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# Ontological Security, Self-Articulation and the Securitization of Identity

*Christopher S. Browning*

&

*Pertti Joenniemi*

University of Warwick

Karelian Institute, University of  
Eastern Finland

Abstract: The concept of ontological security has made increasing headway within International Relations, in particular through its ability to offer alternative explanations of the forces underpinning security dilemmas and conflict in world politics. While welcoming the insights already provided by its application, this article argues that the concept's use to date has been too much geared to questions of identity-related stability, with change viewed as disturbing and anxiety-inducing. In contrast, the article calls for a more open understanding that: (i) links ontological security to reflexivity and avoids collapsing together the concepts of self, identity and ontological security; (ii) avoids privileging securitization over desecuritization as a means for generating ontological security; and (iii) opens out the concept beyond a narrow concern with questions of conflict and the conduct of violence more towards the theorization of positive change.

**Key words:** Ontological security, securitization, desecuritization, identity, difference

**Acknowledgements:** We would like to thank the reviewers and participants at the workshop on ontological security, held at Lund University in May 2013, for their comments on earlier versions of this article.

## **Introduction**

Recently, the concept of ontological security has made headway in theoretical debates about security in International Relations (IR). Understood broadly as a subject's capacity to uphold a stable view of its environment and thereby 'go on' with everyday life, the concept has been utilized to provide alternative explanations of various phenomena, from the reproduction of security dilemmas (Mitzen 2006; Rumelili 2015a) to the radicalization of individuals in an era of global terrorism (Croft 2012).

The general presupposition of most of this literature is that actors (with the focus usually on states) prefer stability and certitude to change, which is seen as generating anxieties and therefore best avoided. Actors are therefore liable to reassert established patterns of behaviour, routines and identities, rather than embrace change precisely because of the perceived need and value of maintaining stable self-concepts.

Such works, focusing on what has been called 'security-in-being', have provided important insights.<sup>1</sup> However, the application of ontological security to IR arguably has been geared too much toward identity-related stability. With the emphasis on maintaining stable and safe identities, change has been perceived as something disturbing and potentially harmful. The application of the concept has thus been largely premised on a restrictive understanding of ontological security that narrows its focus in IR to questions of the preservation of extant identities and, more specifically, the perceived need to ensure the security of identity as a motivator of (state) action – in particular of conflictual practices. In this article we return to ontological security's

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<sup>1</sup> For a broader collection of contributions employing ontological security as an inroad into studies on conflict resolution, see Rumelili (2015b).

philosophical underpinnings in order to provide it with a different interpretation, one emphasizing adaptability rather than stability, and in doing so seek to liberate it from the tendency to link ontological security closely to practices of securitization. We make three central points.

First, by showing how, in their empirical analyses, established IR accounts of ontological security have tended to conflate the self with identity, we argue they have similarly reduced ontological security to a question of identity preservation. This collapsing together of the self, identity and ontological security is problematic because attempts to reinforce an established identity can actually at times undermine the actor's sense of ontological security. Instead of identity being the essence of ontological security, we argue that identity(ies) are better viewed as crucial elements in the self's attempts at achieving it. Instead of conflating self and identity, ontological security analysis would therefore benefit from analysing how subjects become connected to particular identities and why they articulate identity claims in the way they do.<sup>2</sup> Overall, ontological security is not just a question of stability, but also adaptability, i.e. openness towards and the ability to cope with change.

Second, we highlight how in existing analyses the reduction of ontological security to identity preservation typically is understood to result in securitization processes designed to solidify and close down an identity, with the stability brought about by securitization's 'freezing' of identities seen as enhancing ontological security. In

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<sup>2</sup> Notably, the self-identity distinction is viewed in some quarters as inherently problematic because it is seen to presume the existence of a pre-social self, an essentialised ego, that instrumentally selects identities at will. Such a view fails to understand how individuals are embedded within social contexts from their very genesis, or 'thrown into the world' to use a Lacanian formulation. Following the Lacanian theme the self-identity distinction might be alternatively reformulated in terms of one between subjectivity and identity.

contrast, identity transformation and opening up identities for change through adaptation and engagement in reflexive processes is viewed as threatening ontological security by generating unwarranted stress, uncertainty and anxiety. This has resulted in a problematic association whereby securitization – the construction of identities on the basis of the negative difference provided by radical otherness and enmity – is seen to enhance identity-related stability and therefore also ontological security, whereas desecuritization processes promoting change are viewed as fundamentally destabilizing.

This view is problematic on two levels. First, since identities are always in the making, never fully stable, settled and complete, the promise of stability in securitization practices is illusory. Alternative possibilities for self-articulation always exist and this plurality may even improve the chances of generating ontological security, rather than necessarily detracting from it. Therefore, instead of the emphasis on identity stability, more focus is needed on how reflexivity towards identity is also central to ontological security. Second, the association of securitization with stability and desecuritization with change and instability is also problematic because both entail the destabilization of a prevailing state of affairs. This also means, however, that desecuritization – and not just securitization – may be central to re-stabilization processes.

