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International society as an ontological security provider: a framework for analysis

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Abstract

How might international society serve as an ontological security provider? Ontological security studies sees societies as both containers of anxiety and providers of security, but there is little research on how international society relates to this. Any answer to my question is further complicated by multiple takes (Lacanian, Kleinian, and Winnicottian) on the way the subject secures its self. I demonstrate how this multiplicity is accommodated by the conceptual heterogeneity of the 'English School' and offer three separate answers. Lacanian theory suggests a 'pluralist' international society can mitigate ontological insecurity because its institutions encircle 'the lack' that constitutes (collective) subjectivity. Kleinian theory supports the institutions of a 'thin solidarist' international society because it demonstrates how the collective action needed to protect the legal rights that recognise and secure the (collective) self does not necessarily cause anxiety. Drawing on Winnicott, Honneth argues that the (collective) self can only be fully secured if the institutions of a 'thick solidarist' international society go beyond legal recognition to socially esteem the contribution the subject makes to realising the common good. The analytical framework is applied to interpret and respond to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, offering a timely intervention into debates on a post-liberal international order.

Keywords: ontological security; English School; international society; Honneth; Winnicott; Klein; Lacan

How might international society serve as an ontological security provider? Ontological security studies (OSS) are familiar with the idea that societies 'act both as *containers for* individual members' anxieties and *providers of* defence systems against anxiety.'[1] There has, however, been little research on how *international* society relates to this point. Indeed, the literature stops short of this level of analysis, listing either

[1]Gellwitzki 2025, 11.

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'states, nations, ethnic groups, or minorities' as the containers of anxiety and the providers of ontological security.[2] At the same time, the approach most associated with the study of international society – the English School (ES) – is yet to fully engage with ontological security as a concept, or as a research agenda in International Relations (IR).[3] The purpose of international society from the ES perspective is to provide 'order' or 'a pattern of human activity that sustains elementary, primary, or universal goals of social life.'[4] This focus on a 'pattern of human activity' overlaps with OSS's focus on the 'routines' that provide the subject (either individual or collective) with a secure sense of self.[5] The ES, however, concentrates on the 'institutions' that constitute international order (e.g., international law, balance of power, and diplomacy) and how they relate to 'justice' claims in general,[6] or as they relate specifically to human rights,[7] humanitarian intervention,[8] criminal prosecution,[9] international decision-making power,[10] or environmental stewardship.[11]

Despite this gap between the ES and OSS, there is nothing to stop us from asking how the need to secure the self by living 'vicariously' through collective identity narratives is impacted by the social institutions that constitute international society.[12] In fact, there is a pressing reason why we should ask that question: some have argued that the liberal international order (LIO) is being undermined by the alienating consequences of its social institutions. More specifically, individuals within states, and states within international society, have experienced the anxiety of misrecognition, or 'the gap between [a] … desired identity and how that person or group experiences being seen by others.'[13] In response, the ontologically insecure have turned to political movements that promise to overturn the institutions of the LIO and provide ontological security on different terms and to different groups.

The need to consider how international society (liberal or otherwise) might provide ontological security is therefore pressing, but that is far from straightforward. This is because within OSS, there are multiple arguments on the way the subject (individual or collective) secures its self, and how that process is influenced by 'the Other,' which can refer to another separate self or the institutions of (international) society.[14] The recent turn in OSS to the psychoanalytic theories of Lacan, Klein, and Winnicott (and I will add Honneth) captures this multiplicity. There are overlapping

[2]Ibid. See also Zarakol 2017, 48. Gellwitzki and Houde (2023) do go beyond this level to ask how the European Union acts as an ontological security provider.

[3]Steele (2025) has started to build the bridge between these approaches. See also Williams (2015, 17) on a link between psychoanalytical accounts of being human and 'the kinds of patterns of behaviour that result in a pluralist international society.'

[4]Bull 1977, 4

[5]Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; 2025.

[6]Bull 1977.

[7]Vincent 1986.

[8]Gallagher 2013; Wheeler 2000.

[9]Ralph 2007.

[10]Hurrell 2007.

[11]Falkner 2021.

[12]Browning, Steele, and Joenniemi 2021.

[13]Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021, 614.

[14]I see the subject (and refer to 'it') as being separate from the 'self,' which can be multiple and changeable. Separating these words helps capture the way OSS has multiple views on the way the individual or collective subject (re)constitutes its 'self.'

