

Narratives, Ontological Security, and Unconscious Phantasy: Germany and the European Myth During the so-called Migration Crisis

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This article synthesizes scholarship on narratives and Kleinian defense mechanisms against anxiety to develop a framework that enables a nuanced understanding of ontological security-seeking dynamics in times of crisis. Using the case study of the German narrative of the European Union during the so-called migration crisis of 2015, this article engages with the broader question of how unconscious phantasy influences and guides decision-making processes on a collective level as well as the question of how exactly narratives help subjects to manage anxiety to maintain a sense of ontological security. We show that, in the case of Germany, the EU offers a highly affective political myth that has guided both the decision-making of the government during the crisis and the construction of German self-identity narratives by attempting to introject the good part-object of “Europeanness.” Crucially, German self-identity narratives and narratives on the EU were not only inextricably linked but the EU also became an idealized (Kleinian) part-object. During the so-called migration crisis, this fostered processes of projective identification whereby decisions subverting European values and humanitarian narratives as well as general “badness” were externalized and projected onto other member states, most notably the Visegrád states.

KEY WORDS: ontological security, psychoanalysis, narratives, European Union, migration crisis, Melanie Klein, myths

In 2015, the European Asylum Support Office reported that more than a million people had applied for asylum in the European Union, the highest number ever recorded. European member states had different responses to this migration. Some countries implemented new rules to prevent migrants from entering their country (Dingott Alkopher, 2018), others gathered resources to welcome and integrate incoming refugees (Gazit, 2019; Gellwitzki, 2022), and many strongly criticized the EU for its management of the crisis. Political crises such as the so-called migration crisis always entail emotional turmoil (Ejdus, 2018; Gellwitzki & Houde, 2022a; Homolar & Scholz, 2019), and the EU and its member states’ reactions can be interpreted as attempts

to cope with the existential anxieties they provoked. This anxiety management manifested in different ways, as is illustrated by contrasting the migration-hostile reactions from countries like the United Kingdom and Hungary with the unique response from the German government (Dingott Alkopher, 2018).

Unlike other European governments, German officials narrated the EU exclusively in favorable terms despite its reluctance to follow German policy lead and its inability to implement measures to deal with the crisis. The German government had been praised by the (inter)national press, NGOs, and IGOs alike for its humanitarian response to the crisis and the “open-door policy” of the late summer of 2015. However, after increasing domestic criticism and resistance of other EU member states, the same government also eventually pushed for an EU-Turkey deal which would see unauthorized migrants entering the EU from Turkey deported back to Turkey. Despite this decision, the government did not change its narrative on the EU and German self-identity throughout the process, which strongly insisted on historical responsibility and humanitarian “European” values like solidarity and tolerance. But what guided German policymaking in this specific way? How did the German government maintain a stable and positive narrative of the EU during the so-called migration crisis despite the EU’s shortcomings in handling it? And how did Germany adopt anti-migration policies without being overwhelmed with existential anxieties over its autobiographical narrative vis-à-vis its past and historical responsibility? This article argues that a psychoanalytical approach to ontological security offers convincing answers to these questions as well as a unique analytical added value by going beyond descriptive accounts of changes in official discourse and exploring the psychodynamic processes underlying the German response to the crisis.

There has been extensive engagement with the EU’s ontological (in)securities (see, e.g., Brassett et al., 2021; Browning, 2018a; Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Mälksoo, 2019) and the influence of the EU on the ontological insecurity of its member states and their populations (see, e.g., Browning, 2018b; Mitzen, 2006a; Rosher, 2022; Rumelili, 2018). However, how the EU can act as a *provider* of ontological security, which we argue was the case for the German government during the so-called migration crisis, remains understudied (see Della Sala, 2018 for a notable exception). Building on the existing scholarship on Germany’s unique relationship to the EU (Bulmer & Paterson, 2018) and research on the intersections of political myths, ontological security, and the EU (Della Sala, 2017, 2018; Kølvrå, 2016), we conceptualize this dynamic further by synthesizing the literature on narratives in ontological security with Kleinian work on the paranoid-schizoid position. This move allows a detailed understanding of how political myths, and narratives more generally, guide psychological processes integral to ontological security-seeking practices. It includes, notably, anxiety management, reality construction, and modes of relating. Crucially, rather than simply positing that narratives manage anxiety, Kleinian work provides us with the conceptual tools to study how exactly narratives do that: through unconscious phantasies, that is the psychological processes that constantly mediate and influence subjects’ experience of reality and mode of relating to others, rather than self-reflexivity or rational considerations (Klein, 1975). This Kleinian approach contributes to the recent “return to the roots” (see, e.g., Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020) of ontological security theory by rediscovering its psychoanalytical origins to develop the ongoing project of bringing the unconscious back into the framework (see Cash, 2020; Eberle, 2019; Kinnvall, 2018; Vieira, 2018).

