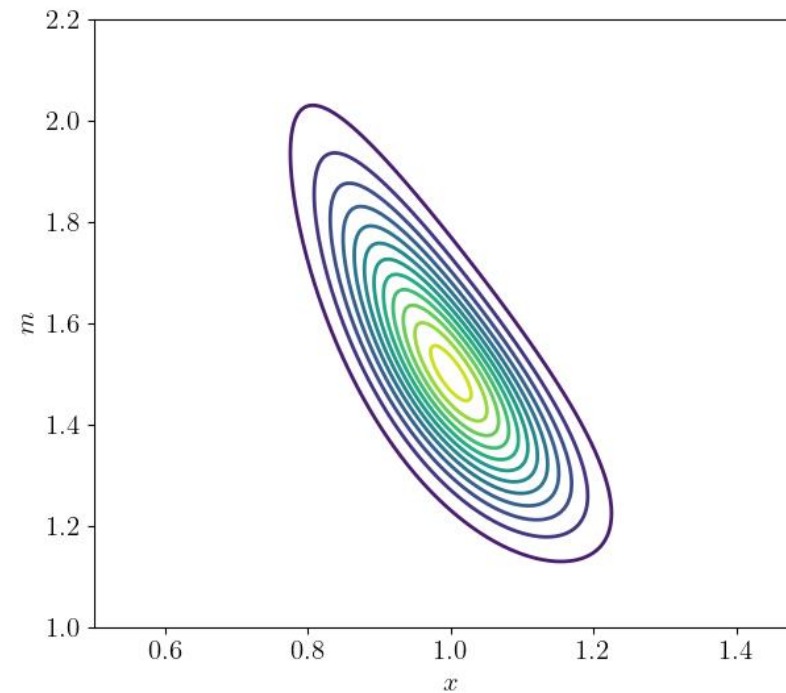
i.e. $p(m|X, Y, x) = \mathcal{G} \left(\frac{Y}{x}, \frac{\sigma_y^2}{x^2} \right)$

- At fixed m (combining the exponents and completing the square):

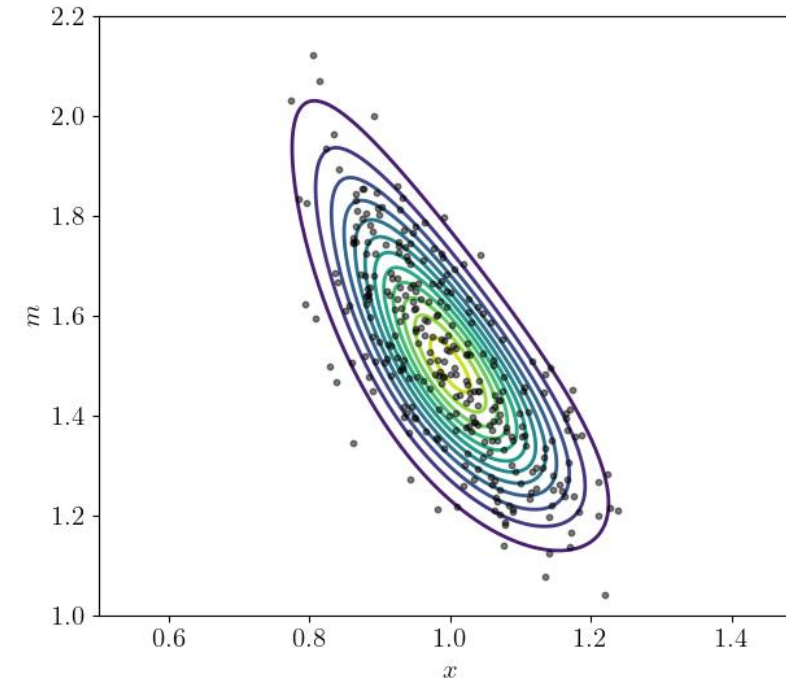
$$p(x|X, Y, m) = \mathcal{G} \left(\frac{\sigma_y^2 X + m\sigma_x^2 Y}{\sigma_y^2 + m^2\sigma_x^2}, \frac{\sigma_y^2\sigma_x^2}{\sigma_y^2 + m^2\sigma_x^2} \right)$$

- We can therefore use Gibbs sampling to draw samples from the joint posterior:

- $m \leftarrow p(m|X, Y, x)$
- $x \leftarrow p(x|X, Y, m)$



$$X = 1.0, Y = 1.5 \\ \sigma_x = 0.10, \sigma_y = 0.12$$



Bayesian hierarchical models and generalised linear regression

- At the heart of the method lies the fundamental problem of (generalised) [linear regression](#), in the presence of measurement errors on both the dependent and the independent variable and intrinsic scatter in the relationship.
- This is a general problem in any field dealing with objects with an intrinsic variability.

- Model to be fitted:

$$y = mx + b$$

- Statistical model:

$$x_i \sim p(x|R_x) = \mathcal{G}(\mu_x, R_x) \quad \text{Population distribution}$$

$$y_i|x_i \sim \mathcal{G}(mx_i + b, R_y) \quad \text{Intrinsic variability}$$

$$X_i, Y_i|x_i, y_i \sim \mathcal{G}([x_i, y_i], C) \quad \text{Measurement error}$$

$$\text{usually } C = \begin{pmatrix} \sigma_x^2 & 0 \\ 0 & \sigma_y^2 \end{pmatrix}$$



BAYESIAN HIERARCHICAL MODELS

Bayesian hierarchical models for adapting the prior

- Simple Bayesian inference:

$$p(\theta|d) \propto p(d|\theta) \overset{\text{prior}}{p(\theta)}$$

- Inference with an adaptive prior depending on a latent variable:

$$p(\theta|d) \propto p(d|\theta) \overset{\text{prior}}{p(\theta|\eta)} \overset{\text{hyperprior}}{p(\eta)}$$

- ... or a full hierarchy of hyperpriors.

Examples:

- Cosmic microwave background:

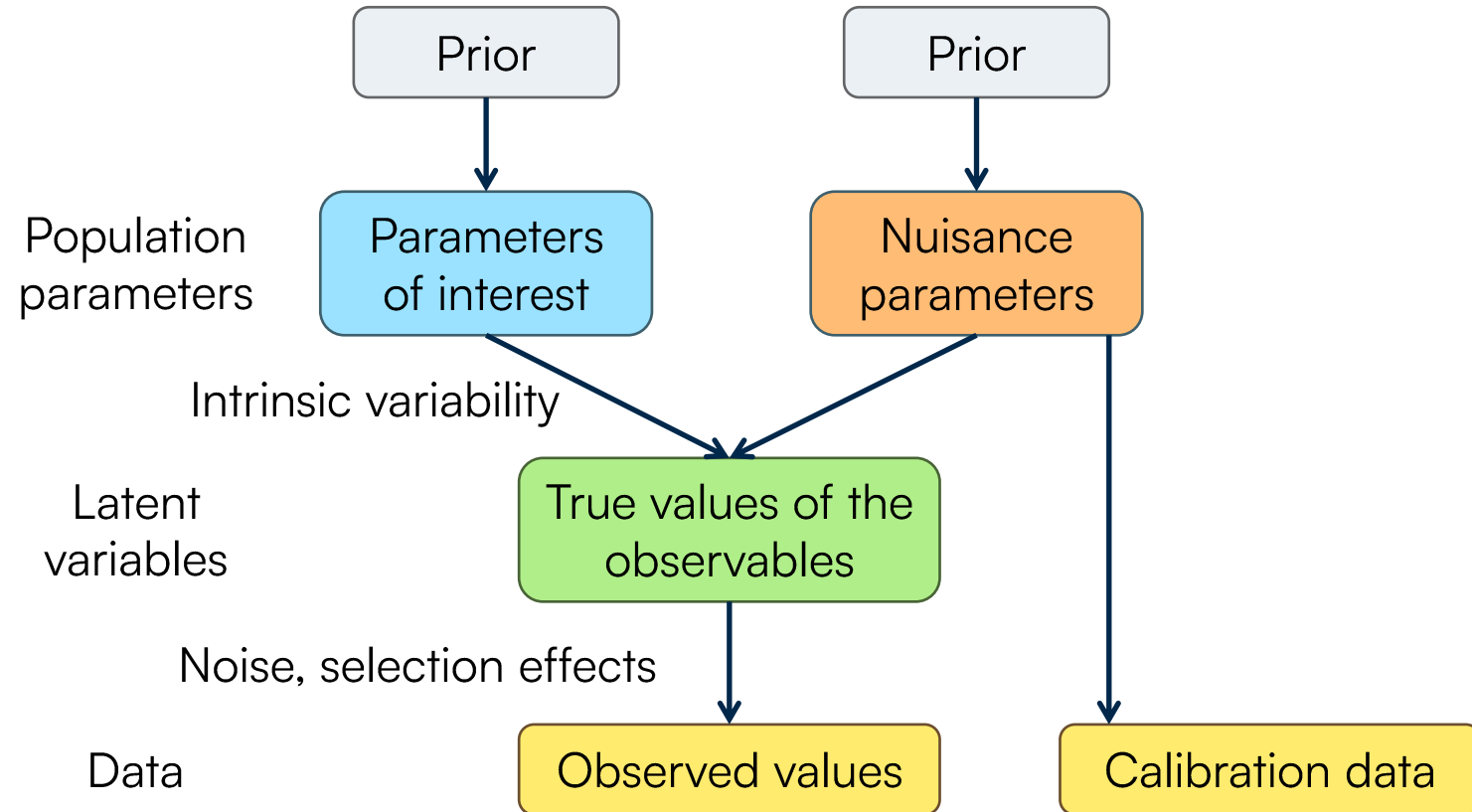
$$p(\{\Omega\}, \{C_\ell\}, s|d) \propto p(d|s) p(s|\{C_\ell\}) p(\{C_\ell\}|\{\Omega\}) p(\{\Omega\})$$

- Large-scale structure:

$$p(\{\Omega\}, \phi, g|d) \propto p(d|g) p(g|\phi) p(\phi|\{\Omega\}) p(\{\Omega\})$$

Many sources of variability

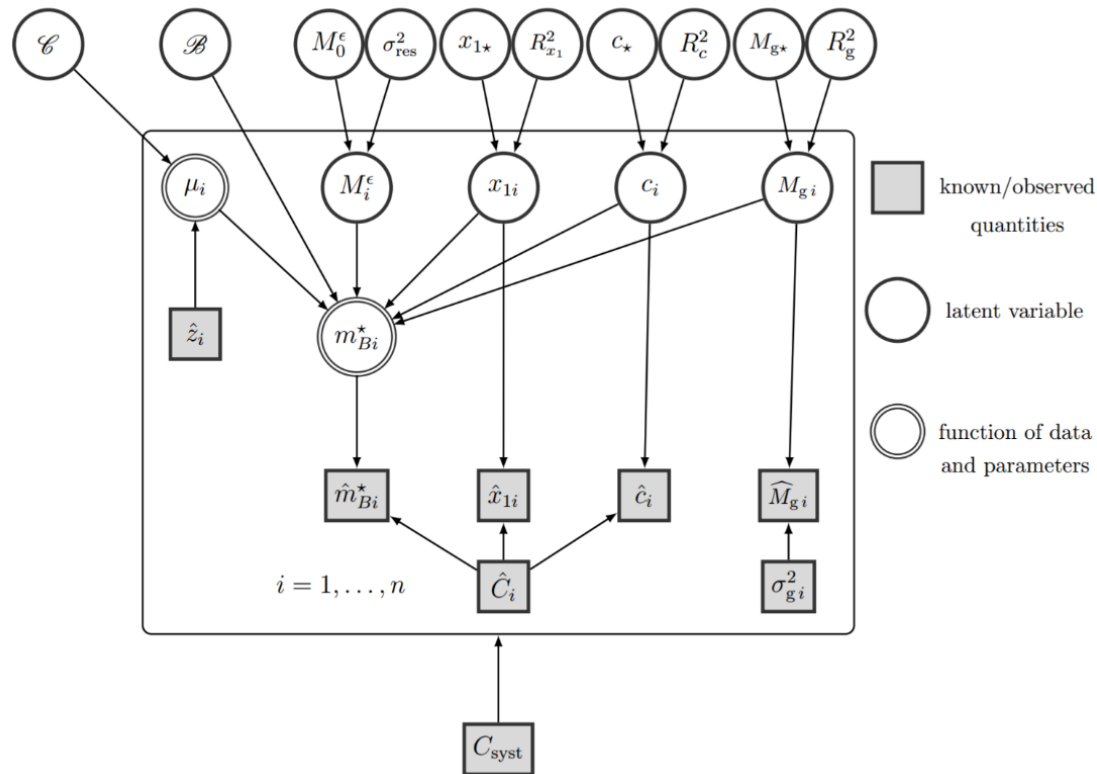
- You pick a lightbulb, and measure its brightness. What is it?
- There are many reasons why the value might vary:
 - It's picked from a box of bulbs of different brightnesses
 - The manufacturing process is imprecise
 - Measurement error
- *Any or all* of these may apply (and you may not know which).



