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ETHICS AND ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY

Introduction

In recent years the concept of ontological security has become increasingly seductive to International Relations scholars, particularly those interested in placing questions of identity at the heart of security debates. This is because ontological security points towards psychological, rather than material, dynamics as underpinning social behaviours as actors seek a means of 'going on' in everyday life (Giddens 1991: 35). Indeed, the concept itself was initially coined by R. D. Laing (1969: 39), a psychologist, to describe how individuals seek to uphold a 'presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and in a temporal sense, a continuous person'. Ontological security therefore emphasises a concern with the continuity of the self, and more particularly is connected to the sense of *confidence* the self has in its own continuity. As Kinnvall (2004: 746) defines it, it 'is a security of being, a sense of confidence and trust that the world is what it appears to be'.

This suggests ontological security is underpinned by a radically different conception of security to that upheld within more mainstream International Relations, as well as in most policy making circles. Instead of an emphasis on maximizing wealth and power and countering/minimising physical threats to survival, ontological security's emphasis on the importance of affirming our understanding of the world, it is argued, means that its pursuit may even entail imperiling those values. To this extent, *ontological security* has at times been defined in opposition to *physical security* (Lupovici 2012). However, while there are good heuristic reasons for doing this, there are also good grounds for suggesting that physical security concerns are actually embodied manifestations of (and therefore subsumed within) the particular ways in which state identities have been secured, stabilized and taken for granted over time (Mitzen: 2015). In other words, there is nothing natural or self-evident about the prioritization of physical security in International Relations, and indeed, such prioritization arguably does little to account for either the emergence or resolution of many physical security issues.

At the same time, the chapter also indicates that ontological security offers something beyond the broader range of critical approaches to security. For instance, while human security and emancipatory approaches tend to focus on largely material issues of individual well being, they have had very little to say about the psychological dynamics of security seeking. Meanwhile, while post-structuralist approaches have focused on the securitization of enemy others in constituting self-identity (e.g. Campbell 1998) and have advanced an ethic of other-regarding behaviour, a focus on ontological security, not only provides clues as to why the securitization of otherness continues to hold attraction, but suggests the embracing of an other-regarding ethic is itself dependent on how subjects generate a sense of ontological security.

Bearing all this in mind, at first glance ontological security appears an inherently positive condition and something that should be pursued and bolstered whenever possible, since its absence – ontological insecurity – suggests a condition of not feeling real, alive, whole, present or continuous. Indeed, a condition of ontological insecurity is usually described as one bedeviled by existential anxieties and feelings of dread, and where actors are liable to slip into melancholic or even psychotic states (Giddens 1991:

41). Ethically, the pursuit of ontological security would therefore appear unproblematic. Despite accepting this general sentiment this chapter argues that while the pursuit of ontological security is central to the human condition – and is something engaged in by individuals and collective actors – the strategies through which it is often pursued raise ethical questions and can sometimes be ethically objectionable insofar as they may legitimise prejudice, radical othering, conflict and violence – which is not to say there are never good ethical justifications for conflict and the use of violence, although justifying this is beyond the scope of the chapter.

In particular, the chapter argues that ethical judgments of particular ontological security seeking practices will depend on the nature of subjectivity they individually support. In particular, it is argued that the requirements of ontological security are often equated in practice (but also in some academic analysis) with the need for certitude and enforcing closure around specific conceptions of self-identity. In contrast, the chapter resists the temptation to conflate ontological security with potentially categorical attachments to particular (yet ultimately contingent) identities. It argues instead that ontological security seeking strategies are most ethically defensible when they prioritise an emphasis on self-reflexivity and openness to plurality as part of a broader quest for fulfillment through living what, in Heidegger's terms, might be called a more 'authentic' life.

The chapter begins by expanding on the concept of ontological security, before noting a number of its potentially ethically progressive attributes and possibilities. It then turns to what elsewhere has been referred to as its 'dark side' (Steele 2013), with particular emphasis placed on how the search for ontological security often results in the securitisation of subjectivity based on drawing lines of categorical difference with others. This temptation is then challenged by noting that there is no *a priori* reason to think that difference need be radicalised in order to enhance ontological security. The final section then sets about making the case for refocusing debates about ontological security away from upholding specific identities towards alternative ways of living with anxiety, and potentially even embracing anxiety as a starting point for living a more authentic and morally fulfilling life.