Giddensian ontological security theory suggests that a blatant discrepancy between self-identity narratives and policy practices should result in an existential crisis and anxiety (see, e.g., Steele, 2008)—yet, in the case at hand, it did not. Kleinian psychoanalytical theory can account for this circumstance and offer significant value that helps us answer the puzzle

set out above by exploring the psychological processes underlying Germany's ontological security-seeking practices. Through its ability to account for actors' qualitatively different modes of relating and their often-contradictory behaviors, objectives, and identifications, psychoanalytical theory offers a framework to explain these issues that other approaches fail to answer. We argue that while the EU's political myth informs Germany's general orientation and behavior towards the Union and its members and remains essential even when the EU is not following Germany's policy lead, it becomes most prevalent in times of crisis when it guides various "phantastic" defense mechanisms against anxiety associated with Klein's paranoid-schizoid position, namely splitting, introjection, and projective identification. Put differently, the European Myth is integral for Germany's sense of and search for ontological security, *especially* in times of crisis.

We begin by discussing how scholars have theorized the nexus of ontological security and narratives before elaborating on Klein's paranoid-schizoid position and its anxiety management mechanisms. We then briefly review Germany's general relationship to the EU to set up the empirical section that explores the German government's narration of the EU during the so-called migration crisis through the analysis of 108 speeches and interviews by governmental officials and the German president¹ to illustrate the value of our approach and make two empirical claims. First, we demonstrate how the German government attempted to manage anxiety by *introjecting* the EU into its self-identity narrative and *splitting* off anxieties about guilt and shame over the past that could be reactivated through the crisis and the mistreatment of migrants. Second, we utilize the concept of *projective identification* to understand how the German government maintained a stable self-identity narrative while backing policy options that openly contradicted it. Here we demonstrate how the government externalized "badness" by blaming the Visegrád countries for Europe's and Germany's shortcomings and narrated them as obstacles.

Ontological Security, Narratives, and Political Myths

Drawing on Laing's ([1960] 1991) existential psychology and Giddens' (1991) sociological reading of the former, the literature on ontological security in IR has proliferated in recent years. Unlike traditional approaches to IR, which argue that states seek material and physical security as a means of state survival, ontological security scholarship posits that states also pursue security-of-being by seeking a sense of stable self-identity through autobiographical narratives as well as routines and practices (Mitzen, 2006b; Steele, 2008). States sometimes even go against their material interests and risk their physical security to pursue ontological security (Mitzen, 2006b; Steele, 2008; Zarakol, 2010). Physical security-as-survival and ontological security-as-being differ both in their referent objects—a state's territory and sovereignty or the collective self—as well as in what can threaten these referent objects (Steele, 2008). Threats to physical security take a material form, for instance, the military capability of rival states, whereas threats to ontological security take the form of uncertainty and existential anxiety that rupture actors' sense of self and prevent them from performing agency (Mitzen, 2006b). Ontological security, the security of the self, is thus ultimately about actors' capacity to avoid and manage anxiety (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020), which in turn "enables and motivates action and choice" (Mitzen, 2006b, p. 344).

Ontological security of states fundamentally depends on dominant autobiographical narratives, or "the story or stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood, both by

¹ Although not part of the government, the president represents the German state, making his speeches insightful for this study.

the [state] concerned and by others” (Giddens, 1991, p. 243), that draw on historical experiences (Delehanty & Steele, 2009) and allow states to create their own identities and make sense of the world (Andrews et al., 2015). Actors attempt to self-reflexively maintain positive autobiographical narratives in times of crisis (Chernobrov, 2016) and in “critical situations” that can challenge and fracture those narratives, thereby generating existential anxiety (Ejdus, 2018). The adjustment of existing narratives as well as the generation of new stories about the self, in turn, constitutes a way to manage the anxiety elicited through moments of rupture. However, the adaptation and alteration of specific narratives are not merely self-reflexive and strategic acts to overcome anxiety deriving from existential crises. Political actors cannot simply conjure up new stories about the state: they need to navigate the dominant autobiographical narratives by activating some and deactivating other parts of it (Subotić, 2016).

The most fundamental of these autobiographical state narratives become political myths, “sacred narratives” that are “normative and cognitive maps that define and give meaning to a political community, helping to define who, more than what, it is” (Della Sala, 2017, p. 546). Myths can be cosmogenic, eschatological (Tudor, 1972), or both; they constitute the basis for political legitimacy and serve as a “narration of the past which serves as a discursive and moral resource for the contemporary formulation of a utopian vision” (Kølvraa, 2016, p. 170). Indeed, especially “chosen” traumas or glories of the past are often integral to understanding a community’s present and future trajectory (Kinnvall, 2004). Political myths, in that sense, constitute foundational metanarratives that provide state actors with a sense of certainty, stability, and continuity while also providing a sense of meaning and purpose; they are integral to a political entity’s sense of ontological security (Della Sala, 2018). Put differently, for states, political myths constitute a stable cognitive environment integral to the performance of agency. The eschatological dimension of political myths guides this agency by providing moral meaning and outlining a path to a utopian future as the “construction of a new ‘mythical’ space of an ideal society is what facilitates the conversion of the general (and inescapable) feeling of dislocation (i.e., ambiguity, confusion, ontological insecurity) into concrete political projects” (Kølvraa, 2016, p. 176). Political myths, then, hold the promise of overcoming perpetually recurring ambiguity, instability, and anxiety, and this prospect acts as an affective pull that guides the direction of changes in autobiographical narratives.