Bayesian hierarchical models for complex problems

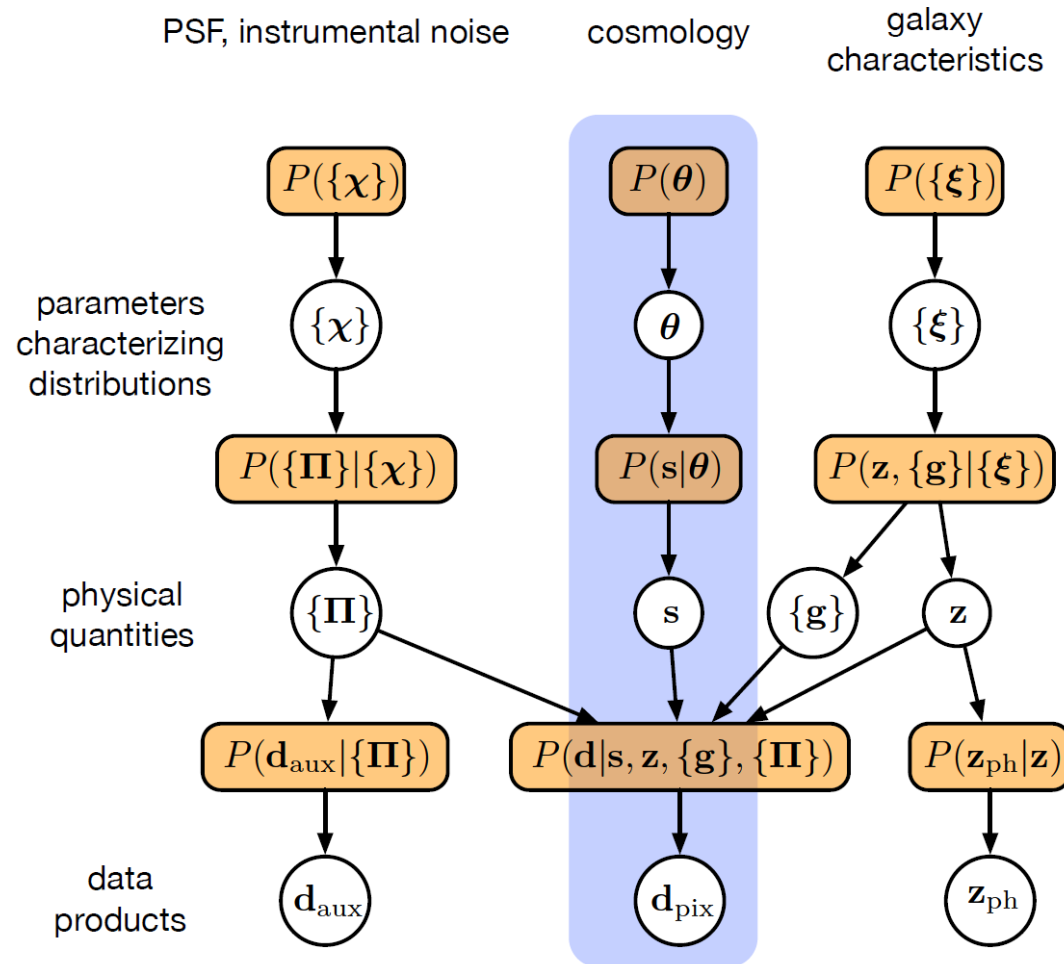
- How can we make sure all the errors are propagated correctly to the posterior?
- We split the inference problem into steps, where the full model is made up of **a series of sub-models**. The aim is to build a complete model of the data. It is a principled way to include systematic errors, selection effects, etc. (everything, really).
- The Bayesian Hierarchical Model (BHM) links the sub-models together, correctly **propagating uncertainties** in each sub-model from one level to the next.
- It also exposes what you need to know or assume. At each step you will (ideally) know the **conditional distributions**.
- All of the steps give rise to “**latent variables**”: parameters in sub-models, usually not of interest.
 - A particular sort of “nuisance parameter”
 - They still need to be accounted for (and marginalised over)
 - e.g., contribution of systematic error to a measurement
 - e.g., galactic dust flux in a noisy CMB pixel
 - These might very well be “signal” for a different purpose.
- Therefore, BHMs may have **very many parameters**.
- When you are using **sampling** for inference, **marginalisation** is “trivial”: just ignore those variables in the output.
 - Realistically, of course, there is usually some information there!

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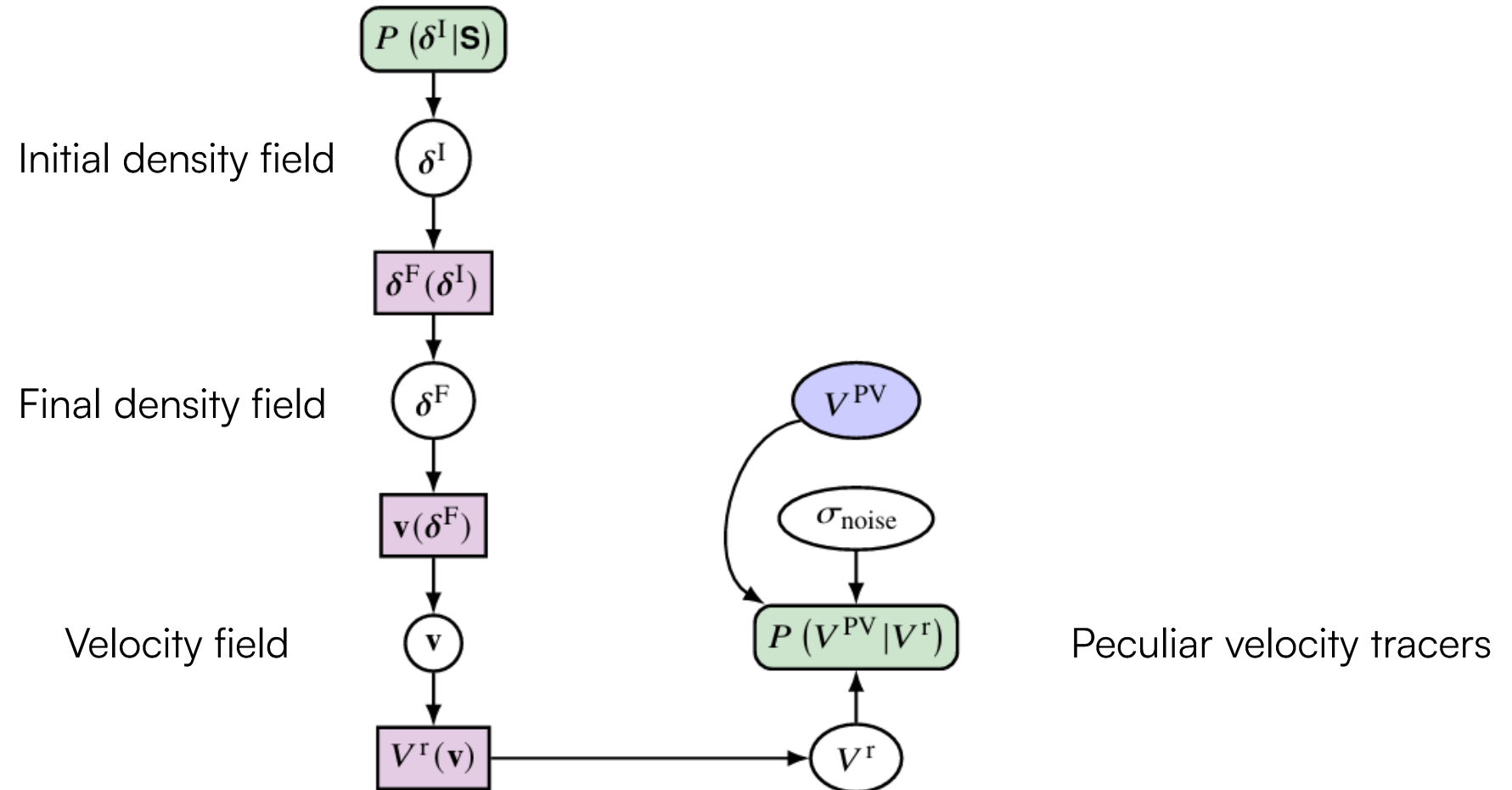


Parameter	Notation and Prior Distribution
Cosmological parameters	
Matter density parameter	$\Omega_m \sim \text{UNIFORM}(0, 2)$
Cosmological constant density parameter	$\Omega_\Lambda \sim \text{UNIFORM}(0, 2)$
Dark energy EOS	$w \sim \text{UNIFORM}(-2, 0)$
Hubble parameter	$H_0/\text{km/s/Mpc} = 67.3$
Covariates	
Coefficient of stretch covariate	$\alpha \sim \text{UNIFORM}(0, 1)$
Coefficient of color covariate	β (or β_0) $\sim \text{UNIFORM}(0, 4)$
Coefficient of interaction of color correction and z	$\beta_1 \sim \text{UNIFORM}(-4, 4)$
Jump in coefficient of color covariate	$\Delta\beta \sim \text{UNIFORM}(-1.5, 1.5)$
Redshift of jump in color covariate	$z_t \sim \text{UNIFORM}(0.2, 1)$
Coefficient of host galaxy mass covariate	$\gamma \sim \text{UNIFORM}(-4, 4)$
Population-level distributions	
Mean of absolute magnitude	$M_0^e \sim \mathcal{N}(-19.3, 2^2)$
Residual scatter after corrections	$\sigma_{\text{res}}^2 \sim \text{INV GAMMA}(0.003, 0.003)$
Mean of absolute magnitude, low galaxy mass	$M_0^{\text{lo}} \sim \mathcal{N}(-19.3, 2^2)$
SD of absolute magnitude, low galaxy mass	$\sigma_{\text{res}}^{\text{lo}^2} \sim \text{INV GAMMA}(0.003, 0.003)$
Mean of absolute magnitude, high galaxy mass	$M_0^{\text{hi}} \sim \mathcal{N}(-19.3, 2^2)$
SD of absolute magnitude, high galaxy mass	$\sigma_{\text{res}}^{\text{hi}^2} \sim \text{INV GAMMA}(0.003, 0.003)$
Mean of stretch	$x_{1\star} \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 10^2)$
SD of stretch	$R_{x_1} \sim \text{LOG UNIFORM}(-5, 2)$
Mean of color	$c_\star \sim \mathcal{N}(0, 1^2)$
SD of color	$R_c \sim \text{LOG UNIFORM}(-5, 2)$
Mean of host galaxy mass	$M_{\text{g}\star} \sim \mathcal{N}(10, 100^2)$
SD of host galaxy mass	$R_g \sim \text{LOG UNIFORM}(-5, 2)$

BHM example: weak lensing



BHM example: large-scale structure inference from peculiar velocity tracers

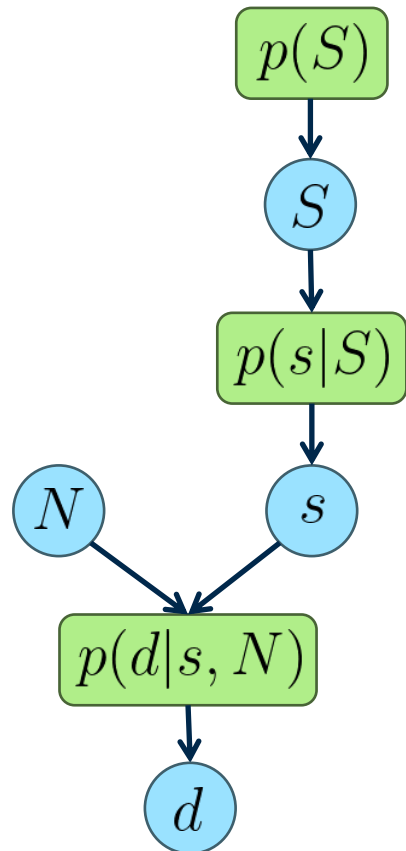


Back to Wiener filtering

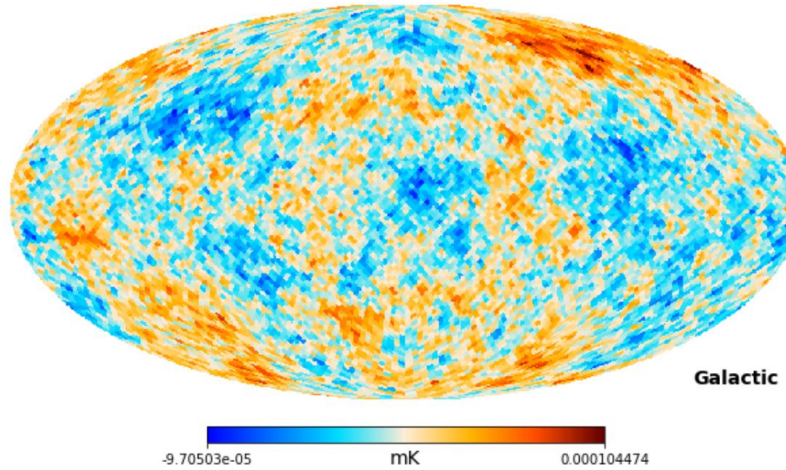
$$\mu_{s|d} = \mu_s + S(S + N)^{-1}(d - \mu_d)$$

$$C_{s|d} = S - S(S + N)^{-1}S$$

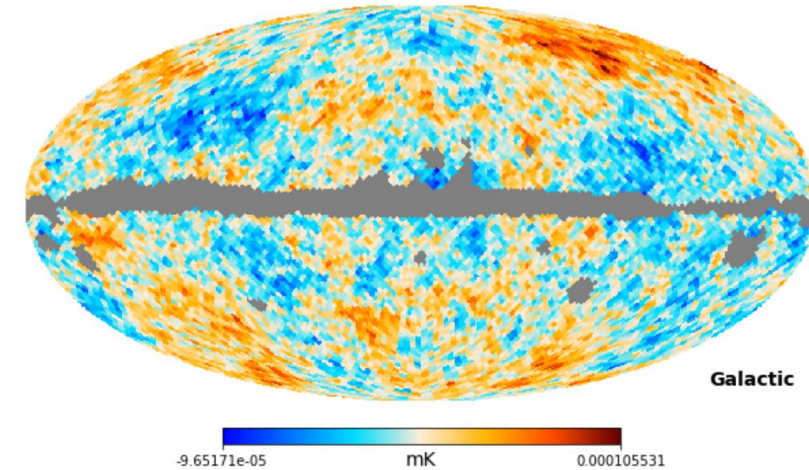
- As a BHM:



