Misunderstanding and Meaning Change

ANDREW HINES

Abstract
Today, the tone of discussion in the public sphere is dominated by misunderstanding. A common assumption is that misunderstanding comes from a failure of understanding. This article argues that misunderstanding is in fact a type of meaning change. To fully understand the contrast between misunderstanding as a failure of understanding and misunderstanding as a type of meaning change, the article uses Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hans-Georg Gadamer as a starting point to tease out an unthought assumption. Both thinkers challenge traditional preconceptions of how language shapes understanding and they make prominent use of the concept of misunderstanding to do so. Yet both rely on a de facto model of misunderstanding as a failure of understanding. To consider an alternative notion of misunderstanding, the article looks at examples from thinkers influenced by Wittgenstein's and Gadamer's philosophy. Finally, the article concludes by positing a new definition of misunderstanding.

1. Introduction

Seven years ago, Gina Miller took a case to the UK high court to argue that the government couldn't go ahead with Brexit without first consulting parliament. Some labelled her a 'traitor to democracy' for her actions and the judges who ruled in her favour 'enemies of the people'. Miller expressed confusion about this. In her perspective, the pro-Brexit activists who called her a 'traitor to democracy' had incorrectly judged how democracy works in the UK, highlighting how the UK is a representative rather than a direct democracy (Hines, 2016). Whether through a lack of experience, of education, or even laziness, when Miller suggests that the activist misunderstands the nature of democracy, she is suggesting that their judgement is committed to something that is incorrect and that further reflection would show is fundamentally improbable. Despite the fact that the EU referendum is nearly ten years old and that the UK has since left the EU, the example of the clash of meaning over a key term like 'democracy' still haunts us today. While Brexit may not be as close to the headlines today as Ukraine or Gaza, the tone of the

doi:10.1017/S1358246124000043 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy and the contributors 2024

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

discussion in the public sphere is still dominated by that of misunderstanding and communication breakdown.

One phenomenon in particular is clearly observed in such examples: while often assumed to come from ignorance or a failure of understanding, the communication breakdown in public discourse of the last ten years is fundamentally linked to a change in meaning. The meaning of words, such as 'democracy' in the Miller example, which are central to providing stability for a community's identity and daily life, has undergone a rapid shift. While one may argue, rightly in some instances, that these meaning changes are not actual changes at all but rather ignorance of the terms involved or a failure to understand them, there is also something else at work. The meaning changes we see today are cross-cutting. The shift in such terms affects all classes, all levels of education, all political alliances. Due to the nature of how we experience information today through social media, the internet and video, these meaning shifts have not simply been observed by academics, but rather have taken place with the whole world watching. The global public of Western democracies have all experienced moments in the last ten years where they found themselves thinking, 'I thought I supported Labour, but not that meaning of Labour', or 'I thought I was a Conservative, but not that type of Conservative', or 'I thought I believed in democracy, but not that meaning of democracy'. These meaning changes that the majority of us have found ourselves within go deeper than a simple ignorance or failure of understanding. And it is these changes in meaning that, at least in part, have caused such publicly visible misunderstandings. Because of this, they leave public consciousness with a gap: we think to ourselves, 'what I see in front of me is misunderstanding'. And yet, try as we might to reduce it to failure, we see our own communities collapsing and fragmenting around us as the meanings of central ideas shift.

This essay will make the case that these meaning changes are not simply an associated phenomenon, brought about by ignorance, failure or error, but rather a part of the very nature of misunderstanding itself. Far from being an assertion of relativism, investigating the relationship between meaning change and misunderstanding does not seek to revert to a post-war critique of metaphysics or to challenge our assumptions about the nature of truth or the nature of fact. Rather, such an investigation seeks to challenge our assumptions about the nature of misunderstanding itself. That is because our contemporary moment suggests that our use of the term is no longer fit for purpose.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

2. An Unthought Assumption in the History of Philosophy

What do we actually know of misunderstanding? It could be said to be the word of our age, yet we know so little about it. As an example, one only need to look to a philosophical dictionary. *The Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* and the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* represent distinct currents for those studying the history of concepts in the humanities. However, one thing they share is the absence of an entry on 'misunderstanding'. Both simply say: 'see understanding'. This conceptual dependency implies an assumption about the nature of misunderstanding. If misunderstanding is simply a word we use to describe the absence or lack of a fully formed concept with a distinct canonical history, then the concept of misunderstanding itself is a lacking or even absent concept. This essay maintains that, given this absence, the concept of misunderstanding is taken de facto on a model of 'failure of understanding'. But far from addressing the phenomenon of meaning change seen in our contemporary moment, the de facto model points us towards an assumption of failure. While sometimes useful, the failure model is severely limited, particularly in a moment like ours when a new type of misunderstanding is emerging.