Ontological (In)security: Anxiety and Fear

One way of teasing out the contribution a focus on ontological security can make is to note that over the years IR scholars have become too unquestioning in their acceptance of Hobbes' depiction of the human condition as at root characterised by a predominating fear of physical injury and death. Seen from an ontological security perspective, and an argument notably shared by Heidegger amongst others (see Berenskoetter 2010a), the human condition is rather one impregnated with anxiety, with fear being either secondary or derivative, as well as often a mechanism by which to escape it (see below). While anxiety can have different causes, Tillich (2000: 37) argues all anxieties always come down to anxiety about non-being. The ultimate anxiety, of course, relates to death and its unknown and unknowable aftermath, but Tillich (2000: 38-51) argues existential anxieties are also evident whenever we are overwhelmed by a sense of meaninglessness or may emerge when we feel guilty or condemned for our moral failings (also Rumelili 2015). Anxiety therefore results when our systems of meaning and sense of self-integrity have been challenged or destabilised (Giddens 1991: 44-5).

Given the precarious nature of existence and the innumerable threats that potentially face us anxiety could easily become overwhelming and paralysing. Debates about ontological security therefore concern the subject's ability to 'go on' with everyday life by developing mechanisms that protect the subject from these otherwise potentially debilitating anxieties. In particular, the focus of analysis has been on how subjects seek to create a sense of certainty and predictability, to make order out of chaos, and in doing so to bracket out anxiety. While there is no single unified perspective on ontological security analysts broadly agree that a subject's sense of ontological security is likely to be enhanced by three factors.

The first of these concerns the subject's sense of what Giddens (1991: 38-9) terms 'basic trust', and which rests on the subject's emotional and cognitive confidence in the nature of the world and 'the existential anchorings of reality'. Giddens argues that for individuals the development of basic trust is largely dependent upon the extent to which the infant's relations with key caretakers generates a sense of 'confidence in the reliability of persons'. Insofar as it does, then Giddens (1991: 39) argues this provides 'a sort of *emotional inoculation* against existential anxieties – a protection against future threats and dangers which allows the individual to sustain hope and courage in the face of whatever debilitating circumstances she or he might later confront' (original emphasis).

Second, the ability to cope with anxiety is also aided through the development of disciplining habits and routines which can provide 'a "formed framework" for existence... [thereby]... cultivating a sense of "being"' (Giddens 1991: 39). Routines, however, not only help instill a sense of order on everyday activity through their repetition, but also – because of their carrying over something from the past to the present and into the future – 'hold the promise to exist indefinitely', thereby fostering a sense of transcending time and offering the 'illusion of immortality' (Berenskoetter 2010a), a point particularly pertinent in respect of collective routines practiced around religion and nationhood (see below).

Third, and most significantly for our purposes, the melioration of ontological anxieties is also dependent upon the production, performance and reinforcement (including routinisation) of biographical narratives of self-identity that provide an account of ourselves and our actions in relation to others and unfolding events. Narratives of self-identity are important because they are central to developing 'a consistent [and emotionally comforting] feeling of biographical continuity' from birth through to death, and help the self 'answer questions about doing, acting and being' (Kinnvall 2004: 746). As we will see below, the search for a single stable identity often comes to dominate the quest for ontological security, often with problematic implications and effects. However, while the desire for a unified identity is understandable, this does not mean such stable identities exist (Kinnvall 2004: 747-8). In this respect, the Lacanian invocation to distinguish subjectivity from identity is instructive when thinking about ontological security seeking practices (Glynos and Howarth 2008: 162). From a Lacanian perspective the idea of a unified self with a coherent single identity 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). However, while subjects may lack essentialised identities they still engage in practices of identification as part of an (inevitably doomed) attempt to capture and express their

authentic fullness. This is an ongoing process as ‘dislocatory events’ inevitably challenge established identifications and raise questions about how the subject is to ‘go on’, with such events compelling subjects ‘to *identify* with new objects and discourses to fill the lack made visible’ (original emphasis) (Glynos and Howarth 2008: 162-3; Epstein 2010: 334; Edkins 2003: 366).