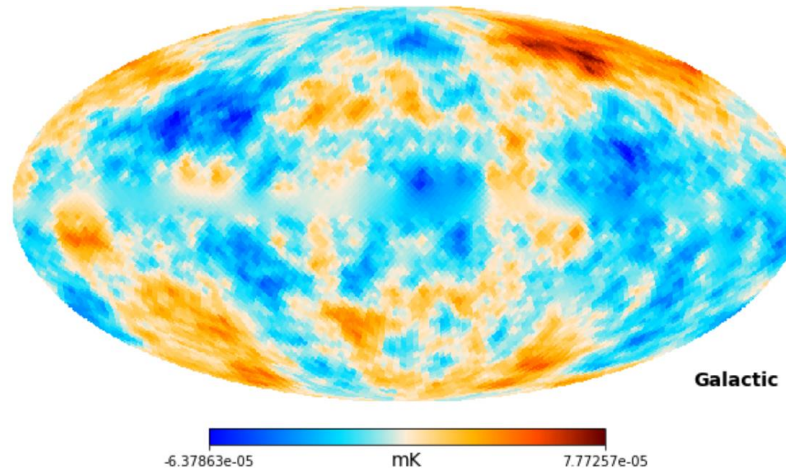
True signal



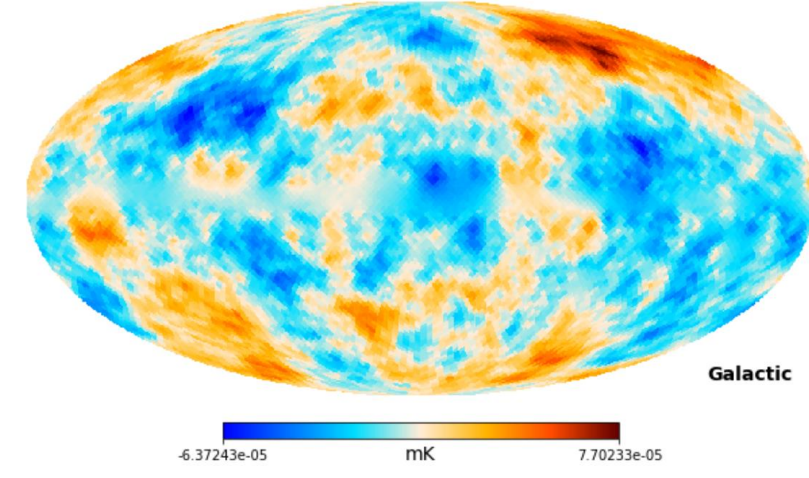
Simulated data d



Wiener filtered data (posterior mean)



One simulated signal

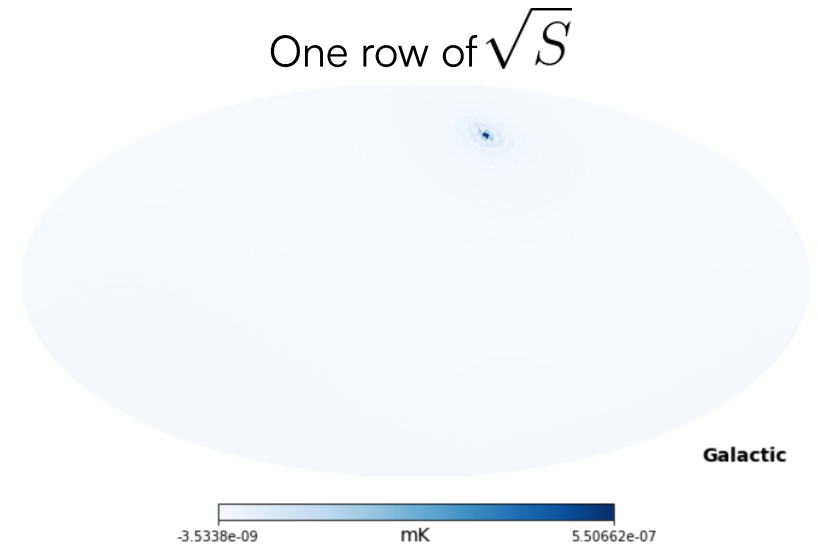
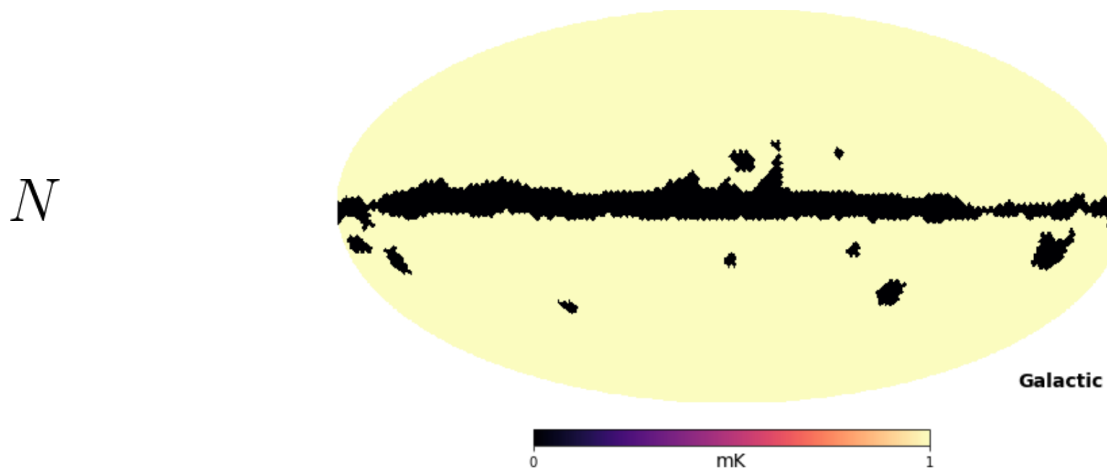
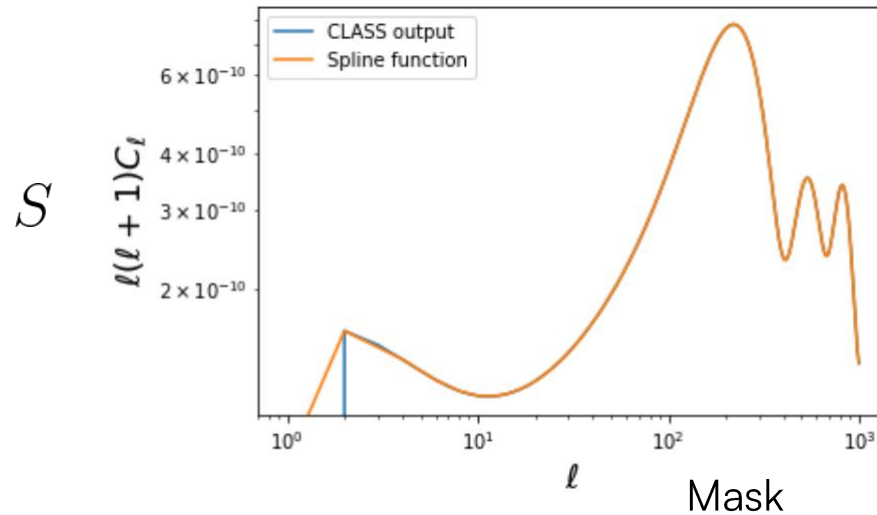


Back to Wiener filtering

$$\mu_{s|d} = \mu_s + S(S + N)^{-1}(d - \mu_d)$$

$$C_{s|d} = S - S(S + N)^{-1}S$$

- Problem: computing/representing $(S + N)^{-1}$ is difficult because S is sparse in harmonic/ Fourier space and N is sparse in configuration/real space.

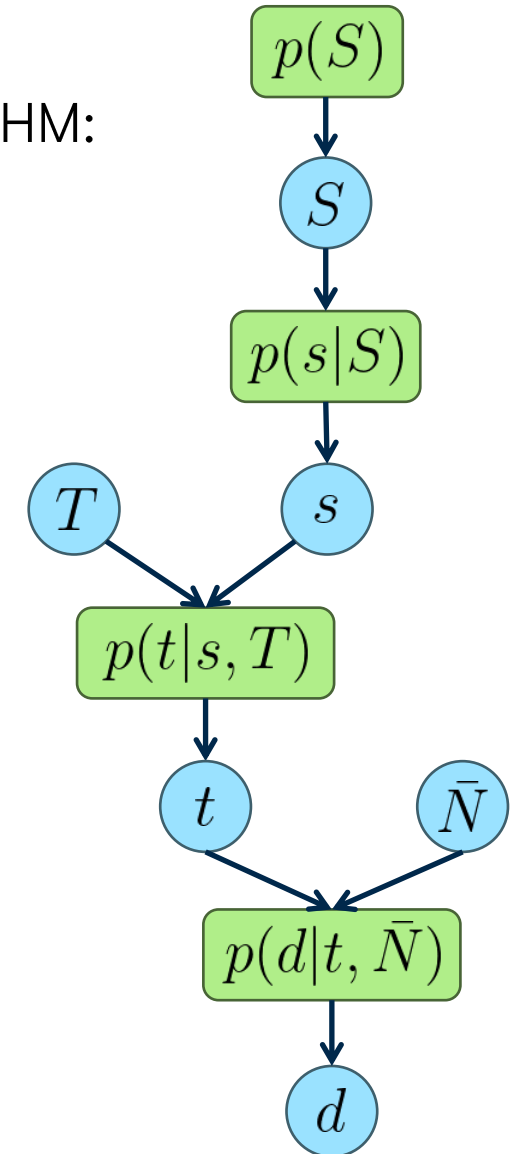


Messenger field and multivariate Wiener filtering

$$\mu_{s|d} = S(S + N)^{-1}d \quad (\text{assuming } \mu_s = \mu_d = 0)$$

$$C_{s|d} = S - S(S + N)^{-1}S$$

- As a BHM:



- Messenger field algorithm:

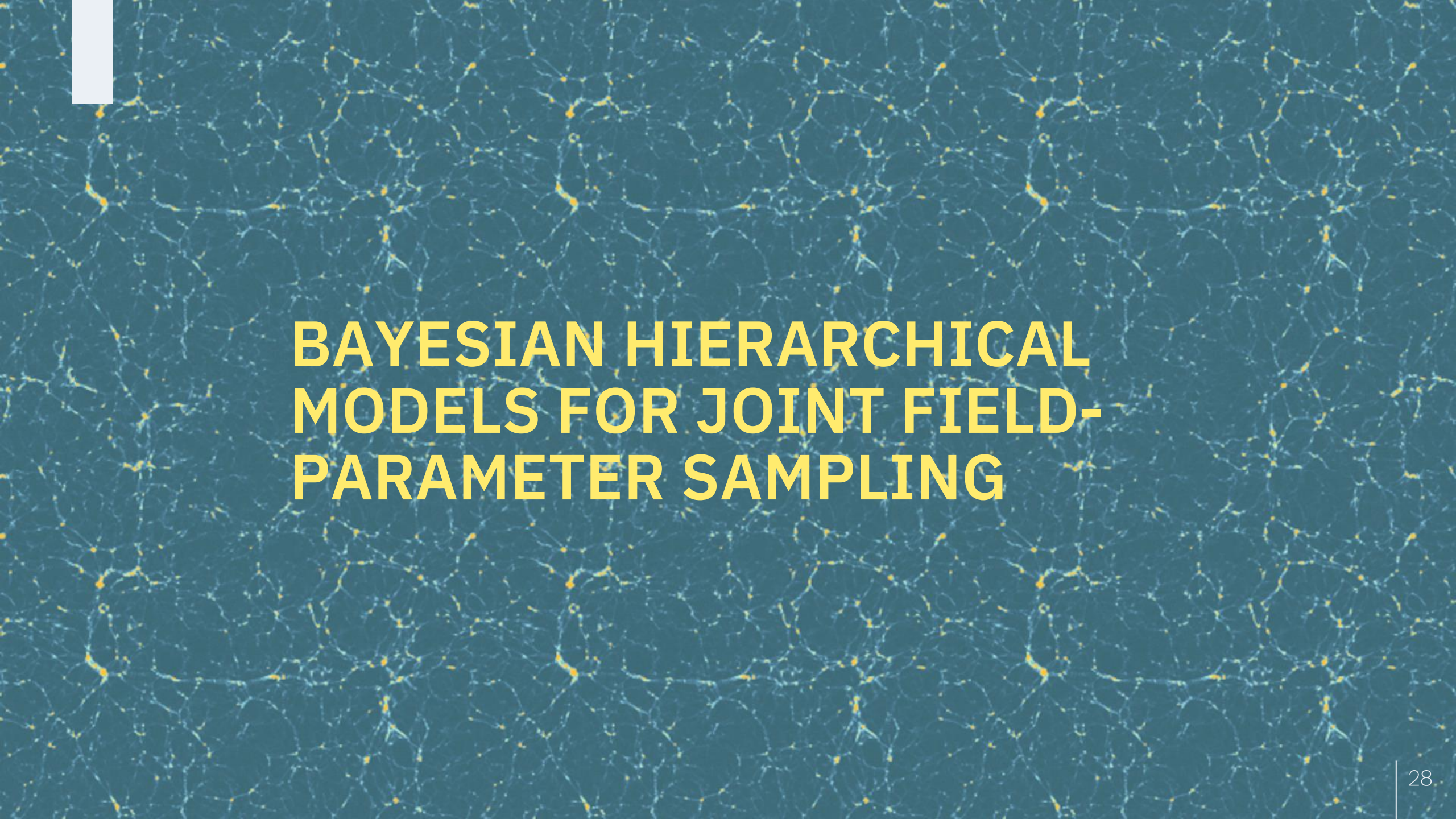
- Introduce an auxiliary Gaussian random field t with covariance matrix $T \equiv \tau I$.
- T (isotropic noise covariance matrix) is diagonal in any basis (harmonic/Fourier and configuration/real).
- Introduce $\bar{N} \equiv N - T$ (residual noise covariance matrix).