Such a de facto model is largely reflected in both the everyday definition and the history of the term's usage in European philosophy. In both the verb and noun form in the English language, dating from at least 1225 and 1443 respectively, misunderstanding is defined as a 'failure to understand something rightly'.[1] This is reflected in its very construction: the root of the term is 'understanding' and the 'mis' doesn't tell us new information about the lack of understanding occurring but only acts a prefix to denote understanding's opposite. This dictionary definition, that reflects popular usage, is also often reflected in the philosophical usage of the term and its associated satellites. These uses, in a history we do not have room to go into here, largely do not reflect on misunderstanding in its own right.[2]

[1] 'Misunderstanding, N. (1)', and 'Misunderstand, V.', in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023).

[2] The author is aware there is a long history of various investigations about how misunderstanding occurs. However, these instances on the whole tend to assume the de facto 'failure' model. The author's argument is not that the history of philosophy does not involve important investigations of misunderstanding, but rather, that it is often the case that such investigations assume the de facto failure model. Because of this they tend to shed more light on human cognition, understanding, language *etc*. than on misunderstanding itself.

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When they do, they often reinforce the de facto, 'misunderstanding is a failure of understanding' model. Such is the case in Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* from 1689 where he argues that our understanding is in error when we have failed to match up probability, evidence, and truth correctly (Locke, 2008, p. 454).

We can see the de facto 'failure of understanding' model reinforced even when the nature of understanding itself is subject to critical reflection. We can illustrate this with two examples from the twentieth century's most influential thinkers on language: Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hans-Georg Gadamer. Both contributed profoundly to the development of Western thinking on language, meaning, and understanding in the twentieth century. Perhaps it is fitting, then, to see the failure model in contrast alongside two thinkers who transformed our conception of meaning and understanding. It is also fitting to look at 'historic' as opposed to current thinkers that have impacted later movements as we can see how rooted later developments are in these descriptions. Finally, what is even more fitting is that Wittgenstein and Gadamer appear to have fundamentally different projects relating to understanding, and yet, when they use the term misunderstanding, they both seem to invoke the de facto failure model in their use of the term.

2.1 Wittgenstein and Gadamer

At first glance, Gadamer utilises the concept of misunderstanding in a very different way for his philosophical programme from Wittgenstein. Gadamer follows along with the larger tradition of German hermeneutics in asserting that misunderstanding happens as a matter of course in the process of interpretation. The father of hermeneutics, Friedrich Schleiermacher, asserts that hermeneutics is the art of overcoming the misunderstandings inherent in language and tradition. These misunderstandings, Schleiermacher argues, happen as a matter of course because of how the parts of speech work.

In *The General Theory and Art of Interpretation*, Schleiermacher is suggesting that the traditional notion of interpretation and translation is incorrect. In the traditional view, if one were to pick up a copy of Cicero and read the Latin word *narratio* and misunderstand it for something other than the English word 'narrative', the reason for misunderstanding would be to do with the translator, the education of the reader, *etc*. As Schleiermacher states, 'the assumption [behind interpretation] is that understanding occurs as a matter of course' (Schleiermacher, 1986, p. 82). However, Schleiermacher's genius lies in the fact that he was able to discern that it is language

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

itself, its historicity, and the parts of speech that can lead to misunderstandings, and this is the starting point of interpretation. The art of hermeneutics is a way of overcoming misunderstandings and achieving understanding.

Building on this tradition in German scholarship, in *Truth and Method* Gadamer famously ontologises Schleiermacher's insight drawing on the philosophy of Martin Heidegger to do so. Gadamer makes the basic hermeneutic principle of misunderstanding not simply a technical matter of importance to textual exegesis, but a basic function of how our consciousness interprets our own existence and the existence of the world around us. Speaking about the 'reflective' nature of language, one of the things that Gadamer's philosophy asserts is that language impacts our understanding and reflects the local, colloquial situation we find ourselves in (Gadamer, 2019, pp. 401–23). Because of this, in a philosophical outlook like Gadamer's, misunderstanding appears to be inherent within language, tradition, and experience of the world.