This last point is important as it reaffirms something often overlooked in debates about ontological security, which is that ontological security is not simply a question of asserting stability and reinforcing a sense of certitude about existence, the nature of the social world and self-identity, but also requires adaptability and a developed ability to cope with change (Craib 1998: 72). As such, Giddens (1991: 40-1) argues, a capacity for self-reflexivity is required to enable the subject to respond creatively and innovatively to a changing world. Indeed, from this perspective, for a subject with a well-developed sense of basic trust, anxiety may even be welcomed as an opportunity for dynamism and renewal (Steele 2008: 61; Mitzen 2006: 350). In contrast, ‘a blind commitment to established routines... is a sign of neurotic compulsion’, likely resulting from the lack of a healthy sense of basic trust (Giddens 1991: 40).

A Positive Value: Community, Collectivity, Shaming

It is evident, therefore, that fostering a sense of ontological security is a fundamental requirement if subjects are to avoid being paralysed by debilitating feelings of existential anxiety or to avoid ‘chronic melancholic or schizophrenic tendencies’ (Giddens 1991: 41). As such ontological security appears to be unquestionably good and something to be developed and protected. Moreover, as IR scholars have increasingly recognised, the requirements of ontological security are also important for developing a fuller understanding of international politics. Given the particular concerns of this volume the following analysis focuses on a number of ethical issues pertinent to debates about ontological security within IR. While the value and necessity of ontological security per se is not put into question, the following discussion focuses on the ethical and moral implications of how it is pursued, as most notably evident in international politics, and where it is argued a mixed picture emerges. The next section highlights the so-called ‘dark side’ of ontological security seeking. In contrast, we begin with a discussion of its more ethically positive elements.

A good place to start is to recognise that the ontological security needs of individuals can be considerably enhanced through identifying the self with a broader collective and which in turn can provide motivation for community building. As Marlow (2002: 247) and Krolkowski (2008) have noted, states are particularly notable in this respect, and which, aside from providing for the welfare and physical security of their citizens, are also important in contributing to their ontological security. Insofar as collective actors – and states more specifically – do this, then a normative judgment might be made that they should be valued for their ability to contribute to what Roe (2008: 785-87; Steele 2013) has termed the ‘positive security’ of individuals.

The point here is that the nation-state offers a mechanism via which individuals can anchor their identities historically. As Kinnvall (2004: 742-44) has noted, nationalism (but also religion) can help individuals establish a sense of continuity, stability and safety, even when other aspects of their personal life may be in disarray. Indeed, citizens frequently expect their political leaders to provide a coherent narrative of the

society and its place in the world and to furnish the nation with a sense of mission and purpose (Marlow 2002: 247). In doing so, such discourses set out a narrative of the nature of the world, typically draw a ‘direct primordial relationship to a certain territory (a “home”) and/or to a certain god(s)’, and in doing so help enhance ontological security (Kinnvall 2004: 763).

Importantly nationalism not only establishes a cognitive order and sense of stability, but fundamentally elicits passionate and emotional attachments that bind citizens to the national community in ways that can generate significant amounts of ‘we feeling’ (Solomon 2013: 131). In consequence, citizens often develop a vicarious relationship with their nation, enhancing their own sense of individual ontological security and self-esteem, and salving their own anxieties, by living through the achievements and experiences of the broader group. Such a relationship of vicarious identity is also one that can offer the individual the prospect of immortality, of surpassing death, by contributing, at least in some small way, to something bigger and historically significant that will endure long after one’s own physical expiration date has been reached (Berenskoetter 2010a).

Taking a very different tack, it has also been demonstrated that the need for ontological security can create vulnerabilities and opportunities that can be exploited for more ethically progressive purposes. Of concern here is the fact that ontological security is fundamentally tied to insubjectivity and recognition dynamics – as evident in the extent to which the development of ‘basic trust’ in early childhood is fatefully linked to ‘the appraisals of others [the infant’s key caretakers]’ (Giddens 1991: 38). Subsequent claims to self-identity, therefore, need to be continually articulated and performed, but are inherently vulnerable to their reception and judgment by others. Actors failing to secure recognition for their identity claims from others are liable to feel angered, shamed and inadequate. It is therefore possible to actively undermine the ontological security of others through denying them the recognition they crave, or by making this conditional on undertaking particular actions (Delehanty and Steele 2009: 526).¹ For example, Steele (2005) has shown how supporters of the Emancipation Proclamation successfully sought to shame the British into supporting the North during the American Civil War by emphasising how support for the South constituted a shameful embracing of slavery by a nation now defining itself in more progressive terms.