Our third argument pertains to studies highlighting the relationship between identity-stability and physical violence. These studies, premised on the view that on occasions ontological stability has been aspired for at the expense of physical security, have as such brought about important and innovative analysis with respect to various current-

day forms of violence such as those related to migration (Croft, 2012; Huysmans, 1998). There is, however, the risk that these approaches provide, at least indirectly, a normative justification for the conduct of violence, and may also, in the field of IR-theory, reinforce various traditional approaches, including even realist and Hobbesian views of international relations. Framed more broadly, the conflation of self with identity and the emphasis on securitization dynamics has resulted in ontological security being invoked too narrowly, with the tendency so far being to emphasise how debates about identity can easily spill over into violence and questions of physical security.

The temptation to prove the concept's value by focusing on the dynamics between identity-stability and the conduct of violence is, as such, quite understandable. However, in the contemporary world articulations of identity related to security are arguably as much the exception as the rule. Indeed, such articulations are today just as likely to be made by prioritizing economic contexts, especially insofar as states are transforming into 'competition states' (Cerny, 1990). In fact, the tendency to contrast ontological security to physical security, thereby perceiving other forms of difference-construction as secondary and marginal, neglects the extent to which a profoundly different environment now exists, and one where traditional security concerns often no longer have primacy. This calls for a quite different thematization of ontological security and one more attuned to changing normative environments in which different sorts of identities are claimed. Established and changing norms of subjectivity are particularly important in this respect, with the desire to match up to and gain recognition as particular types of subject, central to many elements of ontological security seeking.

## **Ontological Security beyond Identity**

To reiterate, our first argument is that by conflating self with identity the literature on ontological security in IR has also in turn tended to reduce ontological security down to concerns of identity preservation. The point can be demonstrated with reference to two specific works by Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008), which we highlight because they have quickly gained the status of providing seminal statements on the relevance of ontological security to world politics. They are, as such, perhaps the two most widely referenced texts in the field.

The conflation between self and identity and the subsequent reduction of ontological security down to questions of identity is evident in Mitzen's initial outlining of ontological security. Drawing on Giddens and Laing, Mitzen (2006: 342) notes that 'Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency'. She continues, however, by arguing that 'Individuals need to feel secure in who they are, as *identities or selves*. Some, deep forms of uncertainty *threaten this identity security*' (Mitzen 2006: 342 emphases added).

The first point to note here is how identities and selves are presented as largely interchangeable terms. Insofar as a distinction is made, selves figure merely as a reflection of identities. This, we suggest, is problematic as it misunderstands the role of identity in processes constituting subjectivity. Seen from a Lacanian perspective, the idea of a unified self with a single coherent identity is problematic and is itself 'an

imaginary construct that the individual needs to believe in to compensate for a constitutive lack that lies at the core of her (or his) identity' (Epstein 2010: 334). Thus, while subjects lack singular identities they necessarily engage in practices of identification as part of ongoing attempts to capture a sense of being and **to** locate the self in the world. Such attempts, however, are never finalized as 'dislocatory events' will undermine established identifications and compel subjects 'to *identify* with new objects and discourses to fill the lack made visible' (original emphasis) (Glynos and Howarth 2008: 162-3; Edkins 2003: 366).

Second, however, identities and their stability are then prioritized as the foundation of ontological security, a move that ultimately enables Mitzen to draw a distinction between physical security and ontological security, a distinction that has become somewhat defining of how many people have come to view and utilize the concept. This is not least because the conceptual distinction introduced by Mitzen provides the basis for her core claim, one that fundamentally challenges established assumptions in the discipline. This is that ontological security concerns – the need to preserve a stable sense of identity – frequently outweigh considerations of physical security in the motivations underlying actors' behaviour. Since 'individual identity is formed and sustained through relationships', states, she argues, may thus prefer the continuation of a harmful or apparently self-defeating conflictual relationship precisely because the enduring conflict reaffirms a sense of certainty about the identity of both oneself and the other (Mitzen 2006: 342).

Steele concurs, arguing that while material concerns of physical existence and social needs are important, the driving force of state behaviour is the need to secure and



maintain a particular and established self-identity through time. Like Mitzen, therefore, he argues states will ‘pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence’ (Steele 2008: 2). What states seek to avoid, from his perspective, are behaviours that might radically disrupt their sense of self-identity and become a source of shame and anxiety as a result of the moral implications of failing to live up to who one claims to be (also Steele 2005).

Importantly, Steele’s analysis differs from Mitzen’s on various points. For example, while Mitzen adopts a relational approach to identity/ontological security, Steele (2008: 2-3) posits selves that generate a self-biography, an identity narrative of who they are that assists them in maintaining ‘consistent self-concepts’, and which provides the bases and established form of articulation upon which they then interact with the world. However, insofar as articulations deviating from established biographical identity narratives are viewed as creating dissonance and therefore potentially harmful, his analysis, like Mitzen’s, also ultimately becomes one about protecting and living up to the particular claims to identity an actor might make. As such, it too in effect shifts the concern of ontological security from the self to questions of identity-related stability.

Importantly, this reduction of ontological security down to the perceived need to uphold particular understandings of identity, a move that results in identity being prioritized over Self, is actually somewhat retroactive in these two core texts. This is to say that in outlining the concept’s contours, the subsumption of ontological security to identity is not immediately apparent. Indeed, at the conceptual level analysts have remained relatively faithful to the development of the concept by the sociologist

Anthony Giddens. Thus, following Giddens both Mitzen and Steele emphasise the importance of ‘basic trust’ and ‘reflexivity’ to an actor’s search for ontological security.