As is well known, Wittgenstein, in stark contrast to Gadamer, was not drawing on a lengthy tradition, but rather responding, at least in part, to aspects of Bertrand Russell's attempt to distil the problems of both philosophy and mathematics with a highly precise approach (see Ray, 2005, pp. 11–19). About this approach, and indeed seemingly all the problems of philosophy, Wittgenstein sums them up as a misunderstanding. At the beginning of the *Tractatus*, it is not that misunderstanding is inherently *within* language, as is the case with Gadamer, but rather that *we* misunderstand the logic of our language. To paraphrase his famous pronouncement, it is our misunderstanding of language which creates the problems of philosophy (Wittgenstein, 1974, p. 3). A cursory, and arguably superficial reading of this, suggests that *we* as thinking human beings are the ones doing the misunderstanding. The *Philosophical Investigations* expands and deepens this initial idea. In §90, Wittgenstein suggests the investigation he's carrying out clears a misunderstanding away over the use of words and analogies (Wittgenstein, 1989, pp. 42–43). In §111, he clarifies that 'these misunderstandings are deep, their roots are as deep in us as the forms of language' (*ibid*., p. 47). One could argue that this type of misunderstanding then is closer to Gadamer's use of the term, because Wittgenstein seems to suggest it is not just *we* who misunderstand but that there is misunderstanding *within* the roots of the form of language itself.

However, whatever view one takes about the location of misunderstanding (within us or within language), there is a fundamental overlap in both Gadamer and Wittgenstein's use of the term that is

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not connected to their respective philosophical programmes. Gadamer's and Wittgenstein's use of the term simply tells us something distinct about the *location* at which a misunderstanding occurs as human beings, think, experience, and use language. One may even argue that they disagree on the location of misunderstanding. But both thinkers' use of the term ultimately connotes the same thing: that a failure of understanding has taken place.

Gadamer and Wittgenstein both produced two of the most influential theories of language to emerge from Europe in the last hundred years. Yet, despite the highly nuanced and pioneering theories both thinkers bring to the theme of how meaning is created or produced, both thinkers, perhaps unthinkingly, invoke the de facto 'failure' model of misunderstanding. Such a model relies primarily on a static view of meaning, as it assumes a basic tripartite correspondence between meaning, word, and truth. The irony, of course, is that, in their own way, the philosophy of both thinkers involves an explicit critique of the traditional correspondence model of meaning. Wittgenstein even goes so far as explicitly stating this in sections 1–5 of his *Philosophical Investigations* and Gadamer's reliance on Heidegger also assumes such a critique.

Because of this, what we have in both thinkers are progressive, paradigm-shifting models of how the creation of meaning relates to human understanding. Yet both models rely on a very traditional, centuries-old model of misunderstanding. Furthermore, in many ways the misunderstanding model they rely on represents the very thing they are critiquing. In some instances, this centuries-old model is very useful. Its description of misunderstanding is quite apt to describe some instances. But 'some instances' is not at all the same as 'in every case' and the fact that this centuries-old de facto model relies on a static view of meaning, makes it increasingly hard to defend, especially when our contemporary lived experience suggests a much deeper relationship between meaning change and misunderstanding. Close examination of these experiences reveals that misunderstanding is rooted not simply within a failure of understanding, but more broadly within a type of meaning change of which failure of understanding is only one sub-variety.

There is one point of clarification needed before we proceed to an explication of the relationship between misunderstanding and meaning change. And that is to do with why I have avoided attempting to establish a normative foundation for the concept of misunderstanding. One might suggest that, to clear up our confusion about misunderstanding, could we not begin by establishing a normative foundation for when a misunderstanding has occurred? This paper

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

will maintain that we can't simply create normative foundations for judging misunderstanding because, as I've attempted to demonstrate above, we don't know what misunderstanding is beyond the de facto model. Because of this, we can't reap the functional benefits of any potential normative foundation. Such a normative foundation would assume that we know what a misunderstanding is and who it is happening to, and that this assumption is suitable 'in every case'.

So, if we can't assume the de facto model of failure of understanding, where does that leave us? We can perhaps best illustrate a different route into the concept of misunderstanding by looking at two further examples in the philosophical literature. While by no means exhaustive, both examples show the mechanics of meaning change as it relates to misunderstanding. Mainly that, a misunderstanding takes place when human language, thought, and experience are caught between two different meanings. Both, incidentally, also take place in the aftereffects of both Wittgenstein's and Gadamer's philosophy.