In a similar vein, Zarakol (2011) has shown how, stigmatised for their lack of civilisation, Russia, Turkey and Japan spent much of the twentieth century emulating Western norms in order to enhance their status and standing and gain acceptance as full and equal members of international society. As she notes, however, in doing so each essentially accepted the Western hierarchical worldview and internalised the West’s judgments about their inferiority, with this in turn exacerbating the sense of shame and ontological insecurity (Zarakol 2011: 39, 95-6). On the one hand, this highlights how stigmatization/shaming dynamics can become self-reinforcing, and may generate bitterness at the constant reproduction of hierarchies in which assignments and identities of backwardness are perpetuated. On the other hand, and leading us into the next section, it also indicates that it may be ‘that only relationships of equal recognition can be stable in the long run’ (Zarakol 2011: 83).

¹ Indeed, Delehanty and Steele (2009) are keen to point out that this shaming option is not only available to external others, but can also be utilised by marginalised or disaffected groups within the community.

The Dark Side of Ontological Security

As we have seen, central to developing a sense of ontological security is the establishment of a sense of certainty and stability about the nature of the world, but also about the nature of the self. Insofar as this develops anxiety is reduced as social life unfolds along largely predictable and anticipated lines. Achieving this requires the adoption of routines and the articulation of biographical narratives of self-identity that position the self in relation to the world, but also in relation to others. However, the desire for certainty and predictability in order to ward off anxiety can go too far, taking on an idealized form that closes down alternatives, most notably via the conflation of the ontological security of the self with particular conceptions of self-identity.² It is when this happens that the ‘dark side’ (Steele 2013) of ontological security seeking emerges, and where the quest for certainty can provide grounds for the politics of prejudice and justify violence and conflict against others in order to uphold sanctified conceptions of selfhood.

The link between ontological security and conflict has been well established in the ontological security literature in IR. For example, both Mitzen (2006) and Rumelili (2015) have demonstrated how actors often appear more comfortable with the perpetuation of long running conflicts and security dilemmas with others, than with their resolution. Despite the manifest threat posed to their material and physical security in terms of unproductive resource expenditure, damage to infrastructure, loss of life, and despite the fact that in some cases their very physical survival may be at stake, both Rumelili and Mitzen argue such conflicts often endure because they uphold and reaffirm a sense of certainty about both self-identity and the identity of the other. By contrast, because conflict resolution and reconciliation require flexibility and an openness towards reconceptualising the identities of all parties – and as such also accepting that the world might not actually be how we think it is – it can also be anxiety-inducing. Who, for example, will we be if our constitutive enemy turns out not to be categorically different or an enemy after all? Faced with such a prospect reconciliation may well be rejected in favour of the security of what is known. This observation, that actors often ‘pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these compromise their physical existence’ (Steele 2008: 2), is deeply significant because it fundamentally challenges the established axiom in IR that physical security is the primary value.

Another example of how ontological security is often reduced down to attempts to reinforce particular conceptions of identity has been provided by Croft (2012), but this time looking at the constitutive role of the internal other in generating a sense of selfhood and certainty. Post-9/11, and perhaps even more so since the London bombings of July 7th 2005, debates about British identity, and the quest for a collective sense of ontological security, have increasingly been framed through the securitisation and othering of ‘the “jihadi” British Muslim’ presumed to be in our midst (Croft 2012: 6). Securitising the internal other has thus become a means for redrawing the boundaries of inclusion/exclusion around Britishness and where a Muslim identity is increasingly viewed as suspect. In this sense, constituting the enemy has become a means of

² On the relationship between self, identity and ontological security, see Browning and Joenniemi (2013b).

reaffirming a particular notion of British identity, while also providing grounds for (re)constituting a role and sense of mission in terms of combatting extremism and upholding ‘civilisation’. Of particular note, however, is that attempting to reaffirm a sense of ontological security through the radical othering of the ‘jihadi British Muslim’ has also had the effect of purchasing the ontological security of the majority at the expense of the ontological security of the minority, for whom anxieties have increased significantly. Thus, unlike other citizens, British Muslims – or even people suspected of having a Muslim background or sympathies – are publically expected to condemn violent actions perpetrated by other Muslims (in the UK or abroad) since, for many people, their loyalty to the state is deemed inherently suspect. Yet they do this despite knowing such declarations are never fully believed and will be expected to be repeated.