Overall, the literature agrees that narratives, including myths, are a primary means to manage anxiety and maintain a sense of ontological security. What remains critically underexplored, however, is how exactly they do that. If we treat ontological security as a psychopolitical rather than a sociological concept, the question of what the mechanisms underlying anxiety management through narratives are becomes crucial to developing psychological accounts of ontological security-seeking practices through narratives. In the following section, we demonstrate that Kleinian psychoanalytical work can enrich and nuance our understanding of the unconscious defense mechanisms against anxiety that actors resort to in times of crisis to get closer to the utopia promised in political myths. Through this turn towards psychoanalysis, it is possible to shift the focus of analysis from exploring how actors strategically and self-reflexively narrate themselves and events to a psychological explanation of how these narrations manage anxiety.

Splitting, Introjection, and Projective Identification

The psychoanalytical work by Melanie Klein (1975) provides detailed accounts of the various defense mechanisms against anxiety, and engagement with these can significantly enhance

our understanding of ontological security (Cash, 2020). Particularly fruitful here is the notion of what Klein (1975) calls the *paranoid-schizoid position*,² a situation in which subjects find themselves when they experience crises and their world seems to be out of control (Cash, 1989; Joffe, 1996; Klein, 1975). As it bears a solid resemblance to the state of ontological insecurity in Giddens' sense (Kinnvall et al., 2018), the various defense mechanisms that subjects unconsciously resort to in the paranoid-schizoid position allow crucial inferences about how subjects manage anxiety during moments of rupture. These mechanisms are elements of what Klein calls *unconscious phantasies* that constantly mediate and influence subjects' experience of reality and mode of relating to others.

Three of these defense mechanisms can particularly enhance our understanding of the psychological processes underlying ontological security-seeking practices: splitting, introjection,³ and projective identification. They usually coincide, even if in different configurations, and enable the extinction of uncertainty, ambiguity, and ambivalence (Klein, 1975; see also Cash, 1989). In the paranoid-schizoid position, subjects' "mode of thinking and relating [is] dominated by [the] psychic process of *splitting*" through which "self and other are split into wholly good and thoroughly bad," leading to the construction of a world that is "populated by idealised 'part-objects' [...] and denigrated, feared and despised 'part-objects' [...]" (Cash, 2009, pp. 95–96). Subjects' capacity to deal with complexity is significantly reduced as the world is divided into "goodies" and "baddies" (Joffe, 1996) and "emotions cluster around the two poles of the hated and the loved—the other and the self" (Cash, 2017, p. 395). As we demonstrate in detail below, during the so-called migration crisis, the German government, for example, split the country into a good part-object "contemporary Germany" and a bad part-object "past Germany." In contrast, the EU was divided into a good part-object "Brussels" and a bad part-object "Visegrád states," eliminating the possibility for nuance and complexity when assessing reality.

While splitting reduces the world's complexity to overly simplified and binary understandings, it is also accompanied by introjection and projective identification processes. Introjection allows subjects to internalize good part-objects, making them part of their self, as a defense against anxiety (Klein, 1975; see also Browning & Haigh, 2022) and to build their identity around these internalized "good" objects (Spillius, 2011). Times of crisis, in that sense, incentivize subjects to adapt their self-identity narratives to become like idealized others (or their idealized self) to absorb their positive qualities and characteristics. Rather than ontological security-as-being and maintaining the status quo in Giddens' sense, this constitutes a form of ontological security-as-becoming an idealized, desirable, and recognized subject by absorbing idealized part-object(s) into the own self-identity narrative.

Projective identification, in turn, helps subjects experience their identity as thoroughly good and to feel good about themselves by externalizing all negative traits and aspects of that identity—as well as the negative emotions associated with it. More specifically, projective identification externalizes the badness of the self and shifts this onto a "bad other" that is then perceived to "be possessed by, controlled by and identified with the projected parts" (Joffe, 1996, pp. 206, 209). This "purifies" subjects' sense of self while allowing them to fantasize and conjure *control* over the "bad other," which not only provides subjects with

²Klein (1975) identified two "positions" in children's early development associated with specific psychological processes relating to anxiety management and reality construction, the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position, to which subjects resort throughout their lives when confronted with anxiety-inducing situations.

³In psychoanalytical theory, there is a theoretical distinction between introjection and introjective identification, yet we use the terms interchangeably since they cannot be separately observed.

a stable cognitive environment but can also turn the other into a source of threat and fear (Joffe, 1996). Through processes of projective identification, identities, as well as social and political relationships, are (re)constructed upon the basis of a friend-enemy distinction (Cash, 2017), and general anxiety is transposed into concrete objects of fear, alleviating anxiety and securitizing subjectivity (see also Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020). It is important to note here that subjects can also project good parts of the self onto an Other and then identify with those parts of the self. When done excessively, however, this can reduce the Other to an “ego-ideal,” and the result “may be an over-strong dependence on [...] external representatives of one’s own good parts” (Klein, 1975, p. 9), rendering such “vicarious identification” (see also Browning et al., 2021) potentially anxiety-inducing if the representative contradicts the subject’s self-identity narrative.

