

# Misunderstandings and Difficulties in Making Sense of the Action

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**Abstract.** Traditionally, intelligibility is associated with rationality. It is also associated with the meaning and understanding of the agent's actions when interacting in a context. What is proposed in this work is an analysis – at the moment in which the agent is interacting – of what happens when intelligibility and meaning are decoupled. It causes a person's actions to be misunderstood or misinterpreted by others. It is even possible that the same person will not understand, later, why she has acted the way she has. The explanation proposed is that this link is broken when the action process, made up of the three stages of action, is not developed correctly. This results in misunderstandings that, because they are directly related to the action, I have called misunderstandings within agency. The analysis of this kind of misunderstanding could be essential to understanding the conflicts that arise in the communicative act and mutual understanding.

**Keywords:** agency, intelligibility, meaning-giving, rationality, misunderstanding

## Nesusipratimai ir keblumai suprantant veiksmą

**Santrauka.** Tradiciškai inteligibilumas siejamas su racionalumu. Jis taip pat siejamas su prasme bei veikėjo veiksmų suvokimu, kuomet veikėjas sąveikauja konkrečiame kontekste. Šiame straipsnyje analizuojama, kas vyksta tais veikėjo sąveikavimo atvejais, kai inteligibilumas ir prasmė yra atsiejami vienas nuo kito. Dėl šio atsiejimo kiti asmenys klaidingai supranta ar klaidingai interpretuoja asmens veiksmus. Netgi įmanoma, kad ir pats asmuo vėliau nesuvoks, kodėl jis veikė būtent tokiu būdu. Siūlomas paaiškinimas, kad šis ryšys nutraukiamas, kuomet veiksmo procesas, sudarytas iš trijų veiksmo etapų, nėra taisyklingai plėtojamas. Tada kyla nesusipratimų, kurie, būdami tiesiogiai susiję su veiksmu, straipsnyje įvardijami agentiško nesusipratimais. Šios rūšies nesusipratimų tyrimas gali būti gyvybiškai svarbus, siekiant suprasti konfliktus, kylančius komunikacijos veiksmo bei ieškant abipusio supratimo.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** agentiškas, inteligibilumas, prasmės suteikimas, racionalumas, nesusipratimas

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## Introduction

Philosophy is often about the connection between what is *intelligible* and what is *rationality comprehensible*. Rationality is described as a human characteristic that facilitates adaptation to the environment to interact with it, to make decisions, and relate to others. Two categories of rationality are usually distinguished: 1) theoretical rationality, which refers to knowledge; and 2) practical rationality, which manifests itself in our decisions and actions. On the other hand, intelligibility is understood as a disposition to make something understandable, providing it with coherence and rationality. It is important to distinguish between intelligibility and sense-making. ‘Being intelligible’ refers to the human being’s ability to understand and explain an action rationally and coherently, whereas ‘making sense’ denotes whether an action has a clear and understandable purpose or meaning. Intelligibility is located in ‘the mental world’ (along with reasons and knowledge), while sense-making involves what we perceive in the environment in which we act, the ‘sensible world’. For instance, a symbolic action would make sense but could be difficult to explain rationally.

When intelligibility is separated from the construction of meaning-giving during the action, misunderstandings arise, which lead to communication and understanding problems between the interacting agents. A misunderstanding happens when several people do not share the same understanding of something. This paper will focus on the causes that produce misunderstandings when action is affected by disconnecting intelligibility and meaning-making. The agent may act for reasons that she<sup>1</sup> considers intelligible, but when she interacts in a particular situation, what happens there may cause her to change her behavior to match what makes sense at that precise moment. This might occur even without her fully understanding why she is doing it, the way when we get carried away by what other people are doing in a context that we do not fully understand because we think it will make us fit in. That is to say, meaning-making can be ‘agreed upon’ by all agents interacting in a scenario to reach a common understanding. This can: 1) make actions fit in a context, or 2) do the opposite, and cause misunderstandings. It is in the construction of meaning that the failure of intelligibility is best perceived, leading to what, for ease of analysis, I have called *misunderstandings within agency*.

