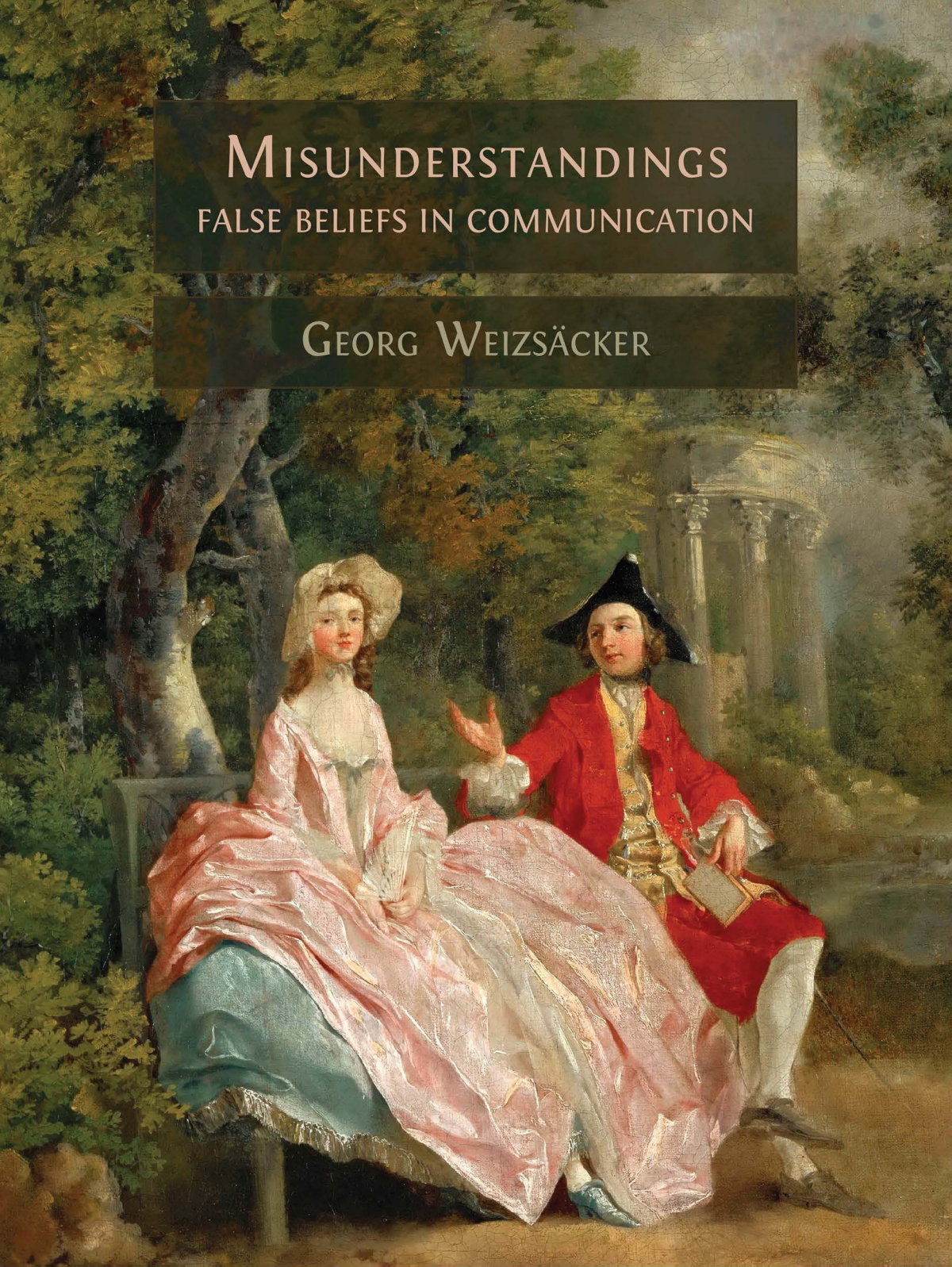


MISUNDERSTANDINGS FALSE BELIEFS IN COMMUNICATION

GEORG WEIZSÄCKER



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Chapter 9

In higher order: Seeing their view of our view

In closing, we ponder more about beliefs about beliefs about beliefs.

This could go on for many more steps – one could ask infinitely many questions about higher-order beliefs in conversations. But the book is already done, as the list of 18 questions goes up only to the second order. The exception is that in the previous chapter, third-order beliefs are briefly described as a possible justification for second-order beliefs.

Why not go deeper? Emphasizing the significance of the brief “exception” in the previous chapter, one may observe that there are plenty of misunderstandings that may arise due to third-order beliefs. [One example is Steve’s belief that Ralph may believe that Steve views the context as relevant.](#) For another example, consider a simple distortion of our second-order talking beliefs of Question 16: we may think that their first-order listening belief does not discriminate with respect to our statements. One possible reason for this – in third order – is that we think that they think that our first-order talking belief does not discriminate with respect to our statements either. That is, we may think that they think it is useless to listen – because they think that we think that they would not listen. If we indeed think about them in this way, then we are obviously unaware of the possible sophistication of their listening. If, in fact, their listening is sophisticated, then we miscommunicate. We may say too little. And the story continues. One can ask meaningful questions about fourth-order beliefs, and so on.

But the book stops early and this chapter merely discusses some conceptual reasons for doing so. One reason for stopping early is that it does no

harm: we do not miss anything that higher-order beliefs may be relevant for. Their effect on behavior, whatever this effect is, would have to pass through the lower-order beliefs. Whatever happens at the innermore layers (the higher orders) of a belief system, it is either irrelevant or it has to show at the outermore layers.