The example is illuminating as it enables us to highlight a number of additional points about practices of ontological security seeking. First, the example takes us back to the relationship between anxiety and fear noted earlier and where it was suggested that fear often operates as a means of escaping (or sidestepping) anxiety. As Giddens (1991: 43) notes, what marks out anxiety from fear is that while fear emerges in ‘response to a specific threat and therefore has a definite object’ that can be prepared for or countered in some way, anxiety lacks such an object of focus as it emerges when one’s sense of integrity, systems of meaning or self-esteem are placed in question (Giddens 1991: 43-5). As Rumelili (2015) puts it, anxiety is ‘experienced internally, rather than projected externally’. What the example demonstrates, however, is that actors suffering ontological anxieties – in this case about the stability of British identity, the strength of social cohesion, and the morality of Britain’s role in the world post-9/11, all generated in large part by the dislocatory events of 7th July perpetrated by a group of otherwise unremarkable ‘homegrown suicide bombers’ – are prone to deflect them through constituting objects of fear to physical security (‘the British jihadi Muslim’) that can be countered (through surveillance, stop and search powers, anti-terrorist hotlines, anti-extremism and de-radicalisation programmes etc) and in doing so enabling systems of meaning about the nature of the world and identity to be re-established. As Steele (2008: 64) puts it, one way of dealing with anxieties about the unknown is therefore precisely to turn them into identifiable threats via securitisation processes, thereby ‘turning *anxiety* into *fear*’ (original emphasis).³

Second, the example also has bearing for the centrality of the idea of ‘home’ to generating ontological security. To quote Kinnvall (2004: 747) at length:

The very category of “home” as a bearer of security can be found in its ability to link together a material environment with a deeply emotional set of meanings relating to permanence and continuity. Ontological security is maintained when home is able to provide a site of constancy in the social and material environment... Home, in other words, is a secure base on which identities are

³ Although it is worth noting that Croft (2012: 7-8) argues that some of the measures undertaken in the fight against terrorism have proven counterproductive in respect of anxiety reduction. This has been especially the case insofar as the constant emphasis on the everyday nature of the threat, the proliferation of surveillance systems, and the constant invocation for the population to be vigilant and take responsibility, has shifted the focus away from clear identifiable threats to more general amorphous risks. In a sense, the lack of specificity about the threat has generated epistemological anxieties that we might not know or always be able to identify exactly what or who threatens us.

constructed. Homelessness is exactly the opposite, as it is characterized by impermanence and discontinuity.

Thus, when the security of 'home' is lost, when home no longer feels like home, or one's belonging in the communal home is questioned, then people may begin looking for alternative homes in order to provide a sense of ontological security. Such a dynamic may help explain the apparent and otherwise perplexing (for mainstream Western society at least) attraction of groups like Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) who actively reach out, offering a new home, to impressionable and otherwise disaffected Muslims in the West whose own belonging to their 'home' society is constantly questioned.

Third, as Croft (2012: 73) notes, the example also demonstrates how 'the securitization of identity leads to the securitization of subjectivity', which in Kinnvall's (2004: 749) terms refers to the 'intensified search for *one* stable identity (regardless of its actual existence)' (original emphasis). Securitization's freezing of identity is, in this way, felt to provide certainty and therefore reinforce ontological security. However, two principal ethical concerns result. First, since securitization entails identifying imminent existential threats to be countered it also typically plays into the radicalised enemy othering of those deemed threatening to self-identity. It therefore embeds conflict into the very fabric of identity construction. It suggests that if only the other could be fully expunged, the disordering chaos they represent expurgated, and the 'ego skin' sealed from contamination (Glass 1997), at last it would be possible to experience a pure state of self-being and ontological security. However, securitization does this by concealing, rather than illuminating, the inherent lack at the heart of subjectivity. Securitization, in other words, makes the 'impossibility of security [appear] contingent [by suggesting that] [i]f only we can get rid of the current impediment, we can achieve a secure world' (Edkins 2003: 367).