For Giddens (1991: 38-39) ‘basic trust’ is fundamental to ontological security and refers to a sense of confidence and trust in the nature of the world – the ‘existential anchorings of reality’ in his terms – and optimism that things generally work out in the end. For individuals basic trust is a product of positive early childhood relations with key caregivers, with this developing a sense of reliability in persons and one’s environment. Basic trust, he argues, is fostered through the emergence of habit and routines in the relationships between the infant and its caregivers, with such routines becoming ‘a crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties’.

While routines are understood as central in helping create a sense of stability about the nature of the world, Giddens is also clear that routinization and the subsequent aspiration to achieve identity-related stability can go too far. What is needed on occasion is *not* an ability to uphold stability and defend the prevailing state of affairs, but the ability to cope with change. As he puts it, ‘a blind commitment to established routines, come what may, is a sign of neurotic compulsion’, and generally results from an infant’s failure to develop a healthy sense of basic trust (Giddens 1991: 40). Characteristic of basic trust, therefore, is a capacity for reflexivity enabling the individual to move forward, confronting life’s various ups and downs creatively and innovatively. From this perspective, therefore, for an individual with a well-developed sense of basic trust, anxiety is not necessarily something to be feared. It may, instead, even be welcomed in calling for change, dynamism and renewal – a point noted by

both Mitzen (2006: 350) and Steele (2008: 61). Likewise, as stated by Rumelili (2015: 13), anxiety is not merely restraining but also contains positive potential in providing ‘the actor with that critical, yet fleeting, moment of freedom and choice’.

Understood this way ontological security is not a question of identity per se, but rather of an actor’s capacity to cope with uncertainty and change – something which might actually entail developing and altering the identity narrative, emphasising one identity over another or shifting to a new identity entirely. Indeed, understood as such claims to specific identities are simply one mechanism by which actors may seek to locate themselves and routinize their relationships with the world – whether that world is comprehended as stable or changing.

However, when applied to specific cases ontological security analysis in IR has a tendency to focus precisely on instances where healthy basic trust, reflexivity and flexibility are absent. Thus, Mitzen’s analysis of the perpetuation of security dilemmas is ultimately one that deals with actors which have ‘rigid or maladaptive basic trust’ and which therefore are unable to maintain distance from their routines. Such an actor, she notes, ‘treats routines as ends in themselves rather than as a means toward realizing her goals’ (Mitzen 2006: 350). In such situations actors are likely to cling to their routines more tightly, irrespective of the fact that this might reproduce dysfunctional relationships, physical threats to the self, as well as an inability to articulate the self in ways more attuned to external conditions. Indeed, for Steele (2008: 61) rigid routines ‘not only prevent us from reforming our actions, they inhibit our humanity’.

To be clear, we are not suggesting that Mitzen is in any sense wrong, rather that in focusing her empirical analysis on cases where actors lack a healthy sense of basic trust, she is ultimately focusing on cases in which the actors' sense of self has been collapsed into specific accounts or routinizations of their respective identities. Her analysis is therefore fundamentally one of ontological insecurities, not ontological security. What we get is therefore only one part of the picture of ontological security's analytical insight for international relations.

Mitzen is not alone in this. In focusing on the difficulties present in conflict resolution in long-standing conflicts as well as potential solutions, Rumelili (2015a) likewise emphasizes cases where claims to identity premised on the generation of enemy images have ultimately collapsed the self/identity distinction, privileging the protection of specific claims to identity as the essence of ontological security and selfhood rather than seeing this as an instance of its inversion. Similarly, Zarakol's (2011) study of how Russia, Turkey and Japan have remained trapped in stigmatized relations with the West, forever seeking recognition that is forever withheld, while apparently lacking the reflexive capacity to reposition themselves through alternative routines and identity narratives, is also one where ontological security becomes understood in terms of the recognition of specific claims to a stable and given identity.

Ultimately, what arguably unites these different analyses is a primary focus on how identity constructions motivate state action in different ways, with this largely limiting ontological security analysis to instances when singular identities have

become manifest, largely hegemonic and therefore also rigid and constraining in nature.

The critique is important because if ontological security analysis becomes understood as primarily concerned with questions of the motivational force of identity, then it is reasonable for critics to question what the concept adds beyond the already rather well established concern with identity in IR. For instance, it might be argued that Mitzen's emphasis on the comforting force of the reproduction of enmity that underlies security dilemmas bears some resemblance to the poststructuralist emphasis on the identification of radicalized others as fundamental to constructing state identity – and which in Campbell's (1998) account is one of the central functions of foreign policy. Likewise, Steele's emphasis on the desire of states to live up to their self-proclamations shares much with constructivist (Katzenstein 1996) and critical constructivist (Ringmar 1996) analyses emphasizing how interests are a product of identity constructions. Meanwhile, Zarakol's emphasis on states' apparently doomed attempts to overcome stigmatizations of inferiority resonates closely with the emphasis on processes of 'auto-orientalism' evident in some orientalist and post-colonial literatures on identity (e.g. Thiong'o 1998).