- Sampling:

- Goal: obtain samples of $p(s, t|d)$ via Gibbs sampling. We need the conditionals $p(s|d, t)$ and $p(t|s, d)$.
- $p(s|d, t) = p(s|t)$ is Gaussian with
 mean: $\mu_{s|t} = (S^{-1} + T^{-1})^{-1}T^{-1}t$ (assuming $\mu_s = \mu_t = 0$)
 covariance: $C_{s|t} = (S^{-1} + T^{-1})^{-1}$
- $p(t|s, d) \propto p(t|s)p(d|t)$ is Gaussian with
 mean: $\mu_{t|s,d} = (T^{-1} + \bar{N}^{-1})^{-1}T^{-1}s + (T^{-1} + \bar{N}^{-1})^{-1}\bar{N}^{-1}d$
 covariance: $C_{t|s,d} = (T^{-1} + \bar{N}^{-1})^{-1}$

Bayesian hierarchical models: summary

- BHMs are a way to build a statistical model of data by splitting the problem into steps.
- Decomposing into steps exposes what is needed — typically many **conditional distributions**.
- For complex experiments, this may be the only viable way to build the statistical model of the data.
- The decomposition is usually very natural and logical.
- The model allows the proper **propagation of errors** from one layer to the next, including a proper treatment of systematics.
- One can often use efficient **sampling** algorithms to sample from the posterior — precisely what one wants for a Bayesian statistical analysis.



BAYESIAN HIERARCHICAL MODELS FOR JOINT FIELD- PARAMETER SAMPLING

A Bayesian hierarchical field-level model

Exercise: Joint field-parameter sampling

- Model:

- The **signal** s is a white noise field.
- The **primordial gravitational potential** Φ_L is a Gaussian random field with phases given by s , zero mean and power spectrum

$$P(k) = A_s k^{n_s - 1}$$

(i.e. a diagonal covariance matrix in Fourier space), where A_s and n_s are cosmological parameters.

- The **non-linear gravitational potential** Φ_{NL} follows

$$\Phi_{NL} = \Phi_L + f_{NL} \Phi_L^2$$

where f_{NL} is a parameter.

- The **density contrast** δ follows (in Fourier space)

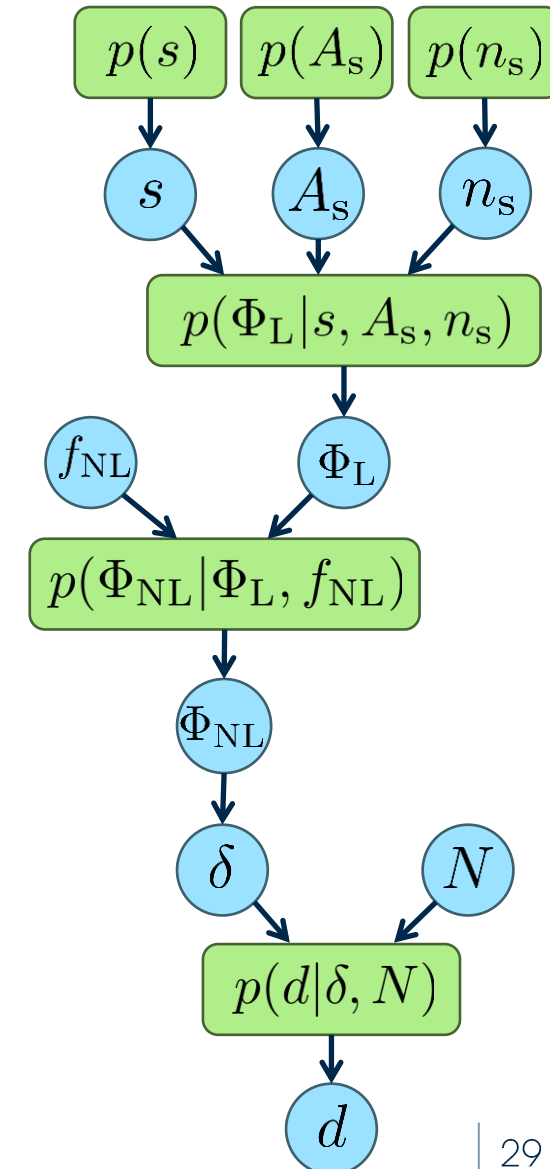
$$\delta(k) = D_1 T(k) \Phi_{NL}(k)$$

where D_1 is a fixed (arbitrary) coefficient and $T(k)$ is a “BBKS” transfer function.

- The noise is Gaussian and additive, to give the observed **data**:

$$d = \delta(s) + n$$

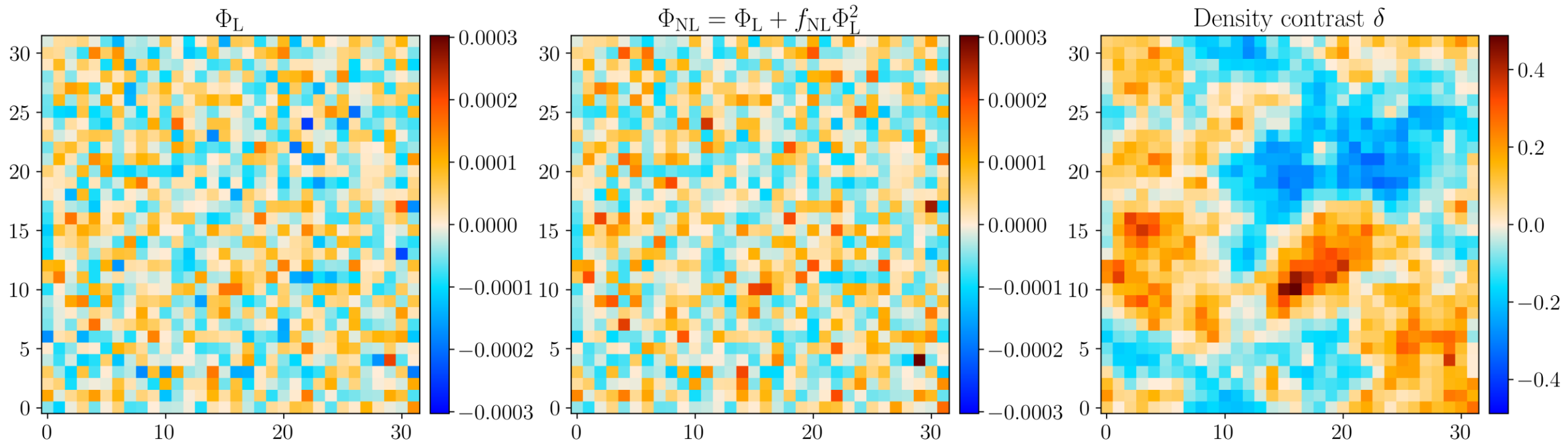
- It is the same model as in the previous lecture, except that $\{A_s, n_s, f_{NL}\}$ are not fixed. We want to sample them jointly with the signal s .
- As natural byproducts, we will get samples of all of the latent fields of the problem: $\{\Phi_L, \Phi_{NL}, \delta\}$
- The full model is conveniently represented as a Bayesian hierarchical model.



A Bayesian hierarchical field-level model

- Generate ground truth cosmological parameters, signal and latent fields

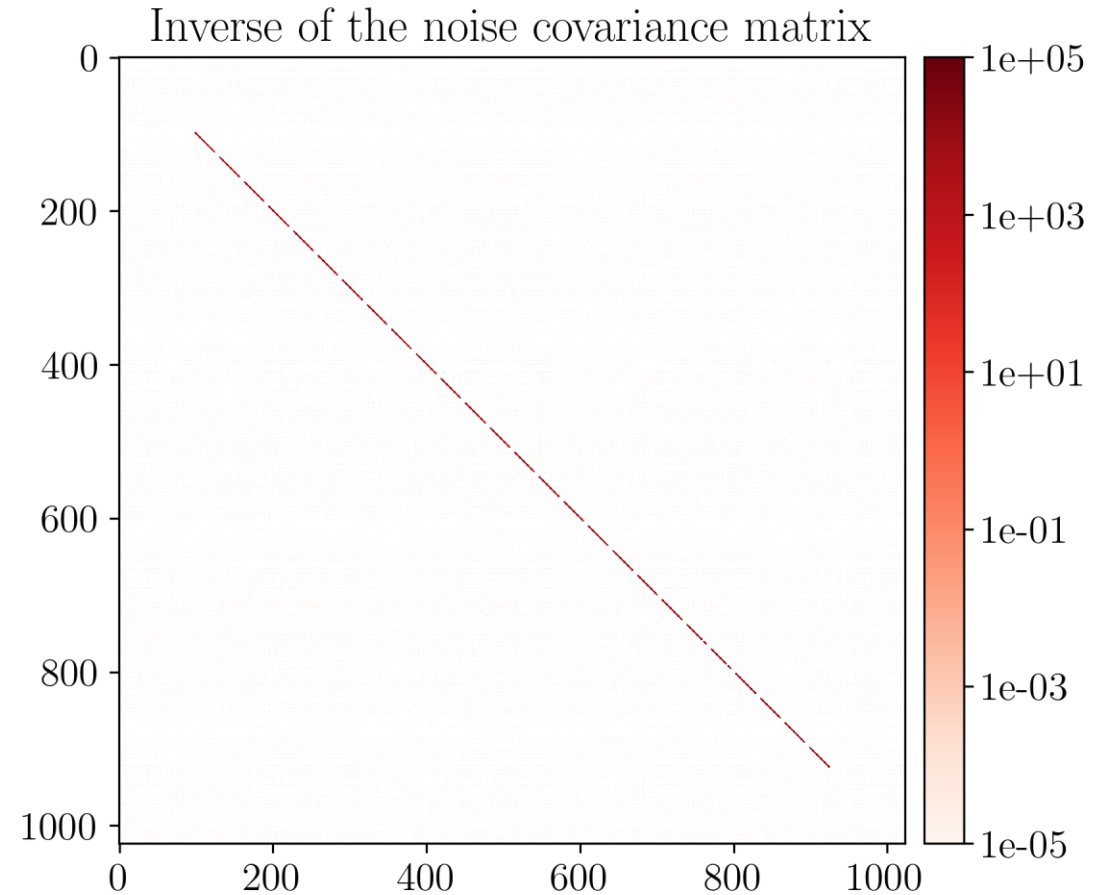
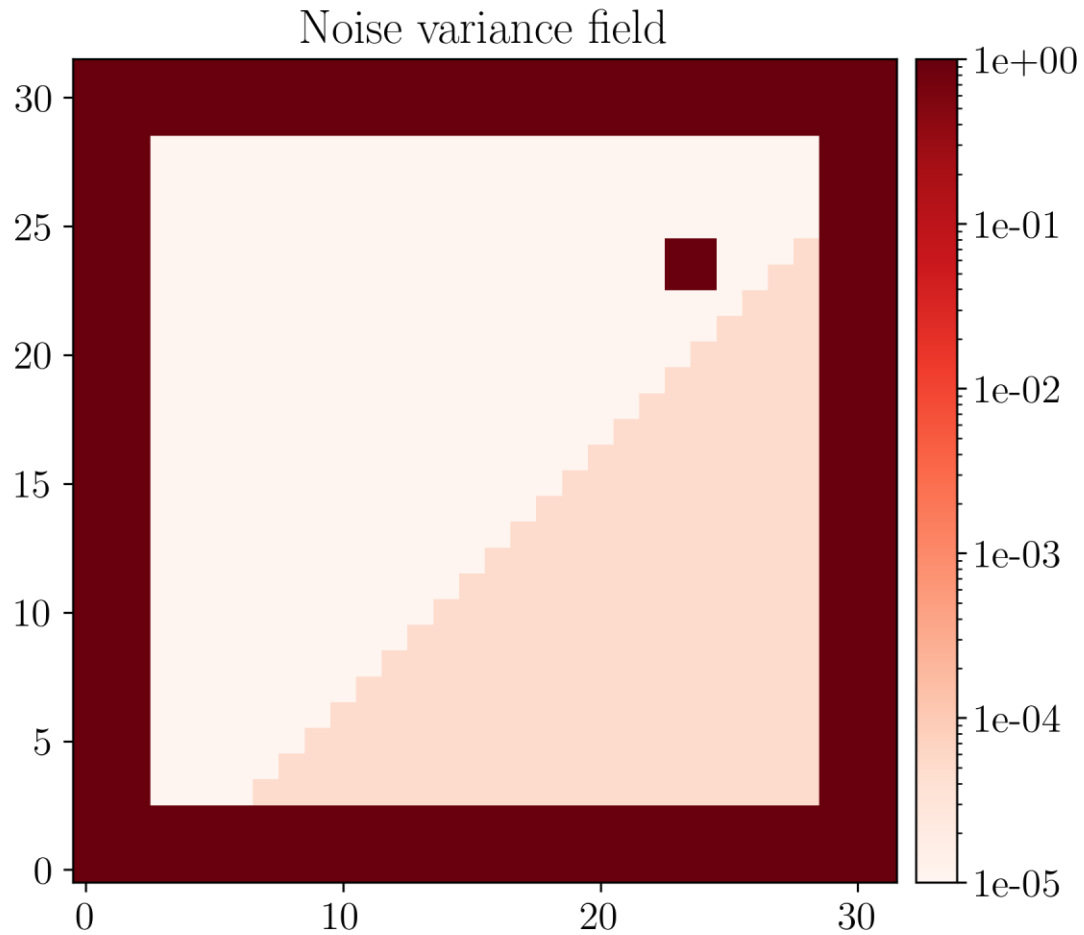
$$A_s = 6 \times 10^{-9} \text{ (arbitrary units)} \quad n_s = 0.96 \quad f_{\text{NL}} = 2000$$



A Bayesian hierarchical field-level model

- Setup Gaussian noise with a covariance matrix as before (diagonal in pixel space)