3. Two Examples: Kwasi Wiredu and Jürgen Habermas

3.1 Wiredu

One of the most influential African philosophers of his generation, Kwasi Wiredu provides us with an example of how misunderstanding is produced when a speaker of a given language is caught between two grammatical realities. He begins with the assumption that grammar produces meaning, but that such meaning is 'tongue dependent'. In his brief but powerful and deeply influential essay, 'The Concept of Truth in the Akan Language', Wiredu reminds the reader of the correlative nature of meaning and that there are different types of correlation. He makes the distinction between moral and cognitive correlation in pointing out the difference between a moral and a cognitive concept of truth. To flesh out this distinction, he uses an example from his native Akan language (Wiredu, 1998, pp. 239–43).

Wiredu points out that the differences between the moral and cognitive correlations of the meaning of a concept, in this case truth, causes a discrepancy in our understanding of meaning production. For Wiredu, an example of such a discrepancy appears when attempting to explain to a native Akan speaker, who hasn't made a specialist study of the subject, a traditionally expressed theory of truth (such as the correspondence theory) (*ibid*., p. 240). Wiredu's conclusion isn't that the correspondence theory is wrong, but rather that meaning and

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correlation are 'tongue dependent'. Specifically, this means that philosophical claims are dependent on the grammatical structure of a given language (in this case Akan) (*ibid.*, pp. 240–42).

'Tongue dependency' of course became one of Wiredu's foundational contributions to the African philosophical movement of the twentieth century. While Wiredu is broadly highlighting the relative nature of meaning, he is doing it through largely empirical means (referencing the evidence of his own language) rather than through a critique of metaphysics as we may find in another thinker such as Nietzsche. Thus, Wiredu's critique is not of the nature of truth (as we find in Nietzsche), but rather of the nature of meaning and with it the constructive assertion that the nature of meaning and its tendency to have a correlative capacity is always 'tongue dependent'. This, Wiredu argues, has special significance for the African philosophical movement. For our purposes, if we take a step back, we can see a concept of misunderstanding and a concept of meaning change take a distinctive shape.

Wiredu opens the piece by explaining the Akan words for truth, falsity, and lies. He uses this to tease out the ambiguous and vague nature of the everyday use of the English word 'truth'. It tends to suggest truthfulness (i.e., the moral concept), not truth *an sich* (the cognitive concept) (*ibid.*, pp. 239–40). So if the average Akan were to encounter the correspondence theory and were asked to translate it, they would encounter a difficulty. The difficulty, Wiredu argues, is quite a good reason, and related not to education or culture (as we might expect if misunderstanding were simply ignorance or failure), but to grammar. This inescapable grammatical reality causes a small misunderstanding in the attempt to translate a theory like the correspondence theory of truth. Wiredu writes,

> Consider the correspondence theory of truth. This is supposed to assert something like this: 'p is true' means 'p corresponds to a fact'. What does this come to in Akan? Simply that 'p *te saa*' which in truth, is nothing more than saying that 'p *te saa*' means 'p *te saa*'. In other words, the correspondence definition amounts to a tautology in Akan […]. If we now assert that the statement form [in English] 'p if and only if q' is equivalent to '(if p then q) and (if q then p)' we are obviously asserting a logical truth in English, but no such logical truth exists in Akan. There is nothing necessary about the form 'p if and only if q', so that it might be thought obligatory that the Akan should have a phrase literally corresponding to it. (Wiredu, 1998, pp. 240, 242)

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Wiredu's point of course is not that the Akan speaker can't understand the correspondence theory of truth if they made a special study of it, but rather that the way the correspondence theory of truth is expressed in English is partially due to the structure (or peculiarity, as Wiredu puts it) of English grammar. The grammar of the Akan language, as Wiredu points out, prioritises a moral, rather than cognitive concept of truth. This is where he derives his famous concept of 'tongue dependency' from.

What are we to make of this? The meaning change between grammatical structures causes a misunderstanding. Wiredu highlights an important truth for our purposes. It is not that the Akan speaker has simply *failed to understand*, nor is it even strictly a cultural paradigm clash. Rather, it is a change of meaning between grammatical structures that causes the misunderstanding. Therefore, the 'home' of meaning in this case, is the grammatical structure and its correlates. Misunderstanding, then, occurs when a meaning change is attempted but fails to land within the 'home' grammar of the language (English in this case) which produces this specialist usage.