To the extent to which it can be construed as simply synonymous with identity, the danger, therefore, is that ontological security will soon become redundant. We therefore need a clearer sense of its added value. Arguably this might be found, not so much through analyzing the motivational force of particular identity constructions (important as that is), as in interrogating more closely the contextual nature of selfhood and the self's reflexive ability and ways of articulation that might enable it to

shift between identities and routines in moving forward. In the final section we begin to open up some questions and lines of analysis in this regard, beforehand we turn to the question of securitization.

### **Beyond Securitization, towards Reflexivity**

As indicated above, a clear sense of identity is often viewed as the central means through which actors are able to generate a sense of certainty about the world and their position within it. Maintaining clear and consistently regulated distinctions between the identity of the self and that of others, it is argued, can help establish an order and expectations of reciprocal behaviour in relationships.

Focusing on this dynamic several scholars have analyzed potential links between the role of identity as a basis for grounding ontological security and its connection to the Copenhagen School's emphasis on securitization processes and societal security. Croft (2012), for example, has explicitly sought to integrate a concern with ontological security into a re-framing of securitization theory. Focusing on Britain, he demonstrates how British identity has been reframed, and ontological security sought, through the securitization of a new Radical Other in the form of 'the "jihadi" British Muslim' (Croft 2012: 6). For Croft the 'securitization of identity leads to the securitization of subjectivity – the intensified search for and/or attribution of a single, stable identity "regardless of its actual existence"' (Croft quoting Kinnvall 2012: 73). In other words, what Croft is actually demonstrating is another instance of how selfhood and subjectivity have been collapsed into the prioritization of a particular identity – with the creation and maintenance of securitized identities (as in Mitzen's

case) seen as providing the necessary certainties seen as central to ontological security.

Rumelili's (2015a) work on conflict resolution provides another interesting analysis. As highlighted by Wæver (2008) in respect of long running conflicts, conflict resolution processes are often difficult because they are no longer amenable to standard resolution strategies of working out compromises and agreements on the outstanding issues. The problem is that such approaches assume the possibility of a rationalistic, interest-based and utility-driven process of give and take by all parties; i.e. that the issues can actually be resolved through technical solutions. However, in long running conflicts the underlying causes are often contested (perhaps even forgotten), while more importantly, the conflicts have often come to frame the identities of the parties. Resolution would therefore require identity transformation. For Rumelili (2015a) this makes conflict resolution particularly difficult. Following Mitzen, she argues that conflicts can help foster a sense of ontological security by providing stable and clear-cut definitions of the identities held by self and other. Since conflict resolution requires flexibility, a willingness to rethink both the identity of the self and the other, it can therefore be felt as anxiety-inducing. In short, conflict resolution raises uncertainties about whether identities can remain stable, and therefore about what the future world will look like, what our identity will be in the absence of the enemy, what will we do, will we any longer be who we think we are. Faced with such anxieties actors may actually find solace in perpetuating the conflict and the securitized identities on which it rests – provided that identity-stability is seen as catering for ontological security.

Rumelili's distinctive move, here, is to draw on Giddens' distinction between anxiety and fear. As Giddens (1991: 43) notes, while 'Fear is a response to a specific threat and therefore has a definite object', anxiety lacks an object and 'is a generalised state of the emotions of the individual'. Anxiety, in other words, concerns 'perceived threats to the integrity of the security system of the individual' (Giddens 1991: 44-5). Anxiety therefore raises the spectre that one's established systems of meaning might be destabilized, potentially resulting in considerable feelings of disorientation, which might potentially undermine the self's ability to provide a sufficient self-articulation.

Building on this Rumelili reframes the distinction between ontological and physical security drawn in some of the literature. Whereas for Mitzen and Steele the distinction is primarily one of different referents (the self/identity in the case of ontological security, the body in the case of physical security), for Rumelili the distinction is rather one of the different sorts of emotions and practices they generate. Put succinctly, Rumelili suggests that the Copenhagen School's concept of societal security retains the survivalist fears central to concerns about physical security. Thus, societal security focuses on identifiable objects of fear (e.g. immigrants) that are seen to threaten the continued viability of a pre-constituted identity. In contrast, 'Ontological security does not presuppose a threat to identity but underlines an ongoing concern with its stability' (Rumelili 2015a). What she suggests, however, is that actors suffering ontological anxieties about the stability of their identities and systems of meaning are prone to deflect them through securitization processes that constitute objects of fear to physical security and thereby re-establish systems of meaning and certitude about the nature of the world and identity (Tillich 2014: 37). In other words, one way of dealing with anxieties about the unknown is to turn them into



the manageable certainties of objects of fear to physical security through securitization (also Steele 2008: 64). Securitization thereby becomes identified as the form of articulation most likely to generate ontological security.

Understood as such, securitized identities therefore become viewed as sources of ontological security. However, this illuminates only part of the picture and in some respects overly simplifies (and potentially distorts) our understanding of ontological security.