To reiterate what we elaborated on in the previous section, political myths are generally essential for and constitutive of political communities, and they can guide the defense mechanisms described by Klein. However, subjects only resort to these defense mechanisms in anxiety-inducing situations. While splitting, introjection, and projective identification are dynamic processes that interact and potentially overlap in how subjects generate a stable sense of self, what concerns us here is the question of what they tell us about ontological security-seeking practices. From a Lacanian viewpoint, obstacles to the fulfillment of a political myth perpetuate its affective appeal (Kølvraa, 2016; see also Eberle, 2019), but a Kleinian perspective emphasizes that these obstacles provide a sense of ontological security by offering a canvas against which subjects’ own “badness,” insecurities, and anxieties can be projected. Focusing on the process of projective identification allows for a better understanding of how political myths and other affective narratives alleviate anxiety and shape ontological security-seeking practices by providing a “bad other” while also allowing for an idealized utopian future, the narrative’s eschatological end, to emerge and become idealized or “sanctified.” Moreover, Klein indicates that in times of crisis, the boundaries between self and others are particularly porous, and relationships, or rather modes of relating to others, become the primary means to manage anxiety. The following section utilizes this framework to explore the empirical case of the German government discourse during the so-called migration crisis in 2015–16 and illustrate the analytical added value of our Kleinian framework.

“Phantastic” Defense Mechanisms Against Anxiety in the Official Discourse on the so-called “Migration Crisis” in Germany

Whereas for many countries the past is something glorious to be remembered fondly (Browning, 2019; Homolar & Löffmann, 2021), in the case of Germany, it is something to be ashamed of and a source of anxiety. Every state must deal with its own “catalogue of failures, injustices, and horrors committed in the name of [the] nation [...]”, but in Germany, the “difficult past has weighed heavily in virtually every moment and aspect of political life” (Olick, 2016, p. 7). The collective memory of Nazism, which continues to be unequivocally understood as the ultimate evil and as an ever-present source of anxiety over German identity, remains salient within German society and retains policy implications to this day (Bachleitner, 2021; Zehfuss, 2007). Although historical narratives generally “provide comforting stories in times of increased ontological insecurity and existential crisis” and “a feeling of home, stability, and continuity” (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 755), in the case of Germany, stability and continuity with the past are anxiety-inducing as the mere idea of home(land) is associated with ethnic nationalism and Nazism, and loaded with negative emotional connotations. Therefore, feelings of home (see

Mitzen, 2018) and trust (see Gazit, 2021), integral for having a sense of ontological security, need to come from elsewhere.

The European Union has emerged as a crucial element in Germany's self-identity narrative, not only because of its portrayal as an opportunity for Germany to "redeem" itself, make up for its atrocities, and leave the past behind it, but also as a pathway to find a "home" for the German state and nation that transcends a history of atrocities. Put differently, the EU has become a sacred political myth integral to the modern German state and its "never again" postwar narrative as it holds the utopian vision of the possibility of atonement and redemption and the acquisition of an identity untarnished by the past: European integration for Germany constitutes a "lifeboat" to escape the past, adopt a substitute of a conventional national identity, and change how the self is perceived in other countries (Bulmer & Paterson, 2018). In the post-World War period, Germany's reputation was low, and European unification became an opportunity to overcome existential anxiety about home and self (see, e.g., Rumelili, 2018).

German history is, however, an "unmasterable past" (Maier, 1997). Not only is it still integral to German identity, but it is also a recurrent theme in other European states' perception of Germany, as shown, for example, by the Greek government asking Germany, during the Euro crisis, for reparations for World War II, and the media depicting German officials in Nazi uniforms (see, e.g., Connolly & Smith, 2015). Germany continues to be inextricably linked to collective memories of Nazism and the Holocaust, both in Germany itself and in countries across the world, while the EU's political myth remains an affective prospect that guides German narrative practices vis-à-vis issues regarding the EU. In other words, the EU constitutes a means through which German politicians engage in anxiety management in an attempt to redeem themselves for the past and seek ontological security in the future. We thus take an "endogenous approach" to the EU and treat it as a "provider of ontological security for its [member states]" (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2020, p. 248).

To demonstrate how the German government attempted to manage existential anxiety through the EU during the so-called migration crisis, we analyze German state officials' discourse on the EU. We build an original dataset composed of 108 speeches and interviews delivered by representatives of the federal government, that is, the German Chancellor and her ministers, as well as state-level government officials and the president, from March 2015 to March 2016. This is the timeframe within which the situation was most acute and allows us to see how state officials construct narratives during a crisis to manage anxiety and justify policies and their implementation (or lack thereof).