To explain this, we will begin (Section 1) by briefly showing how the concepts of rationality and intelligibility are understood from the point of view of action. We will discuss (Section 2) how rationality is related to intelligibility and sense-making, which is essential to understanding how *misunderstandings within agency* arise. Next, we will present (Section 3) the acting process which is structured around *three states of action*. Next, we will define (Section 3) the acting process, which is structured around three states of action. These are the ones that help the agent carry out her actions in an intelligible and meaningful way. We will analyze how intelligibility relates to meaning-giving during action through the acting process, and how this can fail. We will examine (Section 4) an

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<sup>1</sup> I use “she” as the unmarked pronoun that is semantically gender-neutral.

example of *misunderstandings within agency* to justify the central argument. It is important to identify how misunderstandings are generated because they affect the communicative act and mutual understanding. The conclusion (Section 5) will be that the agent does not give up her agency (she acts voluntarily and tries to make herself understood), even when her actions deviate from intelligibility, seeking to make her behavior meaningful in a particular situation. This produces *misunderstandings within agency*.

## 1. On rationality and intelligibility

In everyday social interactions, we relate to others in specific situations. Different theoretical approaches have attempted to explain how reason and intelligibility guide the subject to act and to interpret the actions of others. Understanding why others behave as they do and how they are likely to act next makes it easier to adapt our actions to give meaning in a context. However, on many occasions, we cannot avoid being misunderstood because of misinterpretations of our actions. Similarly, it can be difficult for us to understand our own behavior at any given moment. This gives rise to a kind of misunderstanding directly related to the subject's agency, to how she relates to others and understands her actions. For this, I have called them *misunderstandings within agency*. They arise when intelligibility becomes delinked from meaning-making. Thus, the acting process fails. This can lead to our actions seeming inconsistent or irrational, which affects the communicative act.

It seems impossible not to think of language when we talk about misunderstandings. Rationality is related to language in terms of its use and meaning. Language acts like a mediator between the mind and the world because the subject performs a rational action when she speaks (Russell 1975). Reason and language are within the behavioral process by which the speaker communicates.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the misunderstandings that will be analyzed in this work are those that occur directly when the subject interacts. Therefore, in this section, rationality, intelligibility, and meaning-giving will be only discussed considering their relationship with action and agency.

It is generally accepted that all human beings are rational and tend to behave intelligibly, especially when we interact with others. Rationality is what allows us to develop action plans, make decisions, and interrelate in social settings, making it easier for us to adapt our behavior in search of a common understanding.<sup>3</sup> Thus, rationality could be understood as a tool that offers a causal explanation of the reasons why the agent acts. This conception of the mind, governed by the constitutive principle of rationality, avoids the irrational (Davidson 2004). Rationality is considered to be a necessary condition for intentional action (Davison 1984). Therefore, since humans are intentional agents, we must also be rational agents.

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<sup>2</sup> In this line, linking rationality, language, and the communicative process, see, for example, Searle (2003), Thompson (1983), or Niemi (2005).

<sup>3</sup> I refer to *rational action* as that which can be justified based on reasons. I am aware that this statement raises a relevant discussion about the ontological nature of reasons and the relationship established between reasons and actions. For further information, see Álvarez (2010) or Broncano (2017).

Along with rationality, there is intelligibility. The agent behaves rationally in order to be intelligible. Since we are all rational agents, we should all act intelligently. We interpret others according to our similarities (the Principle of Charity). This will allow us to interpret the reasons for their actions and to reach mutual understanding (Davidson 2001).<sup>4</sup> By assuming this, we avoid attributing irrationality or lack of understanding to human behavior. All of this makes it easier for us to interpret the actions of others and avoid any possible misunderstandings that may arise. Interpretation, then, is understood as a communicative act that gives meaning to the actions of others, considering the similarities between the interpreter and the interpreted subject. However, another way of understanding interpretation is that it is a by-product of the social constitution of human agency. This new approach that identifies the agent as a social subject moves away from the proposal that places rationality under the normative domain of mental concepts.