First, as Mälksoo (2015) has suggested, understood as such ontological security studies actually have the potential to end up providing a normative justification for the securitization of identity. In fact, to the extent to which analysts suggest that possessing stable biographies of the state's identity enhances ontological security (instead of emphasizing the importance of reflexivity) this can come to naturalise/legitimize identity securitizing practices. In Mälksoo's (2015: 223) terms, the problem is that such accounts of ontological security may actually end up 'ontologising' – that is, normalizing and making inevitable – 'a state's need to seek and sustain the intactness and consistency of its identity [which] could dangerously depoliticize the act of protecting a biographical narrative of the state' – i.e. the act of ontological security seeking by obscuring from view the fact that there are always other articulatory options available beyond that of securitization. This is why it is important to *dissociate* ontological security from identity per se and to retain an emphasis on the reflexive self. Indeed, without doing so ontological security studies may even threaten to curb 'the self-reflexivity of the political subject' (Mälksoo 2015: 225).

Second, Rumelili's (2015a) argument presupposes that while securitization might produce ontological security, desecuritization processes are liable to undermine it. This is why, she argues, conflict resolution processes can be so difficult, since while desecuritization may render safe previous objects of fear, it is also a process which in doing so destabilises established modes of being and understandings (systems of meaning) of the nature of the world that are inevitably liable to generate anxieties.

Arguably, though, the presumed differential impacts of securitizing and desecuritizing practices are too clearly drawn because securitizing practices have just as much potential to generate ontological anxieties as desecuritizing practices. This is because the securitization of an identity itself entails a transformation in conceptions of identity and systems of meaning, as it entails a movement of rigidifying, closing down and bordering, a transformation from a former situation when identity was not securitized and was more open. There is, hence, no *a priori* reason for assuming that processes of opening up are any more destabilizing than processes of closing down – as evidenced by concerns at the rise of the Right amongst cosmopolitan society within Europe. In the established literature, however, the move from non-securitized to securitized identities is largely obscured as a source of ontological insecurity, whereas change *away* from a securitized situation is viewed as inherently anxiety-inducing.

Moreover, and as Croft (2012) indicates, while securitizations can end up generating ontological insecurities in others (British Muslims in his case), they can also have the same effect on the subject community itself. As he notes, the proliferation of insecurity practices – not least in the form of anti-terrorist hotlines and

advertising campaigns emphasizing the everyday nature of the threat and the attendant proliferation of surveillance systems and responsibilities throughout society – have undermined societal trust and enhanced more general anxieties throughout the population. The emphasis, he notes, is increasingly on amorphous risks as much as on specifically identifiable threats (Croft 2012: 7-8). Thus, while British identity has become more rigid, the sense of general anxiety has actually, in this case, been heightened by the introduction of epistemological concerns about the need for vigilance in the face of myriad unspecified threats. In contrast, far from being inherently destabilizing to ontological security, desecuritizations may actually suggest the existence of a self possessing the reflexive ability to step back, employ alternative channels of articulation and opt for some other identity – abilities it has been suggested that are actually precisely at the heart of ontological security, but a point which only becomes evident if we resist conflating ontological security with the identity narratives that are invoked in its cause.

This also leads to a third point, which is that the privileging of identity as that which needs to be secured in many analyses of ontological security in IR actually entails a privileging of security mindsets more generally. Expressed slightly differently, instead of focusing on ‘successful’ cases, where security does not seem to have been raised as an issue, the tendency has been to focus precisely on cases where a closing down of identity and sense of rigidity becomes evident – and hence where logics of security and the articulation of identities through discourses on existential danger enter the picture. This is limiting because – as already noted – focusing on cases of identity securitization, typified as they are by a lack of reflexivity on the part of the

self, is therefore to limit analyses to very particular examples of ontological insecurity.

The danger, therefore, is that ontological security is only seen to matter in those instances when it is perceived as lacking. This is problematic because ontological security is never actually 'secure' as such (Croft 2012: 202). In a changing world the positioning of the self is always potentially fragile and something that has to be continually worked at as part of what Giddens (1991: 5) terms the ongoing 'reflexive project of the self'. However, in setting this point aside there is the danger that ontological security becomes a perspective in which identity is always perceived as a question of security. The irony of this may therefore be that, despite its critical overtones, the application of ontological security to international relations may actually end up reconstituting an emphasis on survivalist logics that keeps security studies firmly focused on the familiar territory of war and political violence. While such a concern is more than understandable for security scholars, in the following section we begin to suggest broader avenues for the concept's application within IR.

### **Ontological Security, the Self and Subjectivity**

The central claim, so far, is that applications of ontological security in IR have tended to inadvertently conflate identity with selfhood. The assumption is that the self already has an identity, with ontological security primarily understood in terms of the preservation and management of identity claims. Most analyses therefore jump over the crucial question of how selves become connected to particular identities or articulate claims to identities in the way they do. In the following we raise a number

of tentative thoughts of what might be entailed in our insistence that self and identity need to be kept analytically apart.

First, concerning understandings of the self's nature and its relationship to identity and narrative, it is important to note that Giddens – the primary source for IR scholars working on the topic – himself invokes the couplet 'self-identity'. It is also the case, however, that his elaboration of exactly what it comprises is ambiguous and open to different interpretations. For example, Giddens (1991: 52) emphasizes that self-identity 'presumes reflexive awareness'. He posits that identity is not just given but instead something 'to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual'.