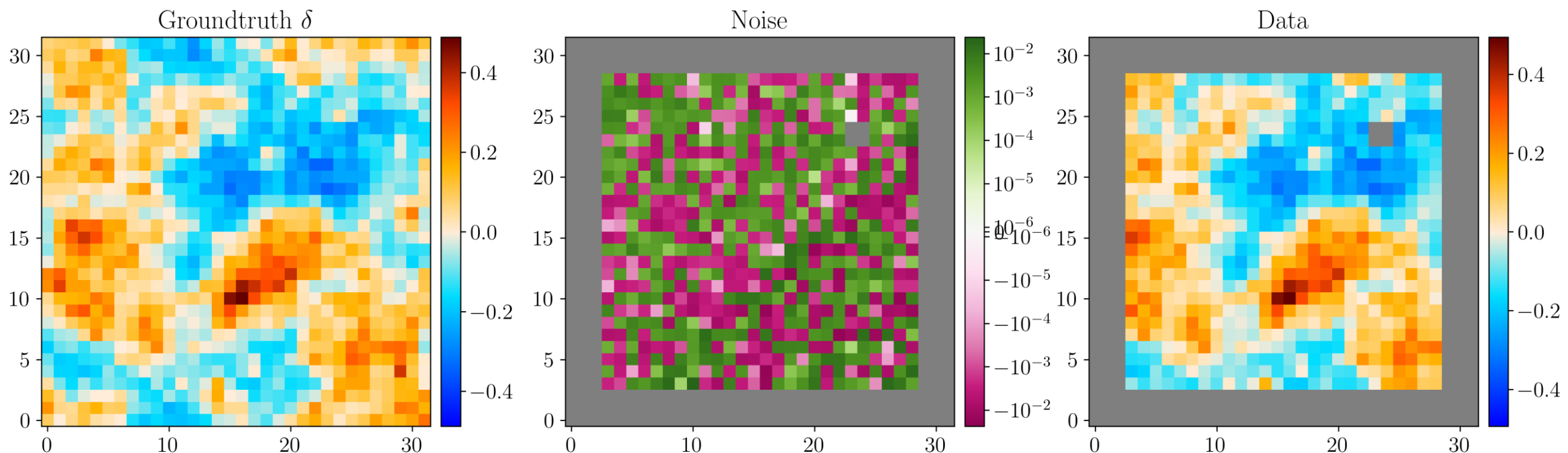
$$N^{-1}$$



A Bayesian hierarchical field-level model

- Generate **mock data**

$$d = \delta(s) + n$$



Gradients of the Bayesian hierarchical field-level model and its posterior

- Define **log-prior**, **log-likelihood** and **log-posterior**: $\theta = \{A_s, n_s, f_{\text{NL}}, s\}$

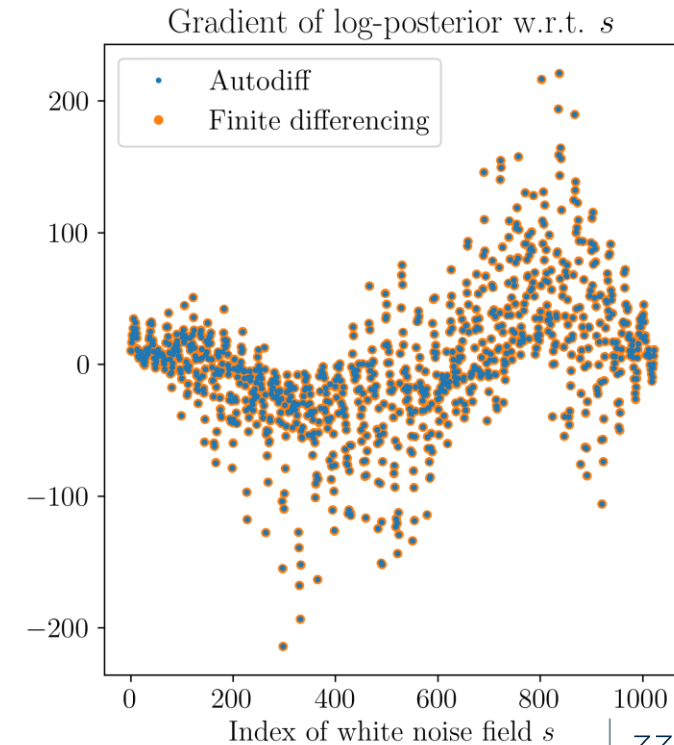
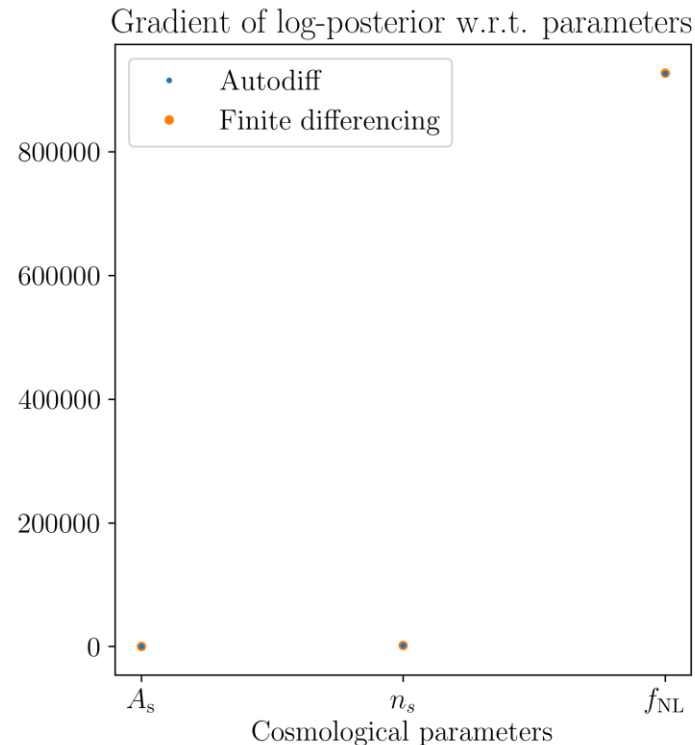
$$\begin{cases} \ln p(A_s) = -\frac{1}{2} \frac{(A_s - \mu_{A_s})^2}{\sigma_{A_s}^2} + \text{const.} \\ \ln p(n_s) = -\frac{1}{2} \frac{(n_s - \mu_{n_s})^2}{\sigma_{n_s}^2} + \text{const.} \\ \ln p(f_{\text{NL}}) = -\frac{1}{2} \frac{(f_{\text{NL}} - \mu_{f_{\text{NL}}})^2}{\sigma_{f_{\text{NL}}}^2} + \text{const.} \\ \ln p(s) = -\frac{1}{2} s^\top s + \text{const.} \end{cases}$$

$$\ln p(\theta) = \ln p(A_s) + \ln p(n_s) + \ln p(f_{\text{NL}}) + \ln p(s)$$

$$\ln p(d|\delta) = -\frac{1}{2} [\delta - d]^\top N^{-1} [\delta - d] + \text{const.}$$

$$\ln p(\theta|d) = \ln p(\theta) + \ln p(d|\theta) + \text{const.}$$

- Compute their **gradients** (analytically, “manual” differentiation, automatic differentiation).
- Checking the **gradient code versus finite differencing** is always a useful sanity test.
- Depending on the sampling strategy, one may not need the gradient w.r.t. cosmological parameters (but the gradients w.r.t. to the field are always needed).

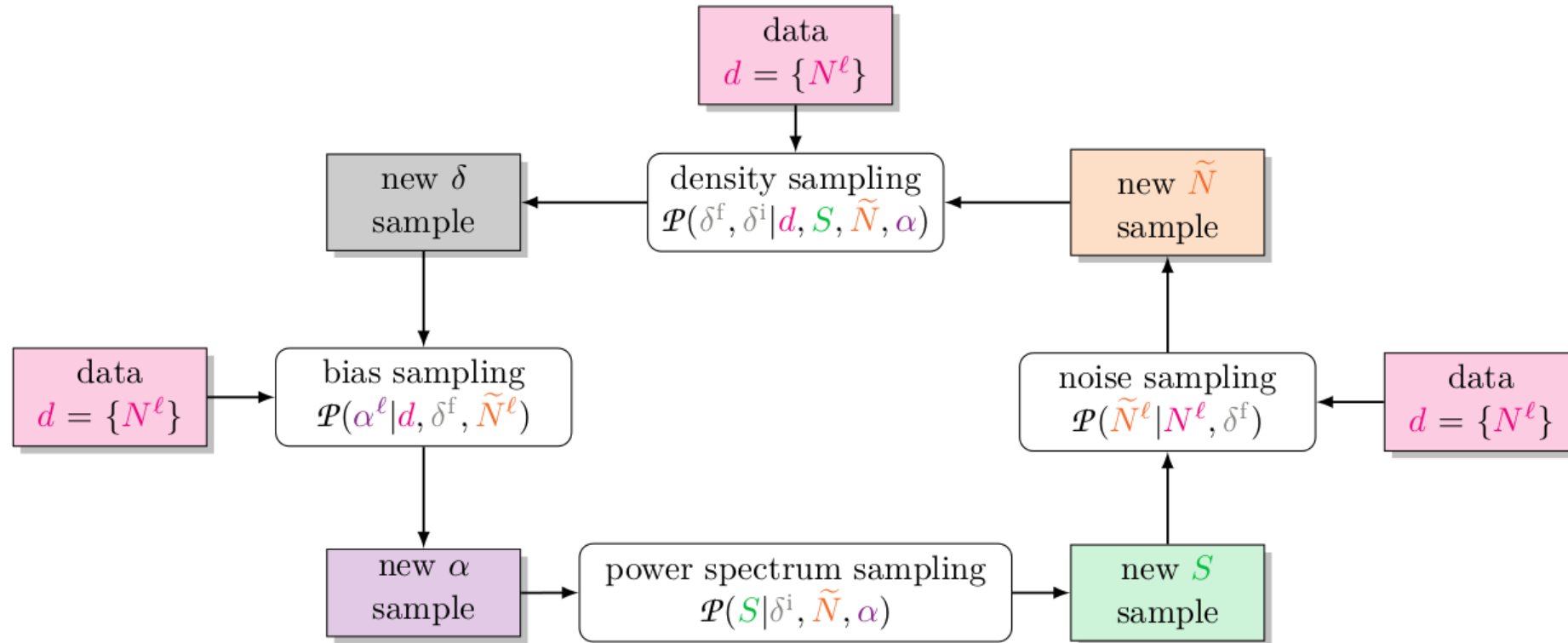


Bayesian hierarchical field-level models: sampling strategy

- Either sample everything together in the [same HMC/NUTS](#) (strategy adopted in the Almanac code)
 - **Pros:** no need to know conditionals, no need to think about different samplers for different parameters.
 - **Cons:** difficult to tune the mass matrix when field and other parameters are of different nature (and therefore have different effects on the data) and may have different scales.
- Either use [Gibbs sampling](#): Hamiltonian-within-Gibbs for the field and some-sampler-within-Gibbs for the cosmological/other parameters (strategy adopted in the BORG code)
 - **Pros:** easy to implement, since we usually know the conditional distributions. We can use e.g. slice sampling for cosmological/other parameters, which is rejection-free.
 - **Cons:** we cannot take diagonal steps in the joint field-parameter space, which can make sampling inefficient.
- Pro tip: work with white noise as the target field parameters, and “[whiten](#)” all other target parameters (rescale and shift them so that they take their values in $[0, 1]$) — particularly if you adopt the first strategy.

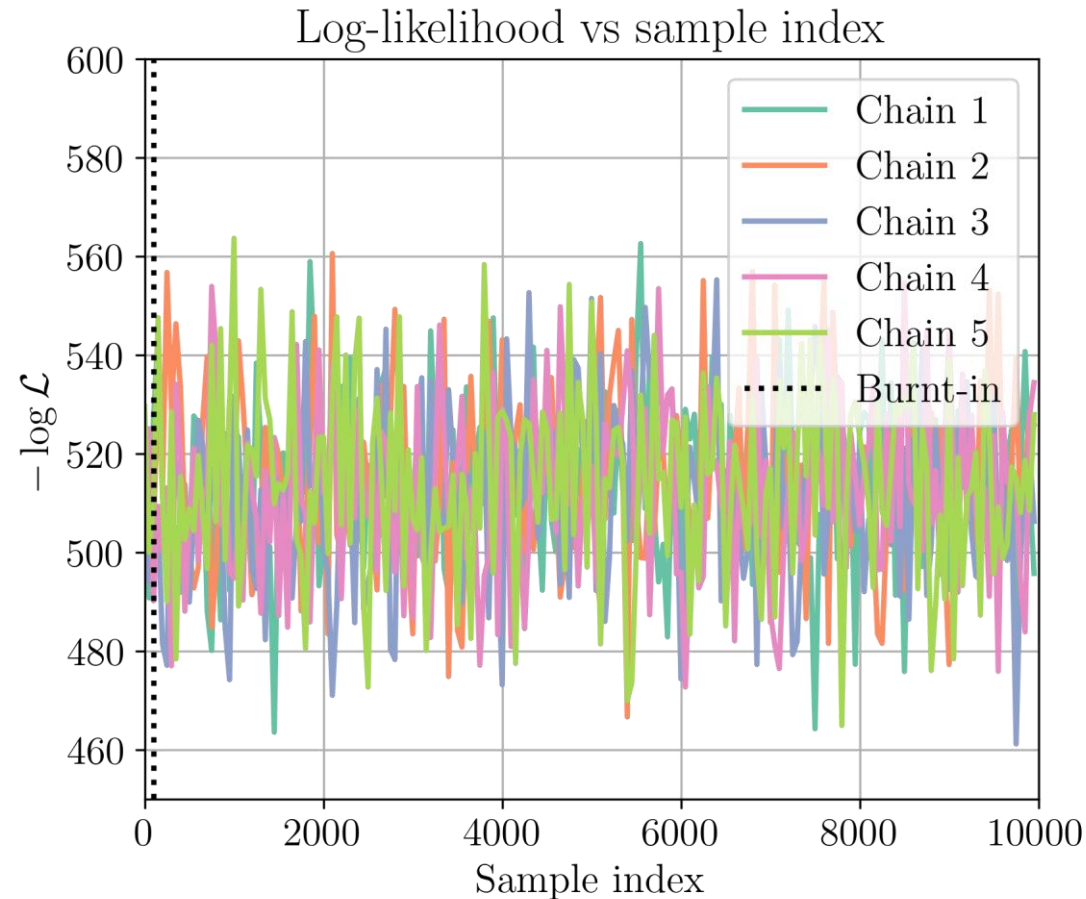
Modular probabilistic programming: example