The data was collected from the German government's official website's archive by searching for key terms such as "EU," "European Union," and "refugees," and subsequently qualitatively selecting relevant results, omitting minor mentions. The speeches were delivered in diverse contexts, from summits and addresses to the rest of the government to fairs and celebrations with the public and a broad range of audiences ranging from German citizens, European or German politicians, and business owners. The interviews we selected were conducted by journalists and published in newspapers and chosen by the government to appear on its website. The texts comprising our dataset have in common that they were (1) considered important enough by the government to be made public online on its own website for citizens to access; and (2) no matter what their context was and who was in the audience, the discourse on the EU and the so-called migration crisis remained consistent throughout the entire dataset. We analyzed the data by conducting an interpretative emotional discourse analysis to uncover the usage of emotional terms and connotations, as well as metaphors, comparisons, and analogies (see Koschut, 2018)

regarding the EU, Germany, and the “Other” to explore the splitting of the self and the other into good and bad part objects, as well as the related processes of introjection and projective identification.

In the following section, we demonstrate that the German government sought ontological security during the so-called migration crisis by (re)constructing a self-identity narrative around the idea of redemption from the past and becoming European. In the process, German officials discursively split Germany into a “good” contemporary Germany and a “bad” past Germany and the EU into a “good” Brussels and “bad” member states. The government insisted that for redemption to be attained, “good” Germany must introject and perform European values of solidarity, humanitarianism, and multilateralism. However, as it was not always politically possible to follow those values and their policy implications, introjecting the good part-object Europe was challenging. Through a process of projective identification, the German government thus narrated the Visegrád states as “bad others” and externalized all “badness” of the EU and of Germany itself, including the failure to uphold values and implement policies consistent with the autobiographical narratives, onto the Visegrád states. This ultimately “sanctified” the EU and allowed Germany to act against its autobiographical narrative without experiencing existential anxiety.

Splitting the World and Introjecting Europe

Government officials emphasized awareness of German history’s “low point” and the moral responsibilities that stem from it throughout the different speeches analyzed. Contrasting the tyranny of national socialism with the peace, openness, and tolerance of today, the German government showed its will to redeem itself from the past. During the so-called migration crisis, mentions of the time under the Nazi regime were frequent and represented a central anchor point, a “chosen trauma” in both the German and European autobiographical narrative. The so-called crisis itself was undoubtedly a source of uncertainty and anxieties for all member states. However, the perceived proximity between the German collective memory of World War II—both as perpetrators and victims—with contemporary refugees’ experiences meant that the so-called crisis always threatened to reactivate a chosen trauma over German identity. Accordingly, throughout the speeches, defense mechanisms of the paranoid-schizoid position are identifiable. German officials *split* and contrasted the Germany of the past with today’s “European” Germany, committed to being open and, as stated by the German president in one of the speeches, “never again xenophobic or racist” (Gauck, 2016). In the analyzed timeframe, this led to unambiguous and supposedly apolitical moral imperatives and policy implications: “protecting” European humanitarianism and helping refugees, since anything else would bring Germany dangerously close to its past inhumane regime. Put differently, and as shown in detail below, to manage the uncertainty and anxiety elicited by the so-called crisis, the German government attempted to introject the good part-object Europe into its self-identity narrative.

European integration was generally narrated as the key to the fulfillment of the redemption from the events of the 20th century. The EU was portrayed as providing ontological security to Germany, as having “saved” the country from its old ways, and as allowing it to share the European values: when Germany was at an all-time nadir, European integration offered a second chance, which the country now has an impetus to honor by becoming and acting “European.” The EU, thus, promises the attainment of a positive, stable, and whole identity: attempting to introject this good-part object by building a self-identity narrative around it holds the promise of the desired feeling of ontological security. The German government indeed expressed much

gratitude towards the EU, and mentions of integration, linked with German reunification, were seen as very positive and Germany's chance to redeem itself. Then Minister for Foreign Affairs Steinmeier (2015a), for instance, stated that:

The common commemoration [of the end of WWII] is a living expression of a development for which Germans can be deeply grateful. Germany, from which all this suffering, all the war, deaths, the expulsions, the destruction, and unprecedented crimes have spread throughout the world, this country has been granted over the last seven decades to slowly and gradually grow back again into the international community and to grow into the heart of the international community and a united Europe. We were granted it—also because many victims shook hands with the perpetrators' country. Today we live in friendship with our neighbors and former war opponents. We must cultivate this friendship! (Steinmeier, 2015a)

By distancing and splitting themselves from the bad Germany of the past, German government officials narrated an identity firmly embedded within a European one. In a way, Europe became discursively represented as “home” for the German state, a “haven in a world that can feel overwhelming or uncertain” (Mitzen, 2018, p. 1376), contributing to Germany's sense of ontological security. Moreover, whereas German collective memory is always threatening to undermine any form of positive German self-identity, during the so-called migration crisis Europe was (re)constructed as an idealized, sometimes even sanctified entity that is unambiguously positive and is as such a highly attractive identity. From a psychoanalytical perspective, rather than mere pragmatism or strategic choices by rational actors, the affective “pull” of this narrative guided much of German official discourse and policymaking.