The collective dimension is also constitutive of the human rational agency. The subject makes herself by interacting socially. The social construction of the mind takes place in a space in which the agent must reach agreement(s) with others, interpret what they are doing, and adapt her actions to the context – even though, by doing this, she is constantly exposed to being misunderstood. Intelligibility is linked to rationality in action, understanding that our condition as subjects is constituted by our capacity to decide how to behave in each particular situation (Broncano 2017). Thus, sociability is part of practical rationality. Intelligibility regulates the constitutive process of our actions by favoring our understanding and that of others. This understanding is developed jointly – by considering the cultural patterns associated with certain situations. The subject will try to make herself understood by others so they can interpret her behavior and achieve mutual understanding. In this sense, interaction is understood as a communicative exchange. As such, misunderstandings sometimes do occur.

In short, the term ‘intelligible’ is associated with the ‘comprehensible’. Intelligibility is often placed alongside rationality in the mind of the subject. Intelligibility can be described, then, as a kind of mental disposition that guides our actions toward consistency and rationality. Intelligibility would occur before action (along with reasons) and make our actions understandable to ourselves and others. For its part, meaning-giving develops in the action itself. It could be seen as what brings intelligibility ‘on stage’, when a person tries to adapt her behavior to what she thinks is coherent according to what is happening. Sense-making is a process of adjustment and reinterpretation that occurs in the context of the same action. This epistemic dimension of agency shows how the mutual understanding of our actions is something more than a purely intellectual condition (Broncano 2017). Pursuing intelligibility is giving meaning to what is done (Velleman 2009). That means that while intelligibility provides a theoretical precondition for understanding, sense-making is the active and contextual process of attributing meaning to actions as they unfold. Both concepts are interdependent and operate on the agency of the subject.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Principle of Interpretive Charity* seems to be inscribed within the intellectualist model of rationality, such that understanding the other requires an intellectual reconstruction of what has led her to act. Rather, this should be understood as a way of approaching others that, on some occasions, can be epistemically advantageous and, on others, can plunge us into confusion (Broncano 2017).

However, intelligibility can be detached from meaning-making, since our interactions are mediated not only by a network of mental concepts but also by networks of affects and symbolic actions that lead us to act, at times, under conditions of non-transparency or opacity. It is of importance to remember that meaning-making is not about what one should do, but how one acts with a view to intelligibility (Velleman 2009). The link between intelligibility and sense-making allows intelligibility to be agreed upon by all the agents involved in a scene through meaning-making, as they try to understand each other and communicate – although this does not always happen. It is about acting from the perspective of what makes sense to achieve understanding, even though sometimes this understanding seeks to give meaning according to what is happening and moves away from intelligibility and the prior reasons for acting. Therefore, when this link is broken, it is understandable that intelligibility fails. The failure of intelligibility gives rise to *misunderstandings within agency* and could hinder both (self-)understanding and the communicative process. This problem occurs because the acting process does not function properly.

## 2. Outlining the concept of misunderstanding

Misunderstandings are usually broadly defined as a lack of understanding or misinterpretation of something. They can occur for a variety of reasons, such as the use of ambiguous language (Wittgenstein 2002), the difference between personal experiences or beliefs (Davidson 1984),<sup>5</sup> the failure to match perspectives or frames of reference (Putnam 1988),<sup>6</sup> errors in mutual understanding (Velleman 2009), or a problem of correspondence between the representation that the subject has of herself and that which others make of her (Garand, 2009), among others. Misunderstandings are generally regarded as an inevitable phenomenon within the complex communication process. These affect the understanding of the meaning of words, the ability to interpret the context of a conversation, and the willingness to be receptive to the perspective of another. Misunderstandings affect people's ability to cooperate, understand each other, and work together to achieve a common goal. All of this leads to the idea that misunderstandings – which tend to have negative consequences, making communication, cooperation, and conflict resolution more difficult – should be avoided, or at least it should be useful to learn how to overcome them in the future.

Additionally, it is possible to relate misunderstanding and agency if we understand action as a form of communication that can be affected by misunderstanding. They also affect the intelligibility of actions which are intrinsically linked to mutual understanding

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<sup>5</sup> It is often said that misunderstandings are an important part of the human communication process. However, while they can have negative consequences (such as loss of communication, relationship breakdown, and violence), they can also be an opportunity for learning (Davidson 1984).