Second, in these processes identity – and memory more particularly – can also become dangerously depoliticised as contending narratives of history and self-identity are closed down because of their perceived threat to the integrity of the self. Mälksoo (2015) has highlighted this point well in respect of the various memory conflicts taking place between states in Europe today – for instance, in respect of different nations' roles in the Second World War or with regard to the Holocaust or experiences under the Soviet Union. In these conflicts, she notes, states are increasingly prone to adopting dogmatic positions, attempting to fix memories, be it through moral suasion or through introducing legislation prohibiting the articulation of contending accounts, because doing so is seen as necessary 'to buttress an actor's stable sense of self as the basis of its political agency' (Mälksoo 2015: 2). The effect of 'framing historical remembrance as a security issue', however, is that it has the effect of 'ontologizing' it, 'transforming it into an inescapable condition of international politics', which in turn is almost inevitably doomed to generate insecurity, and possibly even conflict. This is likely insofar as the contending historical narratives of others – and in particular their depiction of us – are 'regarded as existentially endangering for our existence', just as they perceive ours as endangering for them (Mälksoo 2015: 2). However, ontologizing 'a particular story, making it an unchanging part of the state's self-definition' (Mälksoo 2015: 3), reduces ontological security to upholding a particular securitised identity. Such identity narratives and the historical memories upon which they are derived are never neutral, but operate in the interests and benefits of some to the detriment,

exclusion and marginalisation of others. It also, however, ‘seriously curbs the self-reflexivity of the political subject’ (Mälksoo 2015: 5), which in turn will limit how that subject (i.e. the state) is able to understand and present itself in a changing world.

Finally, there is a broader feminist point to be made about the role of nations and states in providing for the ontological security needs of their citizens. Notable about the above cases is that they all demonstrate how the pursuit of ontological security at the international level is often tied to the production and reproduction of conflict. When ontological security is sought in this way it therefore has the effect of further fostering a gendered reproduction of the international as a realm that privileges ‘masculine’ values and norms of conflict, strength and violence over a more ‘feminine’ ethic of care emphasising ‘mutual respect, peace and cooperation’ (Delehanty and Steele 2009: 535). Moreover, insofar as citizens generate a sense of ontological security through living vicariously through the achievements of the nation, then states also become implicated in the further reproduction of masculinised values at the individual level. As Haigh (draft) argues, one problematic manifestation relates to how nations seek to generate patriotism and loyalty through commemorative practices which typically eulogise the nation’s military exploits. In the context of the First World War centennial commemorations in the UK, for example, people have been encouraged to mine their family histories and connect with their ancestors’ experiences of the Great War, with arguably much less emphasis placed on exploring the politics of the conflict. As such, people today have been encouraged to draw pride and reflected glory – to live vicariously – through the actions and sacrifices of their forebears. This linking of personal family history to broader narratives of the nation is powerful, but is also deeply infused with militaristic values and sentiment. As Haigh puts it, in such practices there is ‘the possibility that the very idea of being itself may have become militarised’ (Haigh draft).

Repositioning Difference

As is evident, therefore, the quest for ontological security can incorporate ethically unsettling practices of securitising subjectivity, radical othering, the militarisation of being and the prolongation (and even generation) of conflict. The search for order and certainty, it seems, can all too easily spill over into violence and oppressive politics. The remainder of the chapter therefore makes two points. In the final section the centrality of order and identity to ontological security is loosened, with greater emphasis placed on the subject’s capacities for self-reflexivity and adaptability. First, however, it is important to affirm that the temptation to securitise subjectivity through the identification of radicalised otherness is not inevitable, even though this often happens in practice.

At the crux of the issue is whether or not the identification of difference central to constituting ontologically safe identities requires identities be framed in exclusivist terms and be placed in an adversarial relationship? The very notion of friendship (at both the individual and inter-state levels) suggests alternative options are available for anchoring ontological security that may even (and often does) include an active appreciation of difference. As Norton (1988: 37) puts it, what binds friends is not simply what they have in common, but also what they do not. Indeed, such differences are often valued as providing space for interaction and an alternative perspective. Friendship, Berenskoetter (2010b) notes, ‘matters because it moulds and reinforces

“identity”, or the sense of Self”. Rather than being built on antagonism it is a positive form of difference premised on equality, respect and solidarity.

Moreover, it is also important to recognise that it is possible to escape histories of conflict even in cases where the conflicts have themselves become deeply significant for the establishment of the respective parties’ senses of self-understanding and ontological security. One example is the emergence of the Nordic security community over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and where a mutually reproducing war community has been transformed into a region of peace in which the differences between the Scandinavian nations are no longer viewed in categorical terms as existentially threatening, but have come to bind them together, not least through the idea that there are different ways of being Scandinavian (Browning and Joenniemi 2013a). The transformation of Western Europe following the end of the Second World War offers another similar example.