In the German autobiographical narrative, the moral imperative to follow European values was often discussed using the pronoun “we” to talk about Europeans. In Kleinian terms, the good part-object EU was thus introjected into the German self-identity narrative and internalized to protect it against anxiety. The optimistic view of Europe and the strong sense of European identity shared by the German government is exemplified in the following speech by Chancellor Angela Merkel:

Perhaps it is time again for us to say it aloud to ourselves. The European Union is the community of peace, it is the community of stability, it is the community of freedom. [...] The [political] blocks [of the Cold War] no longer exist. Instead, there is an enlarged European Union. We did that too, and we Europeans can be proud of that. (Merkel, 2015a)

As stated by President Gauck (2016), the experience of younger generations “as Europeans” also renders their internalization of European values such as openness self-evident and helps Germany to become more European to ultimately reach the utopia envisioned in the EU's political myth. Furthermore, in the government's discourse, the EU was often narrated as some safeguard to keep Germany from veering to its past ways. For example, Olaf Scholz (2015), then first mayor of Hamburg, argued that Germany's place in the world “can only [be found] as part of Europe. The [cooperation] between the European peoples [...] is the only way to prevent—and I say it with this harshness in the words of Helmut Schmidt—the ‘big shit of the war’ [sic] from repeating itself.”

In Germany's search for ontological security, the European Union was thus not seen as a hindrance but as a provider of certainty, stability, and peace. Germany's autobiographical narrative is deeply intertwined with the foundational European myth, as the latter is seen as the ultimate sign that the chosen trauma of Nazi Germany is indeed situated in the past and will not recur in the future. Rather than seeking continuity with the past, German officials emphasized the continuity of the future with the present to maintain the radical rupture with Nazism. During the so-called migration crisis, the EU was therefore introjected into the German self-identity narrative and constructed as a stabilizing anchor that would protect Germany from the recurrence of the past horrors. References to Germany as a model of peace and democracy were strongly connected to the idea of European integration, while the memory of World War II was linked to the undesirable perspective of a Europe without a Union.

For centuries, our neighbors have particularly feared the concentration of [...] power in the centre of Europe. The great happiness that we are responsible for today is that that has changed. Only as part of the European Union was the reunification and re-strengthening of Germany possible. Only as part of a European Union will the nation-states of our continent retain global relevance. (Scholz, 2015)

By building up Europe's image, Germany is also working towards the mythological end-point of its self-identity narrative. As stated above, the distinction between self and others becomes porous in the paranoid-schizoid position. In the case at hand, the boundaries between Germany and the EU thus became particularly blurry and conflated through increased introjection. Seeking ontological security through its EU membership, the German government argued that it was a moral imperative rather than a political decision to follow European values; the EU was constructed as thoroughly good and beyond criticism, and Germany, introjecting this positive identity, would not question it since such criticism would constitute an attack against the self. Put differently, the EU was perceived as part(-object) of Germany's self-identity narrative. In that sense, European integration was narrated as Germany's chance at redemption, as having saved the country from dictatorship, and a means to attain a utopian future only if Germany fully participated and followed the Union. This attempt to introject the good part-object EU into its self-identity narrative, then, already provided a sense of ontological security.

The attempt to always follow European humanitarian values, however, was not always reflected in policy decisions. This is exemplified by the eventual leading role in the negotiation and backing of the EU-Turkey deal, which would effectively end its humanitarian pro-refugee stance. Even then, the German government maintained its official "European," humanitarian, and prorefugee narrative. After all, as the Minister of the Interior De Maizière (2015) put it, "[w]e have a common humanitarian obligation in Europe and an obligation to apply the law that we have set." Despite this rhetoric, Germany changed its initial "open-door policy" towards refugees after it became clear that it had negative implications for the EU since other states were unwilling to participate and the unity of the Union was threatened (Dingott Alkopher, 2018). In other words, Germany was torn between European values of humanitarianism and multilateralism, and although the government initially opted for the former, it ultimately valued the idealized EU so much that it shifted to the latter to protect the Union from falling apart. The discrepancy between the policies implemented and the self-identity narrative built throughout the crisis could have been anxiety inducing. However, as explored in the following section, this was glossed over by the process of projective identification that helped deflect this potential anxiety.

The Visegrád States as Projectively Identified Obstacles

As demonstrated above, during the so-called migration crisis, the German government's self-identity narratives entailed a reconstruing of the EU's political myth as an idealized entity with the potential to bring peace and prosperity. Accordingly, the German government attempted to introject the good part-object EU as a defense mechanism against the anxieties elicited by the so-called crisis. The unconscious phantasy underlying this narrative provided the German government with the desire to follow the EU's values, defend its image, and side with it during debates. Yet, both Germany and the EU also violated the normative map set out by the EU's political myth since, during the so-called crisis, abiding by European humanitarian values was not always politically feasible. However, in the Kleinian paranoid-schizoid position, subjects construct a social reality within which good part-objects, here the self and the EU, are impeccable and complexity and nuance evaporate. Therefore, the inability to abide by values created a conundrum for Germany as the capacity to acknowledge the limits of solidarity and humanitarianism in Europe, as many other EU member states did, was significantly reduced.

The government increasingly attempted to differentiate between "deserving" and "undeserving" migrants. However, the number of "deserving" migrants was still unacceptable for other European countries. Therefore, rather than acknowledging that implementing only policies exclusively based on solidarity and humanitarianism was impossible, Germany engaged in a process of projective identification as a defense mechanism to reject the blame for this limitation and project it onto other member states, specifically the Visegrád states. Decisions inconsistent with the German autobiographical narrative and the idealized part-object EU were thereby projected onto the Visegrád states, and the idealized EU and Germany were never argued to be at fault.