- **ARES**: Algorithm for Reconstruction and Sampling



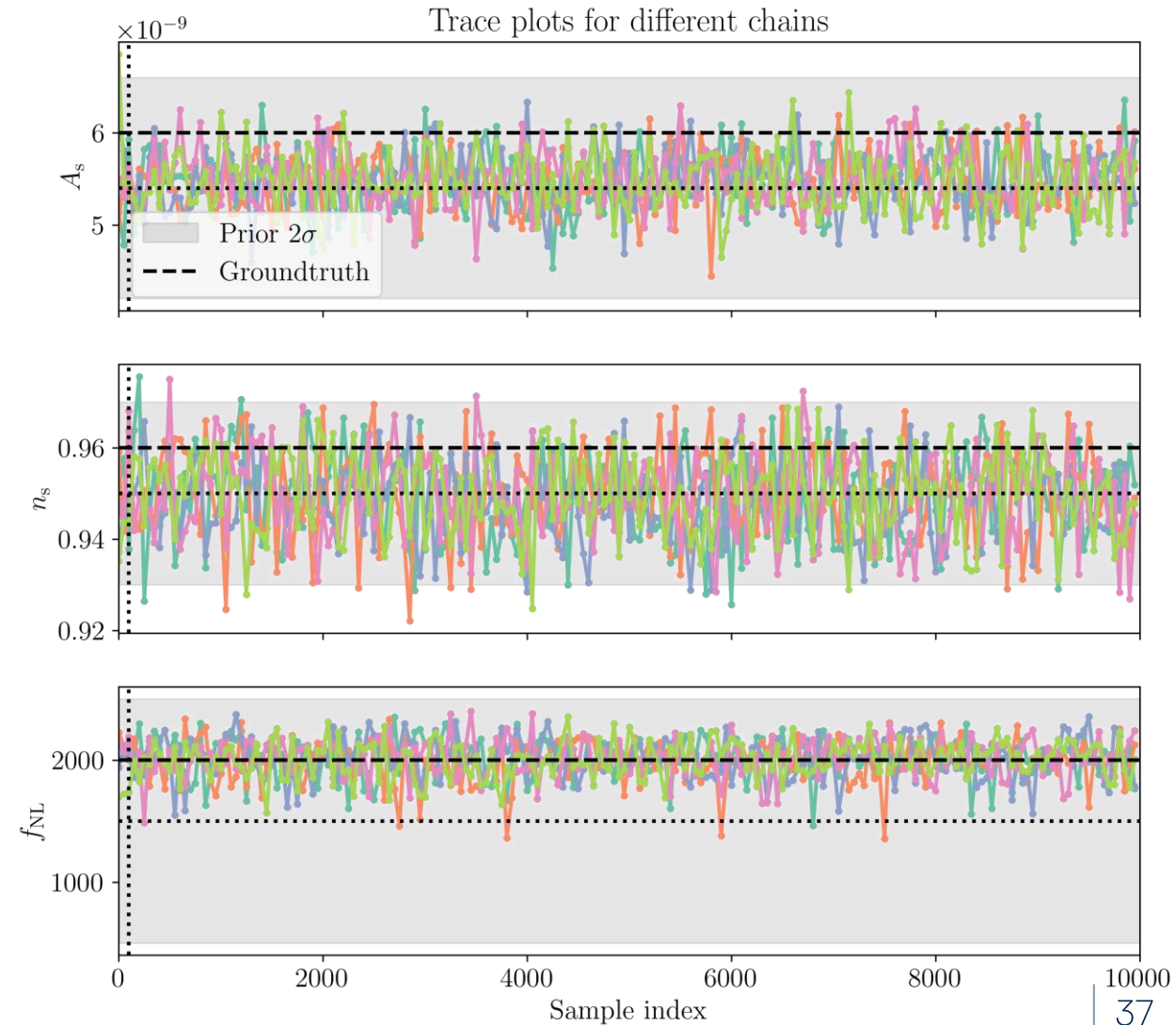
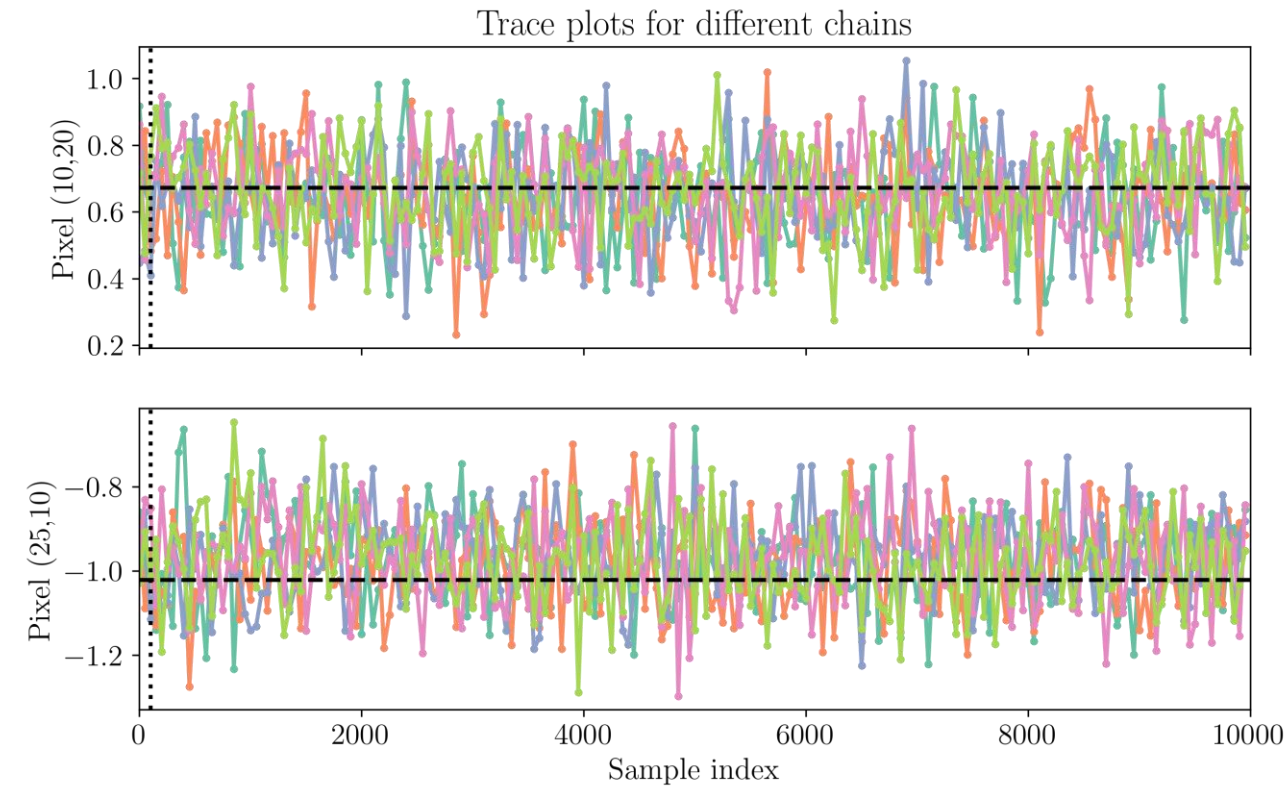
Field-level inference with hierarchical models: sampler tuning and burn-in

- For a well-tuned sampler, the **log-likelihood vs sample index** should oscillate around some value.



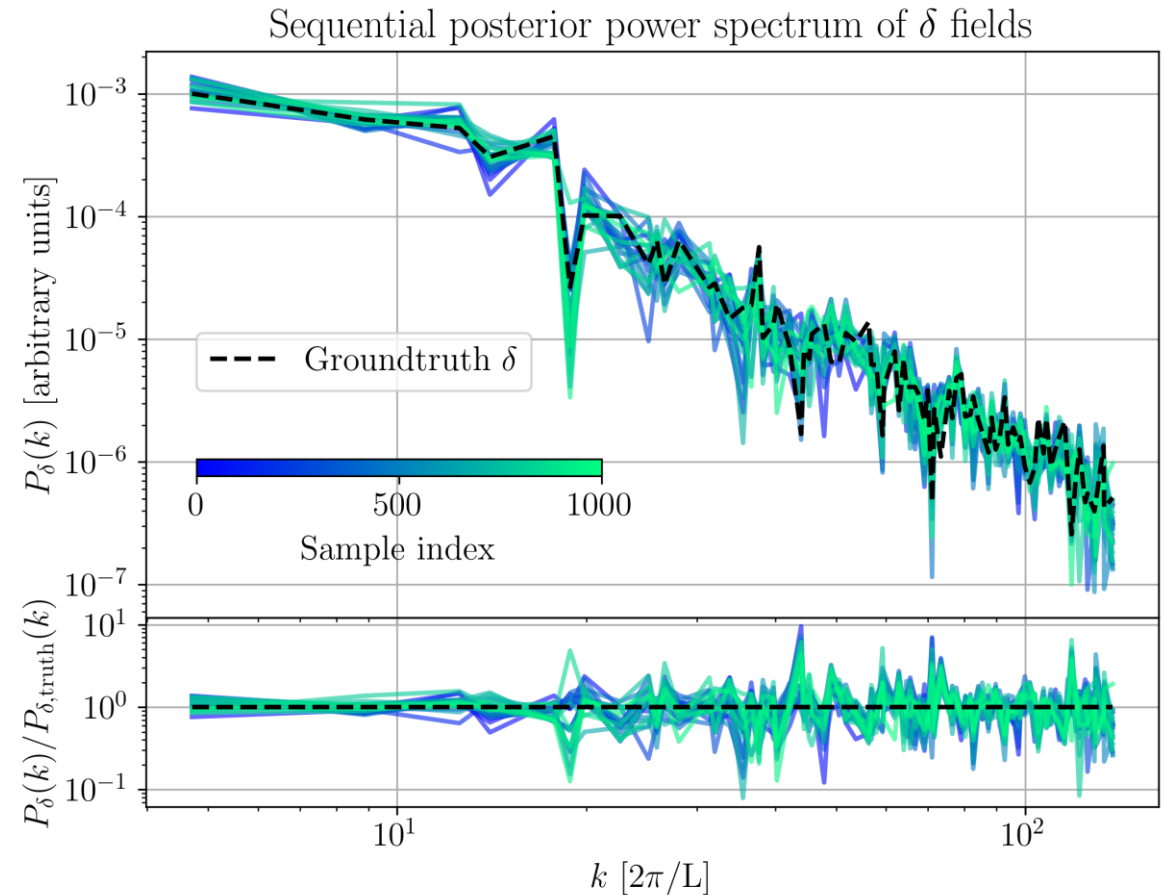
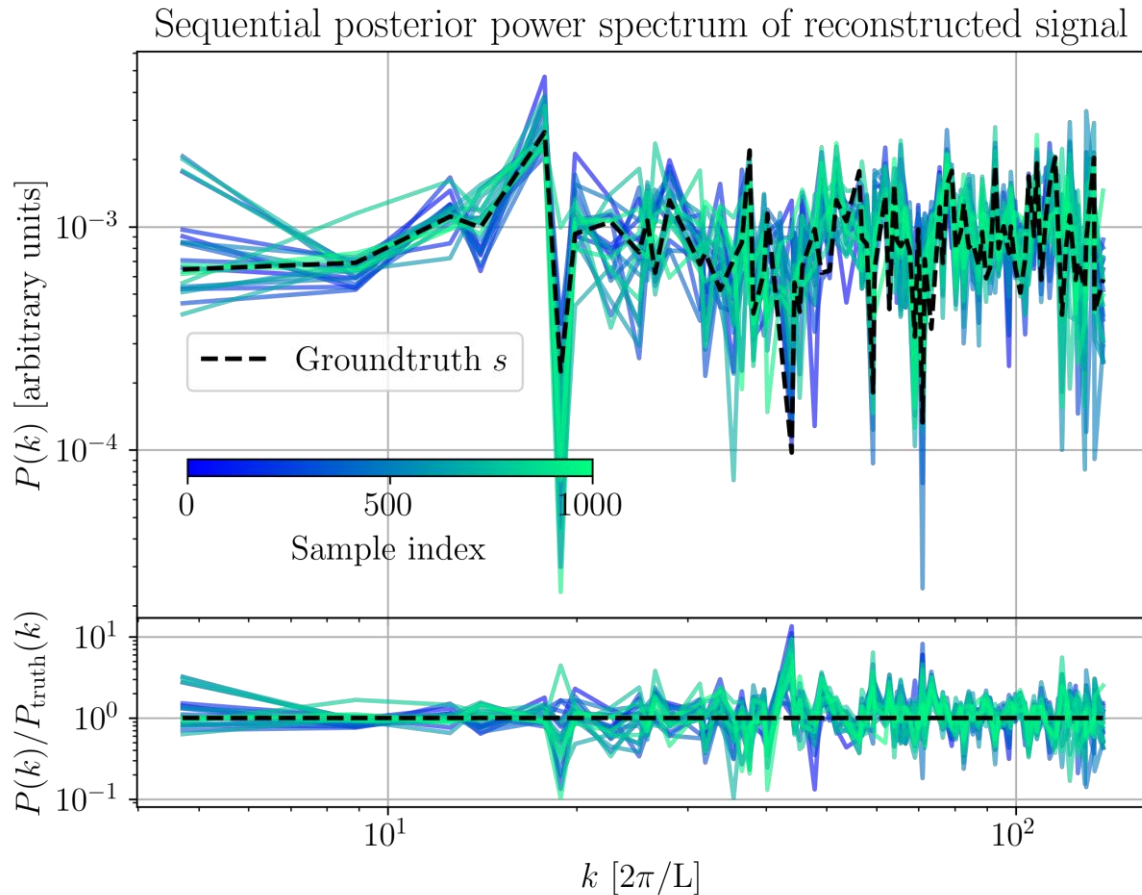
Field-level inference with hierarchical models: sampler tuning and burn-in

- In addition to the trace plot for pixels values, one should check trace plots of cosmological parameters.



