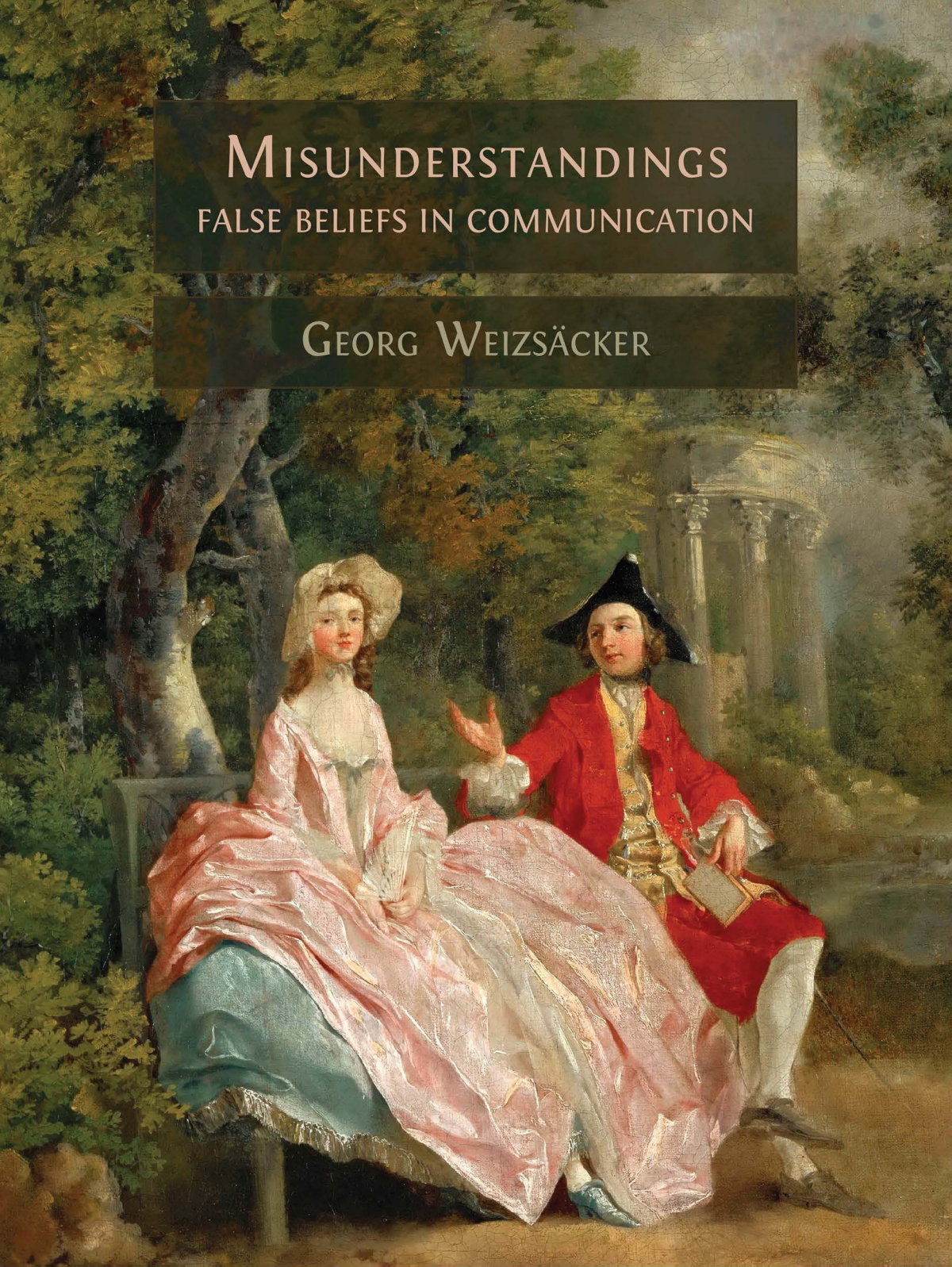


MISUNDERSTANDINGS FALSE BELIEFS IN COMMUNICATION

GEORG WEIZSÄCKER



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Chapter 10

Conclusion

Why describe communication through beliefs? The answer was given in Chapter 2: we can unambiguously describe beliefs as either accurate or inaccurate, in a measurable way. This is not a small feat.

In any real-world conversation, one cannot actually measure the answer, however. To return to the imagery in Chapter 1, we do not live through the same conversation 1000 times. But the measurement works at least in theory. If the conversation is really important, a researcher may mimick it in the laboratory, perhaps even 1000 times. Or, perhaps it helps to merely go through the thought experiment of measuring it.

The considerations in this book describe this approach. They specify the space in which the beliefs live, so that 18 questions can be asked in a well-defined way. They also give a sense of each question's scope.

The main sense that the reader should have about the scope, by now: it is large. Misunderstandings are a whole world out there. The fact that the book highlights *mis*understandings is, of course, also an expositional choice. The book's message could have been more upbeat and optimistic, by highlighting accurate understandings. This would likely create less interest, however: theories of full understanding abound in the existing literature, whereas theories of misunderstandings do not. Moreover, the data are what they are. In the majority of cases, the empirical evidence indicates the prevalence of false beliefs.

Back to detail, one last time – there is some trickery involved in the book's assumptions. Perhaps most importantly, the analysis rests on subjective expected utility, which is a bit of a black box. In addition, much of the

uncertainty is about a very general “state” ω . Many other approaches, with more or less structure, would have been possible as alternatives for Chapter 2. For instance, the book could have combined the state of the world and an interlocutor’s type into a single item. (In game theory, they are often subsumed under a single category “type”.) Note also how the use of a time structure is somewhat special in the book – it is not quite modelled in the formulae (except for the distinction between a^j and \tilde{a}^j in Chapters 5 and 8) but a sequential interaction is implicit in the discussion.

All of these modelling choices in the book are fairly arbitrary – or rather, they are made mainly for clarity in the argumentation rather than for realism. For instance, the separation of a discussion of preference types allows to address all questions of interest alignment head-on. The exposition also serves to connect the book to existing literatures (see the section “Further reading” in Chapter 11). Overall, the maintained assumptions may or may not be more realistic than other assumptions that one could make. But as assumptions go, at least they are quite weak.

Finally, recall that the direction that is expressed in the questions’ formulation is idiosyncratic. Beliefs can be off target in many ways; the book only formulates the possibility of too little discrimination. Why not overoptimism, motivated belief biases, or probability weighting? There are so many more patterns in which humans may systematically screw up their probabilistic thinking, and the book uses only one of them. Let us, thus, view the book’s brevity as a statement about the many routes that research on biases in communication can take.