A counterargument is that the very basis of communication lies in its coordination of beliefs. That the strength of a convention and of a common understanding of context lies exactly in the higher-order beliefs. That the relevance of an utterance becomes clear only because the interlocutors know that they understand each other, know that they know it, and so on.

This counterargument is a good one, based on a large literature. Nevertheless, one can disagree with it. This book is quite precise about what can be described with second-order beliefs but without using third-order beliefs. It is a lot, as Chapters 7 and 8 have shown. References to third-order beliefs are possibly useful, but it is not necessary to make them if one wants to talk about meaning, relevance, lies, or politeness.

The following paragraphs re-examine the question of third-order beliefs with respect to the word “meaning”. They will illustrate that a substantial part of an utterance’s meaning shows up even if we avoid all beliefs of higher order.

So let us consider “meaning” and its connection to higher-order beliefs, as it is often done in the philosophy of language. More precisely, let us consider the following sentence: “By saying statement a^i to person j , person i means p .” Here, p is any given proposition (i.e., a possible truth, perhaps about the state of the world) and we will interpret the expression “means p ” as saying that person i believes that the statement induces a change in person j ’s belief that is consistent with this proposition p .

How does statement a^i achieve this? A helpful discussion from the literature is the view that i expects to successfully communicate p by saying something that she believes will make j realize her, i ’s, *intention* to communicate p .

The logic is compelling: if j can recognize the desire of i to change the belief of j in way that is consistent with p , then he knows what i wants him to think. If i believes all this to happen, then it seems right to describe this belief with the words “person i means p ”.

This view of meaning also has a very elegant structure. It is self-referential by describing the production of a belief change and the recognized intention of the same belief change, in a way that these things point to each other. It evokes, in the reader's mind, a sense of a closed form. Meaning is described as something that occurs when things are in a self-supporting order.

So far so good, but now let us discuss the question of higher-order beliefs more precisely. Here is a re-formulation of the same definition of meaning – slightly longer and less elegant, but directly applicable to the concepts in this book. We may say that person i means p if she believes that:

- (a) j will react to a^i in a way that is consistent with a belief change that is consistent with p ,
- (b) j believes that i believes (a), and
- (c) j 's belief described in (b) is the justification for j 's reaction described in (a).

This definition is self-referential, too, but avoids using the word “intention” – whose proper use would require long discussions – and replaces it by describing only beliefs. Person i believes three things about person j that describe how i realizes what j realizes, thereby lending a purpose to her statement a^i .

Upon careful re-reading of the definition, we notice that the definition uses first-order beliefs and third-order beliefs. In (a), person i 's first-order talking belief is that j shows some reaction to a^i . In (b) and (c), person i considers person j 's second-order listening belief, about how i thinks that j shows some reaction to a^i . From i 's perspective, this is a third-order belief. Without this third-order belief, the definition would not work.

But is the inclusion of this third-order belief in the definition *necessary* for describing an effective communication? The answer is no. Persons i and j can communicate effectively even if their lower-order beliefs are what they are for other reasons than having an accurate third-order belief.

First, observe that part (a) works just by itself. Person i can think that j shows a certain reaction to a^i , and it may therefore be optimal for her to choose a^i . One does not need a further justification for this first-order talking belief. It is good if the justification exists – perhaps, without it one may

not want to call the concept “meaning” – but the described effect (and its measurement) are possible if one restricts attention to the outermost layer of beliefs.

Similarly, second-order beliefs work even if they are not justified by deeper beliefs. That is, we can replace (b) and (c), by saying that in addition to (a), person i believes that:

- (b') j has a belief change that is consistent with p when hearing a^i , and
- (c') j 's belief change described in (b') is the justification for j 's reaction described in (a).

The combination of i 's belief in (a), (b') and (c') is simpler – it uses only first-order talking beliefs and second-order talking beliefs. It describes a perfectly fine justification for i 's decision to make the statement a^i : she wants to induce the action described in (a) and she believes to achieve it by inducing the belief change described in (b').

This is the combination of beliefs that was described in Chapter 8, from the talker's perspective. In Chapter 7, an analogous combination of beliefs was given for the listener's perspective. As the two chapters demonstrate, these combinations of beliefs allow to describe many inferences from statements, and many related phenomena.

Thinking back to these chapters, we notice that there was no mention of a proposition p in them. But this makes no difference, as the chapters talked about certain updates – we can add “... that are consistent with proposition p ” in our minds, without changing the content of the discussion.

Is the combination of i 's belief in (a), (b') and (c') really a perfectly fine justification for the statement a^i ? Perhaps not just as fine as in the earlier version, i 's belief in (a), (b) and (c)?

Yes, indeed it is fine, and this is exactly the point of this book. There is a big difference between i 's belief in (a), (b) and (c) on the one hand, and i 's belief in (a), (b') and (c') on the other hand: the latter combination includes the possibility of false beliefs. More precisely, the second-order belief (b') may be off target, whereas the third-order belief (b), and hence also the second-order beliefs that it implies, is on target: i believes j 's beliefs to be

accurate.

Taken together, the discussion in this chapter means that we can use a definition of meaning that is close enough to the literature's standard, but with a lower order of beliefs and with a more general set of potentially false beliefs.

The reader should also notice that this definitory discussion of meaning is not the core of the book. It is more a feel-good observation at the end that tells us that we are done, and it is one that we do not need in order to understand the rest. Instead, the book's focus lies on the 18 questions themselves and their empirical nature, asking about the interlocutors' many ways of having possibly distorted beliefs.

Of course, none of the above discussion rules out that third-order beliefs exist in communication, and they may even be highly relevant as possible underpinnings of first-order beliefs and second-order beliefs. Whether or not they are relevant in this fashion is another open empirical question.