Throughout the so-called crisis, other EU member states were accused of not sharing the European values, which were (allegedly) vigorously defended by the European Union and Germany. More specifically, the Visegrád countries were narrated as undermining the humanitarian reach of the EU, hence preventing Germany's atonement through the fulfillment of its obligations towards it. Simply put, through a process of splitting, Germany and an idealized EU were perceived as wholly good. At the same time, the Visegrád states became perceived as thoroughly bad. Throughout the speeches, the EU's behavior during the crisis is defended, whereas other EU member states are essentially discursively deprived of their "Europeanness" for not complying with European norms. For instance, Steinmeier (2015b) stated that:

It is not Brussels that is spitting in our soup at the moment. Quite the contrary. When we have expectations towards European asylum and migration policies, we get support from Brussels. It is individual member states that do not allow laws or legal requirements to be enacted in Brussels that would actually help us to get the refugee numbers down significantly.

Once again, the European Union is referred to as a "we." In turn, member states are held accountable for not respecting the shared values and are excluded from this "we." As a common German idiom, spitting in one's soup (to rain on someone's parade) was used here as an emotional way to argue that the EU institutions were not at fault, but that the noncomplying member states were the ones in the wrong. Member states were thus portrayed negatively as they were an obstacle to the EU upholding its values of openness and solidarity. Conversely,

German officials portrayed Brussels as doing its best despite the noncooperation of some countries:

It cannot be that not even a handful of countries are currently accepting all refugees in Europe! [...] European solidarity includes the fair distribution of burdens across all member states. That must not prompt us to complain about Brussels. It is not Brussels that stands in our way. On the contrary! [...] The problem lies in the European capitals, where people like to call for solidarity when European funds are distributed but duck away when the sea gets a little rough. (Steinmeier, 2015c)

This quote illustrates both the positive perception of Europe and the negative framing of the member states as “bad others” and is representative of the sentiment shared throughout the speeches. The EU is perceived as doing its best in the crisis by holding onto its core values, and neither its motivations nor its methods are challenged. It is other member states’ motivations and refusal to follow European values that were questioned, or as Vice-Chancellor Gabriel (2015) put it, “Europe is [endangered]... by the growing national selfishness of its member states.” Other member states were thus seen as undermining the EU’s authority and weakening its image, going against the promise of the political myth. Meanwhile, Germany’s own policies, such as the “open-door policy,” were represented as having no alternative as they were guided by European values such as humanitarianism rather than political considerations.

Yet, as mentioned above, some decisions like the EU-Turkey deal were implemented to save the EU during the so-called migration crisis. Realizing the threat that the so-called crisis posed to the Union, Germany increasingly attempted to push for more restrictive policies while nonetheless maintaining its humanitarian narrative. This situation became puzzling as Germany attempted to uphold European humanitarian values while simultaneously compromising the same values to “save” the EU. A failure on either end, the failure to uphold European humanitarian values or the failure to protect the EU, would subvert and destabilize Germany’s autobiographical narratives and engender anxiety, rendering processes of projective identification crucial for Germany to maintain a positive and stable self-identity narrative. When Germany was actively proposing and pursuing policies that were going against humanitarianism, it projectively identified its own “badness” in the Visegrád states, a contradiction illustrated by the following excerpt of one of Chancellor Merkel’s (2015c) speeches:

We see that 60 million refugees are on the move in the world [...] We must do what we can in Germany—no question about it. But [...] if we think too much in terms of ourselves, then this will [...] be a great threat to Europe. [...] Because those in Europe who think they are not affected by it will be affected in some way tomorrow—even if it is by questioning the unity of Europe. [...] The first answer is to [...] protect the external borders. The second answer is: [...] [W]e must insist that the burdens are shared fairly within the Member States of the European Union. Otherwise, the whole system will not work [...] That is why we are urging [...]—and I am very happy that Jean-Claude Juncker is supporting us in this—that an agreement between the EU and Turkey that will legalize migration can be concluded quickly.

In this speech, Merkel insists that only the EU can resolve the crisis and that a failure to do so would threaten the very existence of the EU, an extremely anxiety-inducing prospect that needs to

be avoided at all costs. In the same speech, the Chancellor called for more restrictive measures to deter and fend off migrants while nonetheless admonishing the Visegrád states for being unwilling to give migrants asylum. The “badness” of these countries contrasts with Germany’s efforts and that of the EU in the form of Jean-Claude Juncker, who is explicitly praised for his work. Despite this rhetoric, the negotiated deal with the EU ended up effectively ending migration to the EU via Turkey rather than legalizing it (Squire, 2020), arguably putting an end to the so-called crisis at the cost of humanitarianism which was nonetheless celebrated as a success.