From this standpoint, it might appear that self and identity are two sides of the same coin, that lacking a sense of identity the self will suffer extreme anxiety, and indeed even in some sense cease to exist. As indicated earlier, our interpretation is different and rather assumes that the self is not given but 'thrown into the world', i.e. has to orientate itself in a world that is not of its own making. As stated by Glynos and Howarth (2008: 164), 'Social agents always find themselves immersed in or 'thrown into' a system of meaningful practices... which both shapes their identity and structures their practices'. This also implies that articulations through identity narratives are always bound to remain somewhat open containing positive as well as negative options. While most analyses tend to shift the locus of ontological security to the actual content of the identity articulated in specific identity narratives, thereby shifting the emphasis from the self as the referent of ontological security to particular

identity claims attached to or articulated by it, in our view the crucial thing Giddens is pointing to is the existence of the self as a reflexive subject.<sup>3</sup>

Put differently, it is not the content of the biography that counts (which might change dramatically over time), but the identification of the self as a biographically endowed person that aspires for articulation that ultimately matters. Thus, and with identity understood as socially constructed, Giddens' point is arguably that personhood/subjectivity as being is not given as such but requires articulation. 'To be a "person" is not just to be a reflexive actor, but to have a concept of a person (as applied both to the self and others)' (Giddens 1991: 53).

Giddens (1991: 53) argues, however, that the socially constituted requirements of subjectivity – and therefore '[w]hat a person is understood to be' – are not fixed but may transform across time and space. Indeed, understanding the implications of such a transformation is the essence of his overall concern with how Late Modernity has impacted on self-identity. His book therefore seeks to chart the axiological change from traditional to post-traditional societies and the impacts this is having by breaking down established ways of being that deprive selves of established forms of articulation. However, while this is generating new anxieties for how actors generate a sense of meaning and position themselves in the world (not least through processes of identification), it is also providing new opportunities for becoming and new grounds for articulation.

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<sup>3</sup> Or in Lacanian terms, a split 'subject of desire'/'discursive subject' on a perpetual (but inevitably doomed) quest to capture and express its authentic fullness through processes of identification (Epstein 2011: 335-7). Or to invoke Heidegger's notion of *Dasein*, a reflexive subject with 'the capacity to choose among several possible ways of being' (Inwood 2000: 24).

Thus, while the Enlightenment promise was that science and reason would bring certitude to the big existential questions, Giddens argues the opposite happened. First, science and reason undermined the previous systems of meaning of religion and traditional society by relativizing them. Second, the scientific claims that replaced them were, ultimately, themselves shown to be contingent because the scientific method is itself one premised on continual radical doubt and questioning (Giddens 1991: 2-3; 21). Claims to truth in modernity are therefore inherently unstable. Combined with globalization, he argues, this creates a very new and challenging environment within which the reflexive project of the self needs to be undertaken.

Indeed, the broader point here is that such transformations can fundamentally impact on the forms of personhood/subjectivity that become viewed as appropriate for the new situation and the sorts of identification processes that is likely to stimulate. Thus, Giddens argues that while in traditional societies the answer to the question of ‘How shall I live?’ was largely pre-given and ordained for the individual by tradition, in the post-traditional world of modernity the question becomes increasingly individualized (Giddens 1991: 14). What marks out the reflexivity of personhood in late modernity, therefore, is the need to cope with the contingencies of radical doubt (Giddens 1991: 20).

The emphasis on the constitutive importance of such transformations can be extrapolated out to IR insofar as the bases upon which claims to subjectivity have been made in international relations has changed over time. For example, while in the early nineteenth century the requirements of nationhood were (largely under Herderian influence) understood in terms of the requirement to be able to identify a

distinct culture, language and organic environment, by the end of the century (and now under Hegelian influence) those requirements had increasingly come to assume the additional criteria of territorial sovereignty (i.e. statehood), without which a nation would never be understood as fully complete or an equal member of the society of nations (see Browning and Joenniemi 2013; 2015a).

In contrast, since the end of the Cold War a case could be made for suggesting that requirements of statehood have also begun to change in international relations, from a preoccupation with territorial sovereignty in a threatening environment of Hobbesian anarchy, to an enhanced emphasis on the market and the demands of the competition state (Browning 2015; Moisiu 2008; Cerny 1990). Arguably, therefore, the socially mandated norms of subjectivity are themselves likely to, in some degree, impact on the sorts of identities a self (be it a state, nation, individual etc) might view as appropriate at any given time. Thus, as the normative environment changes and new norms of subjectivity emerge social agents ‘thrown into the world’ are liable to feel compelled to try out new articulations of self-identity more in tune with the changing normative environment.

Another point stemming from this emphasis on the socially constructed nature of norms of subjectivity (selfhood) is that ontological security is intimately connected to inter-subjectivity and recognition dynamics. The point is that selves are not simply ascribed with subjectivity, it rather needs to be continually claimed, fought for, performed and articulated. As indicated above, the basic trust that lies at the heart of ontological security is itself fatefully linked to ‘the appraisals of others’ (Giddens 1991: 38). In early childhood anxiety is fundamentally connected to the infant’s



sensing of disapproval from the caregiver, the result being that in later life the reactions of significant others also become central to one's sense of self-esteem, confidence and ontological security (Giddens 1991: 45). This makes claiming subjectivity/selfhood an inherently social enterprise connected to meeting the contextually relevant criteria – of what it is to be a human, a nation, a state – and securing recognition for this from significant others. Actors failing to meet (or to secure recognition for having met) such criteria are liable to feel angered, shamed, and inadequate, with this undermining their sense of ontological security (Giddens 1991: 65, 68).