<sup>6</sup> Misunderstandings can also arise from a lack of shared frames of reference, which include beliefs, values, and experiences. This can lead to different interpretations of reality. For example, an event may be interpreted differently by two people with different religious beliefs. Misunderstandings are an inevitable part of human communication and cannot be eliminated, but they can be reduced (Putman 1988).

and the ability of humans to coordinate socially (Velleman 2009).<sup>7</sup> As a result, misunderstandings would cause serious difficulties in understanding and making actions (our own and those of others) intelligible. Solving them would not only increase our knowledge of the world but improve people's understanding and ability to 'get along' in society (Velleman 2009).

Although misunderstandings within agency arise from problems in the acting process, one might think that the subject's misunderstanding about herself is different from the one she has when interpreting the actions of others. This is only partly true because both forms of misunderstanding arise from the same source: problems in the acting process, as we shall see below.<sup>8</sup> However, these conflicts may occur in different ways. When we interpret someone's behavior, even if we consider other things, what predominates is what is happening in the context and what would be coherent and correct to do in it. But when we interpret our actions, the emotional process, desires, beliefs, etc. come into play. The way the subject perceives herself plays an important role in the misunderstanding. Self-awareness is fundamental to action and personal identity. It involves reflection and narration of actions. These reflections may be subject to errors, misunderstandings, or distortions. There may be cases where the subject does not fully understand the motivations, intentions, or reasons that have guided her actions. Therefore, it is possible to misinterpret or distort one's experiences and motivations. Not understanding our actions once they are performed may reflect a dissociation between the prior intelligibility and reason for acting and the sense-making at the moment of action.<sup>9</sup>

Let us take the case of an American student who visits a Spanish friend in Buñol (Valencia province, Spain) in August to improve her Spanish. Her arrival in the city coincides with the *Tomatina*, a popular festival unknown to her. Looking for her friend's address, she is surprised to be hit by a tomato. Somewhat disoriented, she looks around to see what is happening and thinks it is an accident. But, at that moment, she receives another blow, and another one later. The young student does not know how to react and tries to hide behind her suitcase to protect herself. For her, it does not make sense people throw tomatoes. How should, then, she behave? The possible actions that the girl could take – throwing her suitcase, screaming, hitting, or running away in terror – will not be guided by intelligibility because she cannot understand what is happening. She tries to make sense

<sup>7</sup> *Disagreements* and *misunderstandings* should not be confused because they do not always occur together. Not all misunderstandings are disagreements. In fact, in some cases, it is possible to speak of a 'happy misunderstanding', for example when a lack of understanding induces us to act with a positive outcome (Garand 2009).

<sup>8</sup> In both cases, the misunderstanding originated in conflicts that arise when the acting process is not properly developed, even though the manifestation and interpretation of this misunderstanding may differ: 1) In the agent, it causes a lack of clarity about her conduct. 2) In other people, it produces a discrepancy between what is expected and what happens, leading to erroneous interpretations of the actor's behavior. Therefore, although misunderstandings may arise from the same dysfunction in the acting process, its manifestation, and the resulting interpretations may vary significantly between the subject who acts and the one who interprets.

<sup>9</sup> I know that a broader distinction could be made between misunderstandings of oneself and misunderstandings of others. However, exploring this distinction would require a separate article. This work focuses on how misunderstandings fracture the acting process, suggesting that they affect both (self-)understanding and communication.

of her behavior in terms of what is happening on stage, reacting to the actions of others. It is important to note that the fact that the young girl moves away from intelligibility when making sense of her behavior, based on what is happening in the scene, does not always lead her to act unreasonably. That is to say, although their behavior may be intelligible, and even though meaning-giving guides their behavior during the interaction, the acting process works correctly. There is no disconnection between meaning-making and intelligibility in this case. Therefore, no *misunderstandings within agency* arise. As it can be seen, intelligibility usually acts in action through sense-making, and they are not always separated from each other.

Another problem that could arise would be that people reject their behavior because it does not fit their idea of how to behave during that event. For instance, if the young woman starts hitting people with her bag to get them to leave, the *Tomatina* participants may fail to understand why she is doing this. As a result, there would be a conflict in interpreting and making sense of each other's actions, and, therefore, misunderstandings would need to be addressed within agency and the acting process. Misunderstanding others' actions often involves interpreting them based on our beliefs, the patterns of action associated with a context, and what happens there. In this case, the misunderstanding arises from a disjunction between what we consider intelligible and the meaning of others' actions. This kind of misunderstanding reflects the complexity of interpersonal communication and the weight that intelligibility has when interpreting another agent's actions in a social context. So, from a philosophical perspective, the difference between not understanding the actions of others and not understanding our own might lie in understanding the context in which they occur. Nevertheless, all *misunderstandings within agency* arise from conflicts in the acting process.