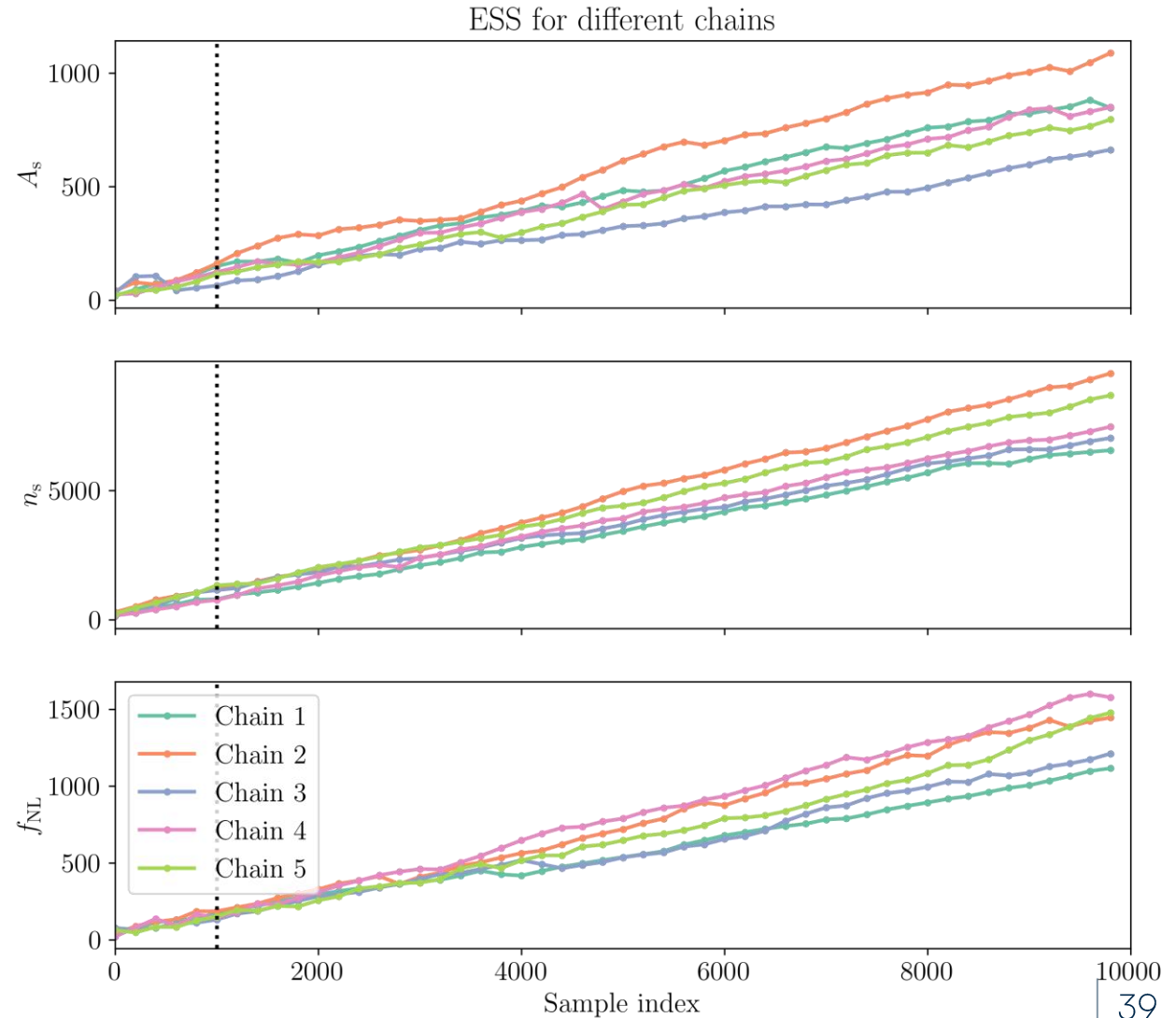
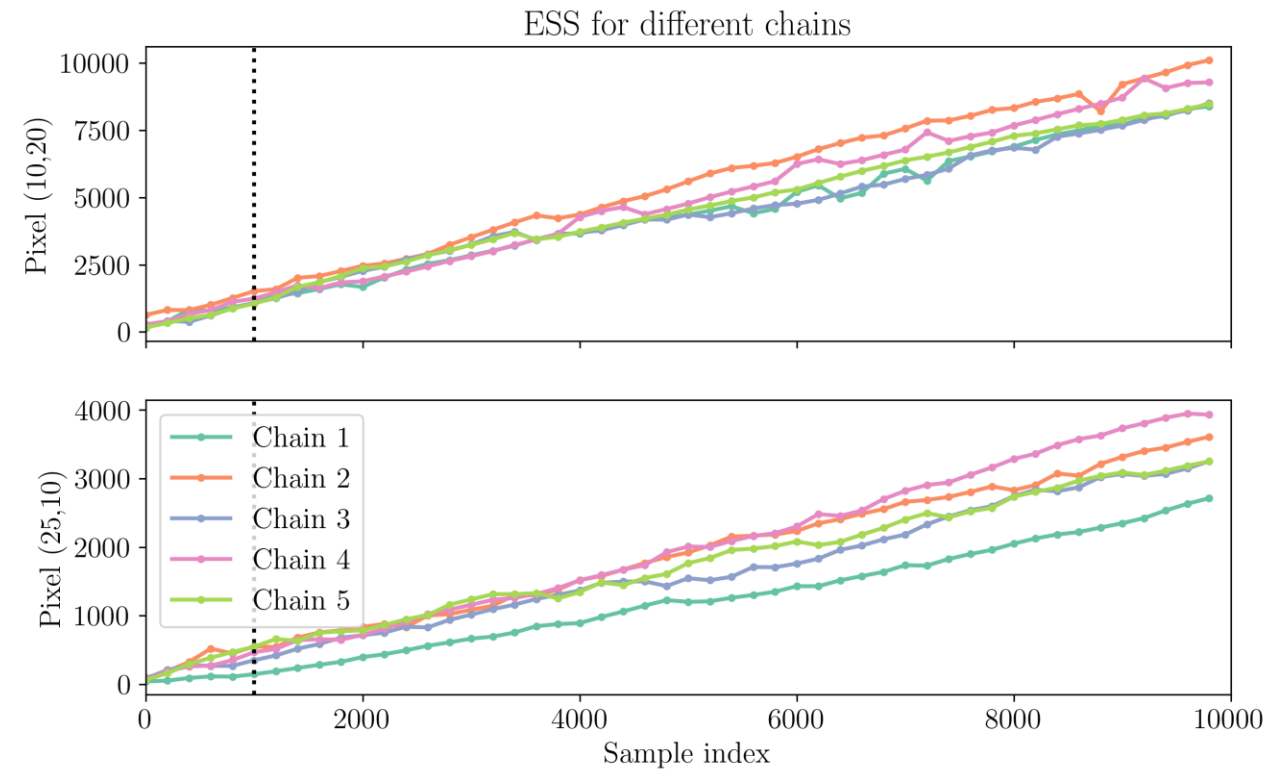
Field-level inference with hierarchical models: sampler tuning and burn-in

- It remains a good idea to start the chain from an over-dispersed state (for the field) and check the sequential posterior power spectrum of samples.



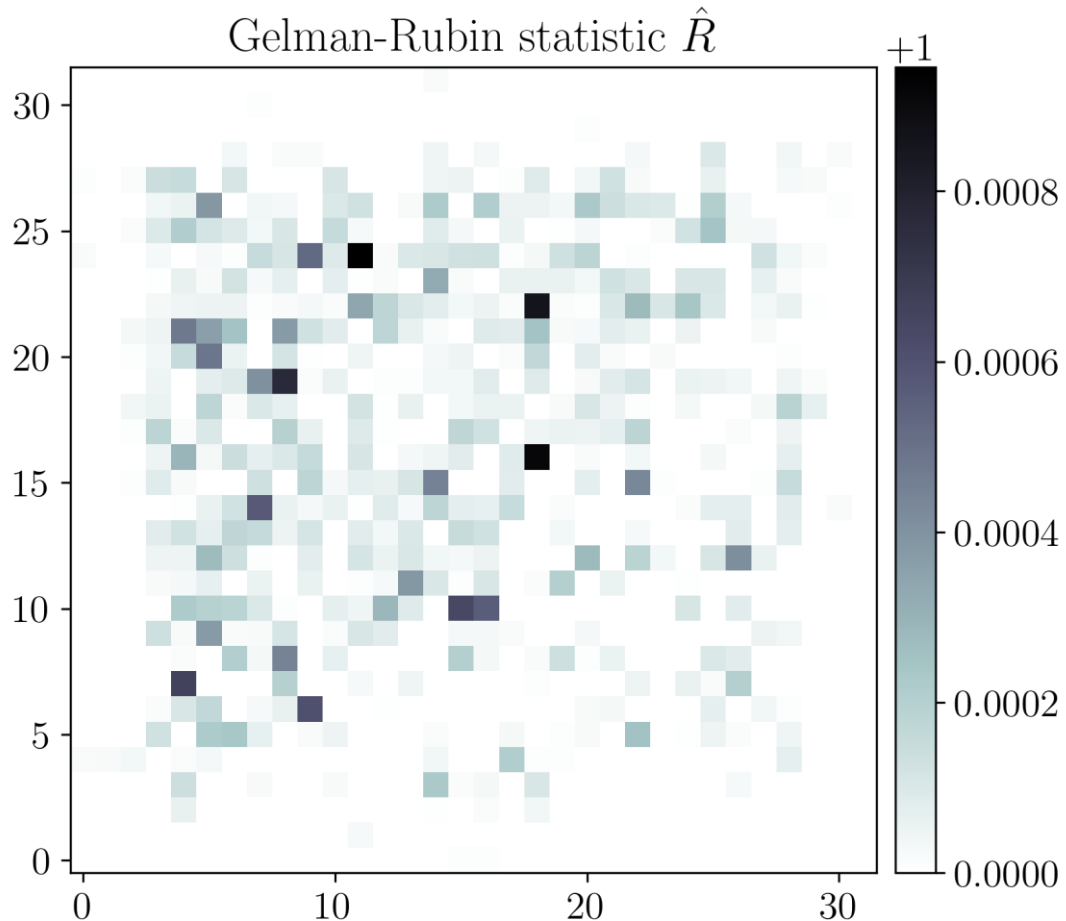
Field-level inference with hierarchical models: autocorrelation and convergence

- The **effective sample size** (ESS) gives number of independent samples. It is especially important for posteriors of cosmological parameters!



Field-level inference with hierarchical models: autocorrelation and convergence

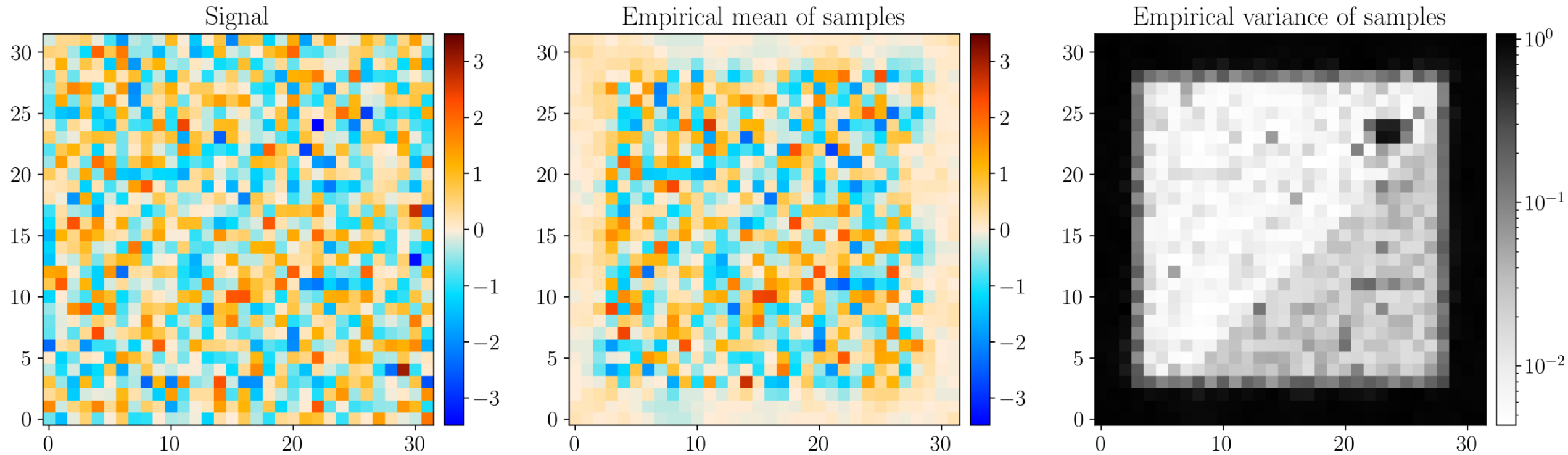
- One can also compute the **Gelman-Rubin statistic** for the field and for cosmological parameters.
 - Note: the chain can appear converged for some parameters when it is far from converged for the field!