As we will see in the next example, misunderstanding does not rest solely (or even primarily) within the individual, but rather as meaning is caught in the 'in-between' state created by meaning change. There are so many impossible transformations of meaning attempted between Akan and English, and yet, these transformations are not fully realised, because the subject experiences a meaning change, even if one party perceives it as a failure.

3.2 Habermas

For our next example, let us look at the definition of ideological misunderstanding Jürgen Habermas provides in his critique of philosophical hermeneutics. This exchange of essays between friends (often characterised as a debate) has come to stand in for an intellectual conflict that runs not only through the length of the critical theory tradition, but through a basic tendency of Western thought: it is simply the question, do we conserve or critique tradition? This binary, often a false one, is a basic habit of Western thought. Do we conserve or do we critique? And what is the capacity of human cognition in this regard?

This question, and the way that Habermas poses it, also has significance for the problem of meaning change. Commentators about this exchange often skip over the attention, care, and respect that Habermas pays to the hermeneutic tradition. In fact, if we simply

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take a moment to read the first half of the essay, his critique is born of both admiration and a deep recognition that one cannot have critique without cognition.[3] What was it about philosophical hermeneutics that Habermas so admired in its description of cognition? It was the fact that meaning is always produced colloquially or through 'colloquial communication' as he calls it (Habermas, 1986, p. 296). For Habermas, colloquial communication is an indispensable aspect of assessing communication. Because of this he makes clear that an approach like Chomsky's Universal Grammar cannot adequately address the full scale of the socio-political questions Habermas is concerned with in his reflections on communication (*ibid*., p. 296). Because of this, Habermas feels there is something essential in hermeneutics, namely its recognition of the colloquial dimension of the production of meaning.

For our purposes, we must also pay attention to colloquial communication to understand the relationship between misunderstanding and meaning change. It is important to note that examining the role of colloquial communication in misunderstanding is fundamentally different from a call to revitalise philosophical hermeneutics in its canonical form. So much philosophy, so much life, has transpired in the fifty years since the publication of Habermas' critique. Because of this, there are many cases where philosophical hermeneutics as an answer to cultural questions is either severely limited or no longer valid. The developments in cognitive science alone, or fundamental changes to the practice of dialogue (due to technological developments and irreversible geopolitical moments), are a few of the several candidates that rupture many of the foundational assumptions of the tradition. This is of course even before we engage with the 'Heidegger question'.

But Habermas' desire to preserve something about colloquial communication in his analysis of the production of meaning is in the spirit, if not the letter, of what we must return to today. So how does he articulate this problem? And how does it relate to misunderstanding and meaning change? Habermas agrees with the hermeneutic tradition that colloquial communication is essential to understanding language as a socio-cultural phenomenon. However, he argues that there is a problem central to the role of colloquial communication in the production of meaning. Colloquial communication both feeds and reflects tradition, and while it is central to our understanding both as individuals and communities, colloquial communication also produces

[3] A point which critical theorists of today would be well served to remember.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

misunderstanding. While colloquial communication can build consensus, Habermas also points out that it can build 'false consensus', being the vehicle not simply for understanding but for oppression (Habermas, 1986, pp. 303, 314).

These few lines present us with a distinct definition of misunderstanding and how it relates to meaning change, particularly from the perspective of ideology. It provides the perfect case study for our purposes. What does Habermas suggest is occurring? The key philosophical insight we need to take from this is that, while colloquial communication creates meaning through the process of the hermeneutic circle and its relationship to tradition (both informing and being informed by tradition), the same relationship can also change meaning. Habermas writes that it even has the potential to do so in a systematic fashion through a centralised authority. This meaning change, Habermas writes, produces misunderstanding. Therefore, Habermas suggests, the very hermeneutic process he values because of the importance it places on colloquial communication also has the potential to systematically produce misunderstandings in our collective consciousness. If we think for example about Boris Johnson's use of the metaphor of Britain as a roaring lion to argue for a distinctive post-Brexit economic policy, we can see Habermas' meaning. The 'roaring lion' of British mythology is a broad figurative truth with several meanings. But in the case of a particular economic policy argument such as Johnson's, it is reduced to one particular meaning (Hines, 2017).

Because of this reality of political rhetoric, what follows for Habermas is not a total rejection of hermeneutics, but rather a critical dialogue about how a theory of language with colloquial meaning in the centre can also recognise the ideological danger of misunderstanding. In particular, Habermas wants to keep front and centre the fact that the danger of misunderstanding comes from the very tradition that produces colloquial meaning itself.