Zarakol's analysis of stigmatization is highly relevant here, as one example of how this can play out in international relations. Her analysis highlights how the desire for 'international status, respect, and acceptance are primary motivators of decision-making' (Zarakol 2011:12). Applied to the cases of Russia, Turkey and Japan, she shows how each country historically has sought to meet the perceived criteria that would result in their acceptance into Western civilization and their recognition as full and equal members of international society. Stigmatised for their lack of civilization these countries set about emulating Western norms to thereby achieve an acceptable and broadly recognized form of identity, i.e. security-of-articulation. However, acceptance of the hierarchical Western worldview, she argues, also entailed accepting its judgments of their own inferiority, thereby generating significant levels of shame and ontological insecurity (Zarakol 2011: 39, 95-6).

Arguably, therefore, some forms of recognition might be more conducive to ontological security than others. For example, invoking Hegel's discussion of the

master-slave relationship, Zarakol (2011: 67-9, 83) suggests that while the master's recognition by the slave is guaranteed, the slave's lack of equal status arguably makes this ultimately unsatisfying. This is why, she suggests, 'it is sometimes argued that only relationships of equal recognition can be stable in the long run' (Zarakol 2011: 83).

Extrapolating from this we would agree with Berenskoetter (2007; 2010) that IR should take friendship relations within international politics more seriously. While in established approaches friendship is often viewed in instrumental cost-benefit utility-maximizing terms this is not how people generally relate to friendship at an individual level, where it instead holds deep emotional significance. Indeed, as Cicero put it: 'if the mutual love of friends were to be removed from the world, there is no single house, no single state that would go on existing' (quoted in Smith 2011: 13). Explicitly linking friendship to ontological security Berenskoetter (2010) therefore views:

friendship as a particular and morally significant relationship... [that]... strengthens moral certainty and the sense of what is "the right thing to do"... friendship matters because it moulds and reinforces "identity", or the sense of Self.

Friendship, however, also opens up space for rethinking the nature of self-other relations in IR and their importance for ontological security. Friendship entails equality, respect and solidarity. It is premised on far-reaching similitude, but also entails an acceptance of difference. Key, therefore, is that the difference required to

articulate safe identities can also comprise positive forms of difference, such as that present in friendship relations. It does not necessarily require articulations premised on fear-related negativities, i.e. those of radical otherness and enmity and a move from the normal to the existential spheres of politics. In fact, given that the presence of difference – positive or negative – is mandatory for achieving security-of-articulation and the formation of identities, and that positive forms of difference are as equally important as negative forms in avoiding anxiety, then this undermines the distinction often invoked in IR between normal and existential politics. Rather, both appear as equally existential in providing the difference – if in different forms – that is mandatory for the articulation of identities to come about. As argued by Berenskoetter (2014: 59), actors may actually prefer friendship to enmity – and the employment of negative forms of otherness more generally – in the construction of their selves because friendship ‘does what enmity cannot, namely compel the actors to creatively support each other in formulating and sustaining their respective narratives through a shared idea of international order’.

Finally, the emphasis on friendship and authentic social relations above also suggests another point that ultimately draws inspiration from Heidegger. It is easy to get the impression from reading Giddens and his interlocutors in IR that ontological security is primarily about the ability of the self to ‘go on’ (Giddens 1991: 35) – to manage everyday life without slipping into existential anxiety. The image conveyed often appears to be that of people struggling to psychologically hold it together. In Giddens’ terms, central to the individual’s ability to cope – to go on – is what he terms ‘practical consciousness’, defined as a form of ‘non-consciousness’ rather than ‘unconsciousness’. In non-conscious activity, it is not that people do not know what

they are doing, but that they have come to take such activities and understandings for granted. 'Practical consciousness is the cognitive and emotive anchor' of ontological security that brackets out existential 'questions about ourselves, others and the object-world which have to be taken for granted in order to keep on with everyday activity'. It is the 'natural attitude' on the other side of which 'chaos lurks' (Giddens 1991: 36-7). What Giddens outlines here is what Heidegger refers to as everyday being and is something we are all necessarily engaged in, at least some of the time (Inwood 2000: 27).

However, for Heidegger everyday being – merely going on – is not enough. In general humans do not just want to go on (to survive), they want their going on to be meaningful and fulfilling. Heidegger therefore draws a distinction between an authentic and resolute being and the inauthentic and irresolute nature of everyday being/practical consciousness/natural attitude. Inauthentic everyday being entails plodding along with our routines. Authentic resolute being, however, is reflexive – though not simply in Giddens' sense of reflecting on whether one's routines and biographies any longer fit the current situation or need adapting. For Heidegger authentic resolute being entails reflecting on one's situation and asking who do I want to be? How do I make my life meaningful? What is a virtuous life? Far from bracketing out anxiety, resolute authentic being actively invites anxiety in, since asking such questions is to accept a nagging sense of doubt as to whether what one is doing is actually right. The authentic person does this precisely because it is willing to confront its mortality and the inevitability of its death – an inevitability that adds urgency and resolve to make the most of one's life (Inwood 2000: 69-79; Giddens 1991: 50). The authentic resolute person therefore seizes on the possibilities of being

rather than simply drifting ‘with the tide of everydayness’ (Inwood 2000:84). In other words, from this perspective ontological security not only requires a reflexive capacity to adapt routines and identities to new situations, but also requires purposive meaningful engagement with who one wants to be. Thus, while Heidegger’s inauthentic being – Giddens’ practical consciousness/natural attitude – no doubt provides a sense of ontological security for everyday existence, the authentic self, reflexively aware of the limits of their life, seeks something more. In doing so, anxiety becomes a potentially generative and creative force.