Such examples, however, also suggest an imperative exists that scholars do not fall into the trap of overemphasising the importance to ontological security of upholding particular (exclusivist) conceptions of identity, or put differently, being misled by the practices of actors they observe in the field into confusing ontological security seeking strategies with ontological security per se. Insofar as they do, the danger is that they may end up providing a normative justification for the securitization of identity (Mälksoo 2015; Browning and Joenniemi 2013b), thereby confusing means with ends. As the cases of Norden and Europe demonstrate, (radical) identity adjustments and transformations are not *a priori* inimical to reducing existential anxieties and establishing ontological security, but may at times be precisely what is required.

Conclusion: Living with Anxiety

Extending this point is that attempting to achieve ontological security via the securitization of identity is itself symptomatic of, and premised on, the illusion that ontological security is an achievable end point, a position we can pin down and occupy. This is a misconception since ontological security is actually inherently elusive, beyond capture and instead best viewed as a constant work in progress – or part of what Giddens (1991: 5) refers to as the ongoing ‘reflexive project of the self’. As Edkins (2003: 366) notes, if the subject is understood in Lacanian terms as inherently incomplete, as has been argued for here, then ‘it is *in its very character insecure*’ (original emphasis). Rather than fleeing from anxiety in search of an elusive singularity of a ‘perfectly “securable” identity’, it would instead, as Mälksoo (2015: 6) argues, ‘be wiser to acknowledge and come to terms with it’. Indeed, for Steele (2008: 61) this is nothing short of a moral imperative since the problem with adherence to overly rigid routines is that they ‘not only prevent us from reforming our actions, they inhibit our humanity. They turn us from subjects to objects’.

We can find support for this view in Heidegger, who actively calls for us to embrace the generative possibilities immanent within anxiety, and in doing so pushes beyond a narrower conception that reduces ontological security largely down to the ability to ‘go on’ and cope with everyday life without being paralysed by existential anxieties. Such a position is arguably evident in Giddens’ (1991: 35-7) rendering of ontological security when he places emphasis on the importance of subjects to develop a sense of ‘practical consciousness’. Practical consciousness emerges when identities and routines have

become habituated and taken for granted to such a degree that they enable one to act without having to consciously and continuously make decisions about elements of everyday activity. For Giddens, practical consciousness is the ‘natural attitude’ on the other side of which ‘chaos lurks’.

For Heidegger, however, practical consciousness – or what he refers to as ‘everyday being’ (Inwood 2000: 27) – is necessary but insufficient in itself to live a fulfilling and meaningful life and in his terms lacks authenticity and resoluteness. Thus, while Giddens argues reflexivity lies at the heart of ontological security, enabling the subject to reflect on their biographies and routines and to assess their suitability to the situation and thereby consider whether they need adapting, for Heidegger self-reflection requires more. For him, it is not simply a question of suitability and cognitive ordering but requires asking fundamentally ethically inflected questions about the nature of the virtuous life and who the subject wants to be. Such questions actively invite anxiety in because they require self-interrogation as to whether one is on the right path, and to this extent indicate that while everyday routines may salve anxieties they can also compromise the self’s ability to embrace its full potential (Berenskoetter 2010a). To do this, however, also requires (and is arguably inspired by) accepting the imminence of the ultimate anxiety of death, and in the face of one’s own mortality resolving to make the most of the time one has by seizing the possibilities of being (Inwood 2000: 69-79; Browning and Joenniemi 2013b). Anxiety and death, therefore, become revalued as creative forces, or as Foley (2010: 210) has more recently and pithily expressed it: ‘Mortality is the spice of life’.

Seen from this perspective routines and biographical identity narratives are only one part to building ontological security, and where its other dimensions require self-reflexivity and self-interrogation with respect to questions about the nature of the good life. Rethinking ontological security in terms of a quest for authenticity – a morally meaningful and fulfilling life – is also significant because it might offer alternative perspectives on key elements of international politics: such as why, despite growing affluence and despite the fundamental challenges science poses them, religion and nationalism appear increasingly resurgent; or why bored youth continue to find appeal in military adventures (Kustermans and Ringmar 2011). Finally, though, as Berenskoetter (2010a) has noted, embracing authenticity also needs to be tempered by recognition of the fact that political projects utilising the language of authenticity may themselves be far from progressive: the Nazi’s being one notable example. However, rather than undermining the invocation that the quest for a meaningful and morally fulfilling life should also be at the heart of discussions about ontological security, the ethical imperative that this demands is that calls to depoliticize such projects should be resisted, in favour of emphasising self-reflexivity and an openness towards otherness that resists securitising subjectivity around exclusivist categorisations of identity.

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