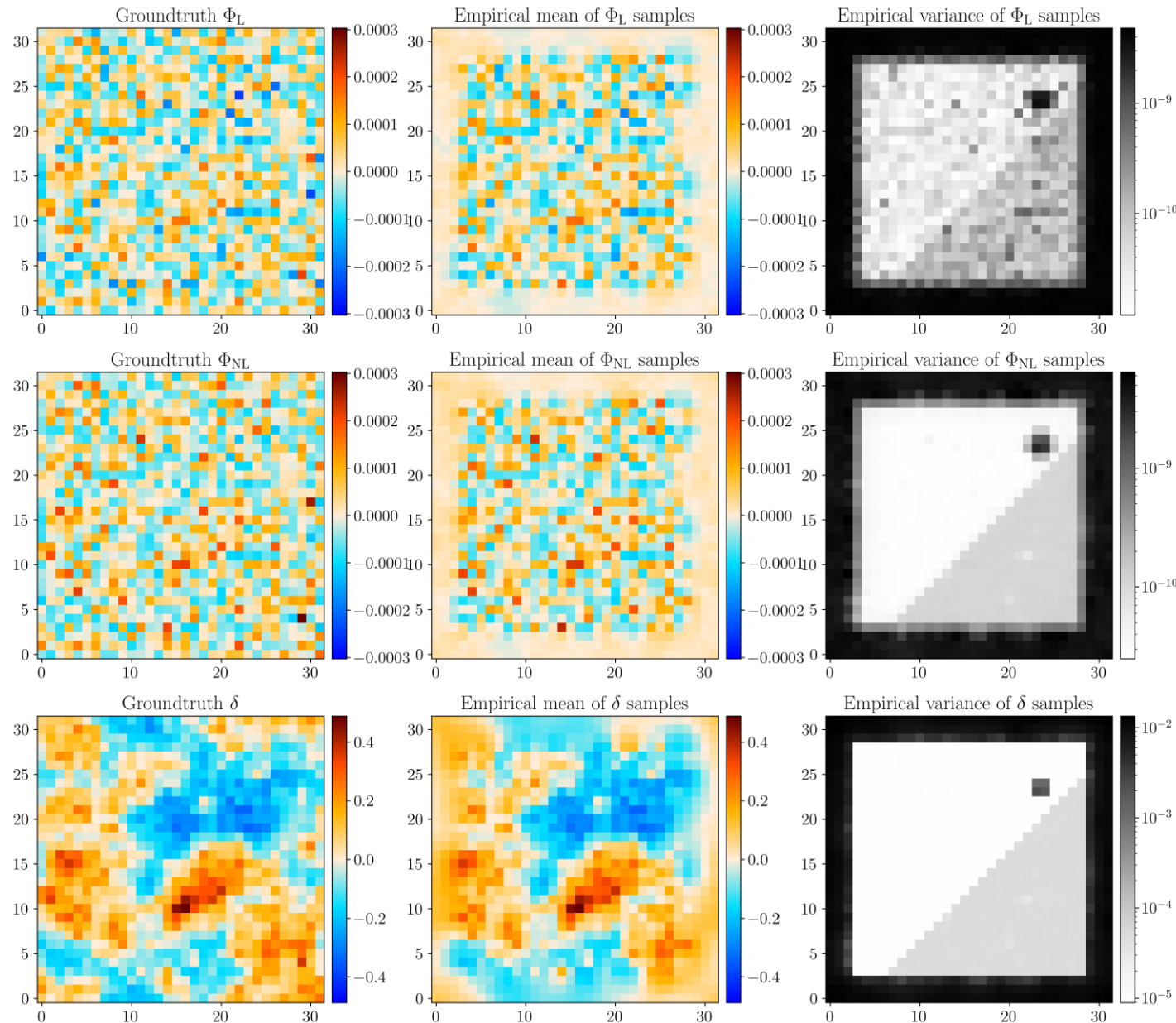
$$\hat{R} - 1 \lesssim 10^{-4} \quad \text{for} \quad \{A_s, n_s, f_{\text{NL}}\}$$

Field-level inference with hierarchical models

- Visualise the **empirical mean** and **empirical variance** of samples for the reconstructed signal (these are the target parameters of the problem).



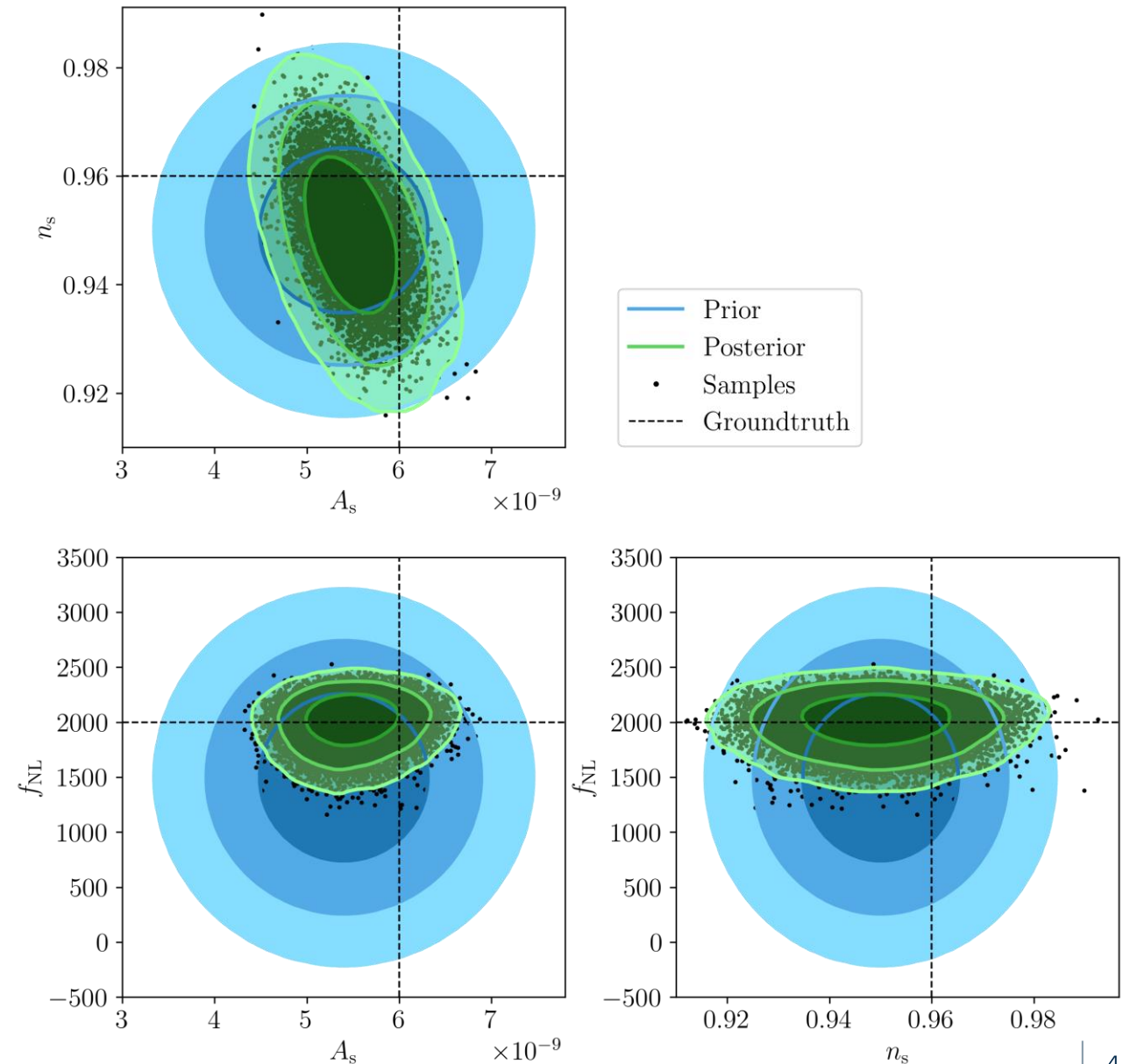
Field-level inference with hierarchical models



- It is also usual to show the empirical mean and empirical variance of samples for **latent fields** that have an interpretable physical meaning.

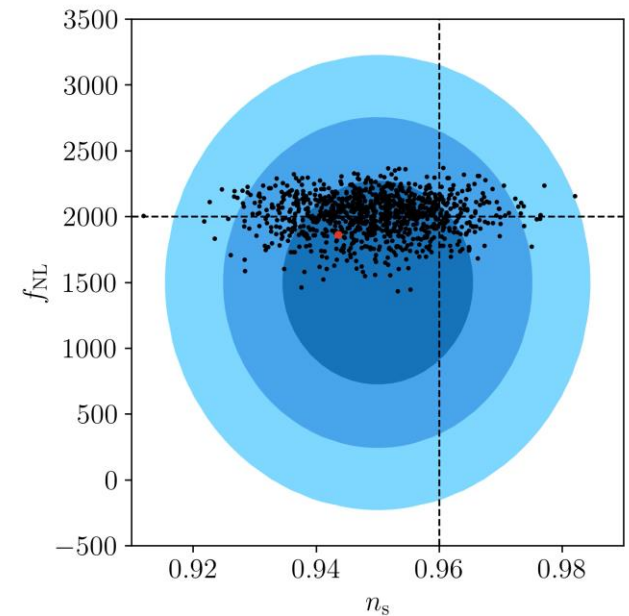
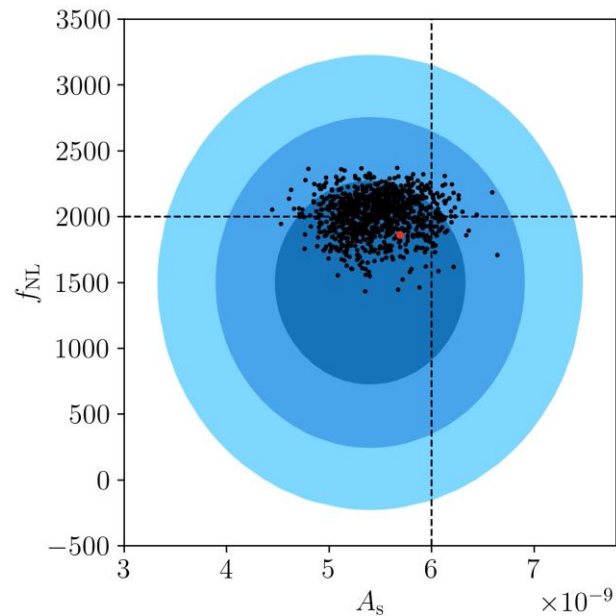
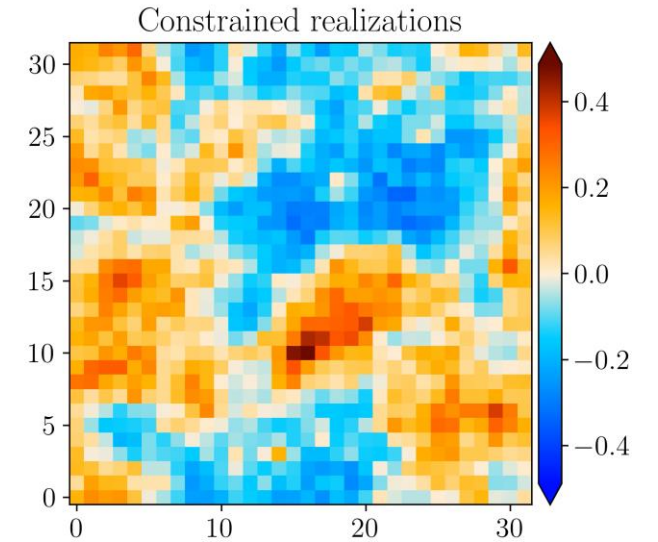
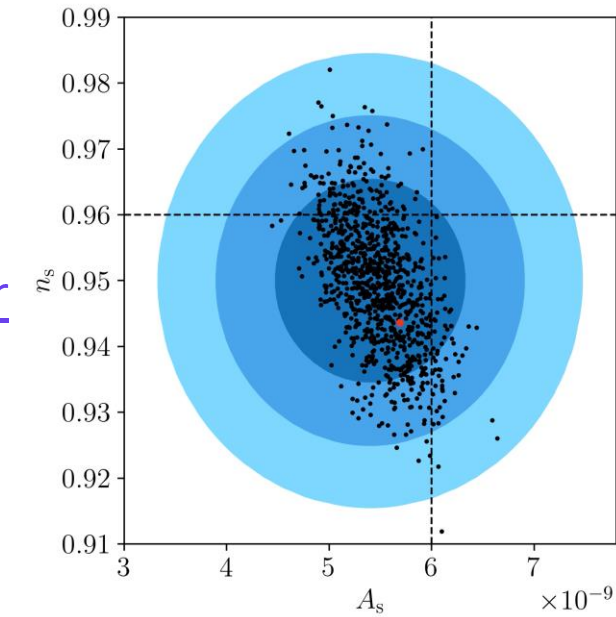
Field-level inference with hierarchical models

- Finally, the posterior for cosmological parameters is usually shown as a **corner plot** (i.e. contours of the two-dimensional marginals for pairs of parameters).



Field-level inference with hierarchical models

- Each sample of the chain is a constrained realisation of the corresponding field, given the data.
- The chain explores jointly the posterior distribution of cosmological parameters.



References and further reading



References:

- A. Gelman et al. (2021), *Bayesian Data Analysis, Third edition*
- C. Geyer (2011), *Introduction to Markov Chain Monte Carlo*
- R. M. Neal (2011), 1206.1901, *MCMC using Hamiltonian Dynamics*

<https://florent-leclercq.eu/teaching.php>