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concerns across these approaches, but I am interested in the subtle differences that centre on the question of whether the subject realises its self *through* social institutions or *in opposition* to them. Lacanians tend to stress the possibility that the subject will lose its self in an overbearing society and will, as a response, transgress the social norms of the Other. Those drawing on the work of Klein and Winnicott emphasise the way subjects can securely identify with, and care for, the Other. Finally, Honneth, who is not a psychoanalyst but drew on Winnicott, argues that the subject can only fully realise its self if it draws 'esteem' from the performance of social roles that contribute to the collective good. The answer to the question of how international society serves as an ontological security provider is dependent on which reading of the subject one takes from OSS.

My answer cannot be singular, therefore. It is my contention, however, that this multiplicity can be accommodated by the conceptual and methodological heterogeneity of the ES approach. In Barry Buzan's influential reading of the ES, an *international society* is constituted by rules, norms, and routines, which exist alongside an *international system* that is constituted by power-maximising or security-seeking states, as well as a *world society* where commitments to universalist ideologies transcend particular identities and state loyalties.[15] Even more helpful for my purpose is the way an international society of states is conceptualised as 'pluralist' or 'solidarist.' Pluralist institutions protect different identities by limiting the demands of international society, demands that – in the language of Lacanian OSS – create anxiety for a particular (national or otherwise collective) subjectivity.[16] Solidarist institutions, however, are more influenced by transnational ideologies and thus more demanding of the collective subject.[17] Where Lacanians might see this as anxiety-inducing, solidarist institutions can, from Honneth's perspective, create the social roles that enable subjects to fully realise their separate self by identifying with a wider collective identity, contributing to the wider collective good in their own way, and then being socially recognised in ways that create self-esteem. My objective, therefore, is to demonstrate how the pluralist and solidarist distinction enables me to tailor the answer to my question so that it fits several different understandings of ontological (in)security.

To meet this objective, this paper has four sections. The first develops the Lacanian point that society (or 'the big Other') can be a source of ontological *in*security, and in these circumstances, the subject mitigates that insecurity by acting out the transgressive 'fantasy.' This speaks to the current argument that New Right ideologies are providing ontological security to disaffected communities by transgressing the liberal norms of international society.[18] It also reveals the potential for a form of agency that

[15]Buzan 2001; 2004. There are overlaps here with Wendt's (1999) Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian cultures.

[16]The term 'international society' implies a focus on the 'nation' as the collective subject. In practice, international society is constituted by 'states' that may or may not be constituted by a specific nationality, ethnicity, or language group. To avoid confusion, I use the term 'collective' to refer to a subject, which could include, for example, a 'people' or 'nation.' I use 'international society' to refer to the object that may or may not provide that subject with ontological security by socially and legally recognising or misrecognising its self-conception.

[17]There is a large literature on ES pluralism and solidarism (e.g., Buzan 2014; Linklater and Suganami 2006; Weinert 2011; Wheeler 2000; Williams 2015).

[18]Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021. On the rise of the 'New' or 'populist' Right, see Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Drolet and Williams 2018; Kinnvall 2018; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022; Mandelbaum 2020.

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is more reflective because it 'embraces anxiety.'[19] What that means for the structure of international institutions (as opposed to agency) is unclear, however, and potentially unhelpful. I turn, therefore, to another reading of Lacan. This argues that the anxiety of ontological insecurity is mitigated by the institutions of a pluralist international society. These institutions protect the shell of subjectivity – they 'encircle the lack' in Lacanian language – and that provides the space for self-determination. The *antagonism* of the friend (self) / enemy (other) fantasy, which is prominent in New Right ideologies, is replaced with something more substantive than the call to embrace anxiety. It is replaced with institutions that construct the political *agonism* of self-determining but mutually tolerant subjects. ES pluralists tend to refer to this as an 'ethic of co-*exist*ence.'[20]