This work analyzes *misunderstandings within agency* in the acting process: when the fact that there is an opportunity to act intelligently does not necessarily lead to doing so. It is why, with the sole purpose of distinguishing them from the common concept of misunderstanding that usually refers to less pragmatic internal mental states, they have been called *misunderstandings within agency*. These misunderstandings are due, among other things, to a lack of understanding of the actions of others or to certain difficulties in empathizing with and interpreting the behavior of others during the action itself. Therefore, they are directly related to the agency and, consequently, to the acting process carried out by the subject when interacting in a context. *Misunderstandings within agency* arise when the acting process faces difficulties that prevent it from developing properly.

### 3. The acting process: Three stages that shape the action

This proposal understands action as a process – rather than the result of a series of mental states – because other elements also intervene in it, such as the patterns of action that have been incorporated throughout life, the reaction that our behavior causes in others, the implicit rules of each context in which we interact, and so on. The agent acquires all this and



uses it by acting through what I have called the *three stages of action*<sup>10</sup> that make up the acting process. This idea is based on the analogy – previously made by Goffman (1970) and Velleman (2009) – that the agent behaves in a similar way to the theatre performer: she follows behavioral patterns associated with the stage, which at least partly guide and condition her performance, while exposed to the external gaze of the audience (which remains present even when she is alone).

The *three stages of action* are not ordered in any particular way, because they are constantly interrelated according to the subject's needs. I call them *stages* to make it easier to understand the structure of the acting process, and also because they are based on how the performer works. However, they should be seen as a kind of scaffolding that supports the subject's action who tries to be intelligible to the other actors. They would be the following: 1) *Embodiment Stage*, in which experience and belief systems are used to build narratives that support our knowledge of the world and give us some guidelines for acting. In addition, throughout our lives, we learn many behavioral patterns associated with different roles, which help us to adapt our actions to the context in which we interact.<sup>11</sup> 2) *Embedding Stage*, in which the agent interacts with others in the scene and puts into practice the behavioral patterns it has acquired. By reacting to a situation, it is also possible to create new action guidelines and modify the previous ones.<sup>12</sup> 3) *Stage* in which we *engage* with the scenario in which we interact according to our role. At this stage, unwritten rules of action linked to the context are accepted, which allows us to behave intelligibly and consistently in a given situation (by understanding the context from an external perspective). Suppose we extrapolate the three stages of action to the performer's work. In that case, we can clearly distinguish: 1) how the actor has to build up her character to find out how to act, 2) how she has to behave in her role on stage, interacting with the other actors in different scenes to embed appropriate behavioral guide-

<sup>10</sup> The *three stages of action* are based on the work that the dramatic actor carries out when she wants to represent a character or perform in front of an audience, as previously developed by Goffman (1970) and Velleman (2009). They should therefore not be understood in the same way, although they may at first sight be reminiscent of the 4E approach to cognition. While the *three stages of action* are about how the action is structured and how it happens, the 4E proposal refers to integrated cognitive systems and new ways of thinking about the mind. For more information on the *three stages of action*, see (Rivero-Obra 2021); and on the 4Es, see, for example, Newen et al. (2018).

<sup>11</sup> We can find this kind of misunderstanding in violent situations that arise in moments of stress, anxiety, or when people act based on their emotions. For instance, it could be the case of a man who feels jealous when he thinks his wife is flirting via chat and, driven by this emotion, throws her mobile phone on the floor. However, this man has never behaved similarly or experienced jealousy. Thus, he cannot understand why he did it, even though, at this moment, it made sense to him to act this way. Based on his experience and belief system, it seems wrong to him to act in this way. This would cause a delink between meaning-giving and intelligibility, which would lead to a lack of self-understanding and could affect this man's self-conception.