This is what is so essential to grasp. Habermas initially affirms hermeneutics because it reminds us of the truth that we are not outside tradition and colloquial meaning. Yet both tradition and colloquial meaning have the capacity to oppress or to generate ideological misunderstandings. In this critical distinction, we see Habermas create a fundamental link between misunderstanding and meaning change. For Habermas, the idiomatic quality of our colloquial communication produces meaning. This meaning is stabilised, not by some metaphysical or 'natural' truth, and not solely (though definitely partially) by grammar, but by the continual use of language by a

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community of speakers. This process of stabilisation informs and is informed by tradition.

Here is where the ideological misunderstanding comes, according to Habermas. That which is common suddenly is changed and destabilised. The interesting and key thing is the fact that the community of speakers doesn't necessarily immediately notice the meaning has changed. What exactly is changing here? It is the consensus of meaning that has changed. How? Let us use the example of an individual in a community of speakers that hears or uses a term that has been systematically produced by a structure of power or centralised authority. Because the structure of power uses colloquial communication, the phrases are familiar to the listener and automatically register as a part of the common consensus that has held together meaning, such as the roaring lion as a metaphor for Britain.

However, the consensus of meaning has also been nudged in the direction of a certain interpretation of that larger metaphor, such as the post-Brexit economic policy. While the particular word or metaphor, in this case the roaring lion, is traditionally associated with a fairly general idea, the ideological meaning has nudged it into a more concrete literal meaning. The broader, more figurative meaning has shifted to a specific and more literal use of language for a particular aim.[4] In our reading, we can see Habermas suggesting that the individual consciousness will eventually recognise this change, even if subtly, but that their understanding is caught between the two different consensuses: the polyphony of the figurative, broad colloquial meaning, and the more literal, specific meaning of ideology. Here again, as we saw with Wiredu, an individual's understanding is caught between two different meanings. This is thus ultimately what happens when a misunderstanding occurs.

4. A New Definition of Misunderstanding?

From both of these examples, we can suggest a new definition of misunderstanding that moves beyond the de facto 'failure of understanding' model. Misunderstanding is not simply a failure of understanding but rather a type of meaning change of which failures of understanding are subvarieties. In its broadest sense, misunderstanding is when human understanding is caught between two different meanings. It

[4] This principle is similar to the concept of 'prefiguration' that Hans Blumenberg develops in his posthumously published text *Präfiguration: Arbeit am politischen Mythos* (2014).

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

is when understanding rests in the space between meanings. Both failures of understanding and intentional misunderstandings (ideological *etc*.) can happen within this phenomenon but are never reducible to it. Finally, one of the socio-political conclusions of this article is that we will not be able to adequately confront the problems of our age if we reduce public sphere misunderstandings simply to ideological misunderstandings, failures of understanding *etc*. This article maintains that our 'communication breakdown' is in fact partially created by such a reduction. In defining misunderstanding in this new way, there are three things that become clear. First, we have seen that while the 'failure of understanding' model is a useful model in some instances, it is ultimately an insufficient model. This article's assertion is that even in a failure of understanding, meaning change is present. That is to say, failure of understanding is simply a subvariety of the understanding's being caught in between meanings. Secondly, it poses questions about who is misunderstanding or experiencing misunderstanding. Finally, it asks us to reflect more on the location of misunderstanding. Is it a social phenomenon? A grammatical one? A cognitive one?

One of the great problems we are left with, then, is how do we affirm the 'in between meanings' state of misunderstanding, while simultaneously affirming the need for some form of shared understanding for communities. Alongside this, how do we affirm the 'in between meanings' state and also affirm that there are indeed failures of understanding and failures that are poisonous to the health of communities? These are the questions that we must turn our attention to if we hope to comprehend the communication breakdown in the public sphere. A starting point is recognising the absence of a philosophical exploration of misunderstanding beyond the de facto 'failure' model and the need for more reflection on the relationship between misunderstanding and meaning change. This article has maintained that misunderstanding is in fact a type of meaning change, a state of being 'in between' meanings. Far from being a throwback to a post-war relativism, considering misunderstanding as a type of meaning change can potentially open the door for a more constructive reflection on the different types of misunderstanding seen in the public sphere, and how acknowledging these can be a constructive tool in building a new type of dialogue in our communities.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1358246124000043 Published online by Cambridge University Press