This perspective has relevance to IR in several respects. As Giddens (1991: 132) himself is aware, actors can become bored by routine and often engage in ‘cultivated risk-taking’ that deliberately exposes them to uncertainty. Moreover, his broader analysis of Late Modernity is also important here. The radical doubt and reflexivity central to modernity, he notes, can result in ‘the looming threat of *personal meaninglessness*’ (Giddens 1991: 201, original emphasis) that has ironically resulted in a resurgence in the appeal of religion and tradition – those systems of meaning precisely challenged by modernity – as a means of reclaiming a sense of purpose (Giddens 1991: 201-8). Arguably the globalization of liberal capitalism has also played into this, at least insofar as liberal capitalist commodification is experienced as fundamentally uninspiring. An emphasis on ontological security, therefore, should lead us to question these developments and what they might mean for international relations.

## **Conclusions**

In this contribution we have sought to challenge some of the assumptions evident in some of the earlier and best-known applications of ontological security within International Relations. While welcoming the insights of these analyses we have provided a re-reading of some of the concept's philosophical underpinnings as a means of recovering a wider conception of ontological security that may serve as an encouragement for its broader application. In doing this three core and inter-related arguments have been developed.

First, we have argued that there has been a tendency in analyses to reduce ontological security down to a question of identity preservation and stability, particularly when moving from theoretical development to empirical application. This tendency, we argued, stems from the propensity to conflate self with identity, seeing them as two sides of the same coin and largely interchangeable. In contrast, we argued the self should be viewed as analytically distinct from the identities it reaches for in order to secure a sense of being in the world. 'Thrown into the world' subjects necessarily engage in processes of identification, but since the world constantly evolves, dislocatory events will challenge existing identifications, potentially generating anxiety. In such situations subjects may well try and cling onto existing articulations of selfhood. However, while stability is an important element of ontological security, upholding a distinction between self and identity (identification) enables us to highlight that at its core ontological security also requires flexibility and adaptability – capacities closely related to a self's more general sense of confidence, self-esteem and basic trust. Indeed, invoking Heidegger, we argued at the end of the article that in turn this enables us to understand that anxiety need not necessarily be something to be

assiduously avoided, but may actually be welcomed as offering chances for renewal and the pursuit of a more authentic and (potentially ethically) fulfilling life.

Second, we argued that, in turn, the conflation of self and identity and the consequent reduction of ontological security down to questions of identity preservation has resulted in a focus on the securitization of identity as a means of achieving ontological security. This is problematic because: (i) it has the potential to encourage a normative endorsement of the securitization of identity; and (ii), because it assumes that while securitization enhances ontological security, desecuritization undermines it. In contrast, we have argued that since both securitization and desecuritization entail moving away from an established sense of selfhood/subjectivity to something either more closed/exclusive or open/inclusive, both potentially can be a source of ontological security or ontological insecurity. There is no a priori analytical reason to prefer one to the other. Ethically, however, we would suggest this is not the case and, as such, when moving forward we would argue there is a need for ontological security studies, not only to explore cases of closing down around identity, but also cases of opening up; in particular, to understand the ways in which potential ontological anxieties have been managed without slipping back in radical othering by replacing amorphous anxieties with identifiable objects of fear.

Third, we argued that the conflation of self with identity and the emphasis on securitization processes in much of the literature, when combined with a potentially limiting contrast between physical security and ontological security, has resulted in an empirical emphasis on cases highlighting how the quest for identity stability either results in violence or makes processes of conflict resolution inherently difficult.

Framed this way ontological security analysis carries the danger of restricting its understanding of its core concept to issues of subjects seeking security-from-violence or, for that matter, security-in-violence. To be clear, these issues are important, but in two respects we have argued ontological security analysis would benefit from broadening out its areas of concern. First, in order to provide a more accurate rendering of ontological security dynamics in world politics the emphasis on securitization processes needs to be balanced with analyses highlighting the mechanisms by which relations premised on friendship and other positive forms of difference may also provide the requisite form of constitutive difference necessary to generate ontological security. One possibility, for instance, would be to investigate why some states appear to vicariously identify with other states in order to generate a sense of status, self-esteem and ontological security (e.g. see Browning and Joenniemi 2015b). Second, this broadening out is also necessary in order to better capture the extent to which – in some parts of the world, or in relations between particular groups of states, at least – the normative environment has shifted away from a preoccupation with Hobbesian forms of anarchy to an environment in which states increasingly compete with each other on different grounds – not least for attention and seeking to be the most attractive for investment. Insofar as such a transformation has taken place then ontological security seeking is liable to require different forms of identification more in line with new emerging norms of subjectivity/statehood. The emerging literatures on status seeking (Paul et al. 2014), stigmatization (Adler-Nissen 2014) and nation branding (e.g. Browning 2015) offer some potential avenues for investigation in this respect.



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