<sup>12</sup> A crucial aspect of agency is to consider that the action is also constructed by the agent's reactions, which are made by interacting in a specific context. During the interaction, we find a type of practical rationality that involves the reciprocal configuration of intention and action, instead of the instrumental kind of rationality in which action is understood to be determined solely by intention (Bertinetto & Grüneberg 2023). Misunderstandings of this type are related to the understanding that we intend to make ourselves intelligible to others or to try to make sense of the situation. That is, they affect the way we behave in social contexts and the way we learn and try to achieve (a) mutual understanding.



lines for that situation, and 3) how the actor commits herself to carry out these patterns of action by playing her role, trying to make everything understandable to the audience, which also conditions the performer's behavior by its very presence. Considering all the aspects mentioned, the *three stages of action* can give meaning to the subject's actions as they are being carried out.

Let us now take the classic example of someone who enters her house, without expecting anyone to be there, to make herself comfortable and have some rest. But then, just as she turns on the light, she notices an open window and sees someone running through it. If we analyze this case from the perspective of the *three stages of action*: 1) The person's actions, at first, are guided by her desires and beliefs (based on her previous experience) and, also, by behavioral patterns acquired through habit (the *embodiment stage*). Thus, upon entering, she could have the intention of taking off her shoes and coat, closing the door from inside, leaving her smartphone in the hall, and putting on her pajamas to feel more comfortable. 2) But when she turns on the light and notices that something strange is happening in her house, her initial intention changes and her actions adapt to the new situation: she will no longer leave her smartphone or change her clothes, but she will behave with caution and immediately call the police – she follows different guidelines of action because they seem more coherent in such a scenario where she participates and shapes the new scene through her actions (the *embedded stage*). 3) Even if she is at home, she is aware that there may still be dangerous people and that the police may arrive at any moment. Therefore, she will continue to wear street clothes and prepare to speak and behave the way she thinks appropriate, according to the rules of action linked to the context (the *engagement stage*). For example, she will prepare her documents, find out if anything has been stolen, arm herself with an object to defend herself if the intruder poses a threat, and so on.

*The three stages of action* make it easier for this person to adapt her actions to the change in context so that they can be understood (by herself and others) as reasonable. As it can be seen, the acting process is structured on more elements than mental states, since knowledge, mutual understanding, the rules of the context, and the actions of other agents, among others, also intervene in it. Furthermore, intelligibility and meaning-making play a fundamental role in the acting process, above all, when it comes to achieving a common understanding that allows the interpretation of others. However, although I agree that intelligibility might intercede previously in the action – when the subject tries to make her actions coherent and understandable (Velleman 2009) – I think that meaning-giving is placed in the same scene, during the interaction. This is evident when we think it is reasonable to act in a certain way, and, at the moment of doing so, we realize (from the context and the reactions of others) that it is better to act differently. This allows us to readjust our behavior to make sense and is understandable, even when it deviates from what we initially considered intelligible.

Intelligibility and agency are closely related if we understand intelligibility as a disposition that allows actions to be rational, understandable, and meaningful. *Misunderstandings within agency*, then, are the result of the discrepancy that can arise between

intelligibility and meaning-making in the performance of action. This happens when the action process is confronted with conflicts that hinder the correct development of the *three stages of action*. What happens then is that we make certain mistakes in interpreting the actions of others, which means that we do not know how to adapt our behavior to the situation, and our reactions do not make sense. This disconnection between intelligibility and meaning-making can also lead to conflicts of understanding for the subject itself – as when we do the opposite of what seems intelligible or reasonable to us in an attempt to make sense of our behavior in a situation that we cannot understand. For example, if I notice that everyone in a dark cinema is wearing sunglasses, I choose to put them on, even if I do not understand why they are acting so, because doing it makes sense to me in such a situation. Analyzing *misunderstandings within agency* helps us understand, from a practical perspective, how intelligibility is linked to reasoning, and why intelligibility is sometimes disconnected from meaning-making.

#### **4. The disconnection between intelligibility and meaning-making in the acting process: misunderstandings within agency**

As social beings, we try to make our actions make sense and be understood, although we will not always achieve it. On some occasions, our actions are considered (by others and by ourselves) inappropriate or meaningless according to our own experience and belief system, the situation in which we interact, and the relationship we maintain with others in such a context. This is due to a problem in one of the *three stages of action* that make up the acting process that causes intelligibility and meaning-giving to become disconnected and the subject's actions to adapt to the current circumstances.