For Germany, reaching the eschatological endpoint of the EU’s political myth is linked to its attempt to introject the EU, its positive image, and the respect of its principles into its autobiographical narrative so that ultimately others might recognize this narrative. Thus, the disrespecting of European values, the implementation of policies that go against it, or any decision reminiscent of the Germany of the past are not justifiable in the German context as the threat of having the past brought up if they did is omnipresent and anxiety inducing. During the so-called crisis, the prospect that Nazism or the events of World War II could be invoked if the German government was to act against the EU was a menace to Germany’s ontological security, which the government could not risk. Yet, some decisions like welcoming all migrants, albeit respecting the European humanitarian values, were not politically viable. Hence, Germany eventually had to make decisions that went against their autobiographical narrative by, for instance, backing the EU-Turkey deal, resulting in a stark discrepancy between rhetoric and policy decisions. In fact, Germany took a lead role in negotiating and implementing the deal with Turkey. However, in phantasy and discourse, the blame was put on the “bad” Visegrád countries, allowing “good” Germany to narrate the non-cooperation of these member states as an obstacle to the achievement of the atonement and utopia sought by the German government.

The EU-Turkey deal contradicted the German autobiographical narrative but, of course, still complied with the European value of multilateralism. However, the failure to abide by European humanitarian values could not be acknowledged without implicitly taking a step back in the quest for the fulfillment of the European project, hence the engagement in practices of projective identification as a defense mechanism. In other words, the German government searched for ontological security by thriving towards a utopian future promised by the EU’s political myth, which was enabled by the unconscious phantasies of splitting, introjection, and projective identification; the latter of which allowed the externalization of the blame and negative feelings—including anxiety—about the self. Thus, the Visegrád states not only became a normative threat (see Mälksoo, 2019) to the EU and Germany but also a primary means to manage anxiety.

Conclusion

This article has sought to explain how the German government avoided existential anxiety and a rupture of its self-narrative and the EU despite both political entities’ failure to handle the so-called migration crisis in accordance with the humanitarian values integral to these narratives. To achieve this, we have shone a light on the links between narratives and the defense mechanisms of splitting, introjection, and projective identification in ontological security-seeking practices. More specifically, it demonstrated that Kleinian psychoanalysis constitutes an analytical added value for ontological security studies by providing a better understanding of the psychological processes underlying narrative practices. To put it simply, Kleinian work provides the conceptual tools to explain why and how narratives manage anxiety.

To empirically illustrate these claims, we have explored the case of the German government during so-called the migration crisis, uncovering what guided its policymaking and how the adoption of policies that were seemingly inconsistent with Germany's autobiographical narrative could be handled without being overwhelmed with existential anxieties. By doing so, we developed a nuanced account of the psychodynamic processes underlying Germany's changing and seemingly contradictory responses to the so-called migration crisis that goes beyond the common assertion that the government strategically and rationally changed its approach because of the number of migrants and the policy deadlock in the EU. This offers a psychological explanation of how the EU's political myth, and more specifically the phantasy underlying it, influenced the government's experience of reality, mode of relating, strategic behavior, priorities, and rationality which ultimately led to shifts in official discourse (see also Gellwitzki & Houde, 2022b). We have demonstrated that the German government constructed a self-identity narrative that pitted part-objects against each other through splitting, introjection, and projective identification. On the one hand, through introjection and projective identification, the EU was framed positively and narrated as the solution to the guilt and shame that Germany brought upon itself during the Nazi era, but also as a representation of an idealized German identity based on values like peace and humanitarianism. On the other hand, we utilized the notion of projective identification to demonstrate how noncompliant EU member states—namely the Visegrád countries—were narrated as the obstacle to fulfilling the EU's political myth. Thus, Germany remained captured by its past by idealizing the EU and consolidating its sense of ontological security-as-becoming (European) in the present.

Political myths and unconscious phantasy are constantly evolving and differ between states and contexts, and thus the particular case of Germany is not generalizable to other EU member states. Nevertheless, the psychic defense mechanisms discussed here will apply to other case studies and constitute numerous avenues for future research. Our findings raise at least two questions that require further investigation. First, we can ask ourselves what other insights can be derived from the concept of unconscious phantasy, including but not restricted to the processes of splitting, introjection, and projective identification, and how can it further our understanding of subjects' ontological security-seeking practices? Specifically interesting might be the ontological security-seeking practices of the Visegrád states at the time since they had been projectively identified as Germany's bad other, or how Germany manages European crises and anxieties that are less directly associated with its past. Second, and more generally, the question remains as to what exactly is the role of the EU in other member states' ongoing search for ontological security? Or put differently, how does Europe's political myth translate into other member states' self-identity narrative? Surprisingly, little ontological security scholarship has pursued this question. The concept of projective identification might provide valuable insights in this regard as the EU or some of its member states, in many cases, constitute the perfect "bad other" against which member states' own anxieties and insecurities can be projected. In that sense, the suggested framework can be utilized to understand how states seek ontological security when dealing with actors across multiple levels. As shown throughout this article, the European Union plays a crucial role in Germany's sense of and search for ontological security and, contrary to other cases studied in the literature, acts in this case as a provider of ontological security. As stated by Chancellor Angela Merkel (2015b), "European integration is the best that could have happened to us after centuries of war, bloodshed, enmity, and rivalry". Considering recent European history, we posit that the EU and its political myth play an integral role in ontological-security-seeking processes and "phantastic" defenses against existential anxiety across Europe and warrants further investigation.

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