To illustrate what we have said so far, let us examine the example of a young activist, passionate about social justice. He and his younger sister decide to participate in a peaceful protest. He intends to behave at the demonstration calmly and avoid violence. During the protest, the crowd becomes agitated, and some people start destroying public property. Then, the police block their way by trying to break up the demonstration. The young man does not understand why people are acting like this and tries to keep his sister away from the attacks. But, at that moment, the sister is hit with an object on her head and falls to the ground. When that happens, the young man looks around and sees a policeman near his sister. Then, believing that he was the one who had attacked her, the young man reacts in anger and punches the policeman until he falls to the ground injured. Once he has finished fighting, he realizes what he has done and feels confused and remorseful. The confused gaze with which his sister looks at him makes him think that perhaps the policeman was not the aggressor. In any case, he does not even recognize himself in his actions. Therefore, he cannot understand why he has done it.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> For further insight into how *misunderstandings within agency* arise when emotions influence action, see Rivero-Obra 2024.

Bearing in mind that *the three stages of action* are always interrelated and difficult to separate, we can see that the main source of the young man's misunderstanding of himself is the disconnection of the acting process with his beliefs and with the role of a peaceful activist that he wants to carry out (the *embodiment*). Although, at first, his reasons and intelligibility led him to act peacefully, during his interaction in the scene what makes sense for him is to behave violently (i.e., he is moved by emotions). Here, there is a new conflict with the *embedded stage*, as the young man participates in his actions in the creation of a scene with which he does not agree. This directly affects the *engagement stage*: the tendency of the young man to be peaceful and to respect the rules. Thus, intelligibility is disconnected from meaning-giving to the scene when the acting process does not work correctly. This causes the young person to lack self-understanding.

While the young man violently is attacking a police officer, his sister, who has been beaten by a protester, is watching him while lying on the ground. The girl may be thinking that, perhaps, her brother has been carried away by the anger of other protesters, but she does not understand what is happening. That is, she is trying to come up with an explanation for what her brother is doing that would make sense in the context (the *embedding stage*). But, even so, the violent actions her brother has been carrying out do not fit with the image she has of him (the *embodiment stage*), and she cannot understand why he has done what he has done. Furthermore, it did not make sense to act violently in the context of the 'peaceful demonstration' they were attending (the *commitment stage*). Thus, the girl is unable to understand why her brother acts as he does, and fails to interpret his behavior.

As it can be seen, the *misunderstandings within agency* arise from conflicts affecting the acting process that disconnect intelligibility and meaning-making. However, agency remains effective in such misunderstandings because the subject acts voluntarily. That means *the three stages of action* carry out the acting process even if they do not do so satisfactorily. The interpretation of the actions of others and our behavior is building on the acting process. So, the misunderstandings may not be the same. But they are happening on the same scaffolding. For this reason, I have called them *misunderstandings within agency*. In our daily social interactions, they all manifest problems of (self-)understanding and communication.

## Conclusion

Misunderstandings are more common in everyday life than one might think. In particular, misunderstandings in the area of agency appear when intelligibility – linked to acting coherently and reasonably – is dissociated from the meaning-giving when the action is carried out. We could consider this as a failure of intelligibility. This can happen in two ways: 1) the subject moves away from intelligibility when making sense of her actions in a particular situation and, after the action, fails to understand why she has acted in such a way; 2) the person has difficulty interpreting the actions of other agents because, for her, they move away from intelligibility. However, in neither of these cases does the subject lose her agency, since she always acts voluntarily.

Lack of intelligibility leads to misunderstandings directly related to the subject's agency because, often, they are a source of problems in the communicative act. Misunderstandings occur when the acting process does not develop correctly. That is when one of *the three stages of the action* that make it up is not carried out or is interrupted for some reason. Intelligibility is related to rationality at a practical level and directly intervenes in *the three stages of the action*. Subjects interact in the scene trying to make sense of their behavior, by seeking (a) common understanding. Thus, through the search for meaning, it could be said that intelligibility can be agreed upon by all the agents participating in a scene. If this consensus is not successful, *misunderstandings within agency* occur, which lead to problems of (self-)understanding and difficulties in carrying out the communicative act.

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