The second section considers the implications for my question of a Kleinian approach to ontological security. This is important because the Kleinian argument that the subject can construct a self by identifying with (and even caring for) the Other reveals the possibility of a solidarist international society that provides ontological security by protecting a 'thin' layer of shared values: the sovereign rights (as expressed in international law) of other states. At this point, I look to Honneth because he makes clear the link between this kind of psychoanalysis (although he drew on Winnicott), its vision of the ontologically secure subject, and how that is realised through legal rights that codify sovereignty. I note, in the third section, however, that for Honneth, the legal institutions that recognise the (collective) self's right to be what everyone else is (i.e., sovereign) do not enable the subject to *fully* realise its self (and thus escape anxiety). This is because these institutions do not recognise the self's *particular traits.*[21] That shifts our attention from legal rights-based norms to social norms of (international) status and to a 'thicker' sense of shared values.[22] An international society based on shared social values provides ontological security by expressing solidarity with the subject – and thus 'esteeming' it – when it contributes to the realisation of those values. A solidarist international society, in other words, enables the collective subject recognised as a legally sovereign state to distinguish its self when it fulfils roles that are socially valuable. The final section illustrates the interpretive value of my framework by applying it to the question of Russian ontological insecurity and the invasion of Ukraine.

A pluralist and agonistic international society as an ontological security provider

Ontological security is a concept that originated in psychoanalysis.[23] It focuses on 'the management of anxiety in the constitution of the self.'[24] It also appears in sociology, especially the work of Anthony Giddens.[25] The emphasis here is on the personal

[19]Browning 2016; Rumelili 2021.

[20]Dunne 1998, 136–60; Ralph 2007, 16.

[21]Honneth 1995, 88, 121, 126; 2007a, 224–7; Honneth 2007b, 129–33.

[22]See Weinert 2011, 39 on how a 'thin–thick' typology helps ES better differentiate 'the types and depths of normative commitments states are willing to make.' See also Wheeler and Dunne 1996, 98, who equate 'thin' solidarism with 'interstate law enforcement,' and 'thick' solidarism with 'a community of humankind.'

[23]Laing 1990.

[24]Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 240.

[25]Giddens 1991.

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'need for cognitive consistency and biographical continuity – a security of 'being' – especially in a world shaken with the dislocations of late modernity.'[26] IR research has applied this concept to help explain state behaviour. Brent Steele, for example, argues that states 'seek ontological security because they want to maintain *consistent self-concepts* and the "Self" of states is constituted through a narrative that gives life to routinised foreign policy actions.' When events disrupt those narratives, actors 'will seek to re-establish routines that can, once again, consistently maintain self-identity.'[27] More recently, leading voices in OSS have called for a return to the psychoanalytic (and existentialist) study of anxiety to address a normative concern that the sociological emphasis on consistency and routine is too conservative.[28] In response, OSS has turned to Lacanian psychoanalysis, but the implication for international society as an ontological security provider is currently unclear. In this first section, I will summarise what Lacanian psychoanalysis brings to OSS and identify those implications. As the left side of Table 1 illustrates, those implications vary depending on which reading one chooses.

From a Lacanian perspective, anxiety stems from a moment of self-recognition that is prior to social interaction. This is captured in Lacan's theory of 'the mirror stage' in a child's development. As Richard Lynch put it: 'For Lacan, the "original organization of the forms of the ego" is precipitated in an infant's self-recognition in a mirror image.'[29] At this point, the subject 'anticipates'[30] or 'imagines'[31] a coherence and unity of self. Lacan calls this the 'imaginary' or 'ideal-I.'[32] But the mirror stage is also a moment of unsettling misrecognition because even the bodily image in the mirror can seem strange or inaccessible. That sense of alienation increases in social interaction as the 'social-I' ultimately fails to deliver the yearned-for sense of coherence. This 'splitting' of the subject results in what is variously referred to as 'lack,'[33] 'primordial loss,'[34] or 'alienation.'[35] The 'lack' one experiences in society can, however, be positive. It creates desire, which works 'as the motor of human agency.'[36] 'Lack' constitutes subjectivity, therefore. Alienation may be disaffecting, but the distance it creates can also be liberating. It enables a subject to recognise an individual self even if that self can never be fulfilled.

Lacan further argued that the lack of 'lack' – which occurs when the separation between self and society collapses – is another source of anxiety.[37] In response to this situation, the subject can recover its self through the 'jouissance' of transgression.[38] Jouissance gives expression to the subject's desire, which is 'aimed at recouping that

[26]Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 240.

[27]Steele 2008, 3.

[28]Berenskötter 2020; Cash 2020; 2022; Gellwitzki 2025; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023; Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020; Kinnvall and Svensson 2023.

[29]Lynch 2008, 210, quoting Lacan 1948 [1977] and 1949 [1977].

[30]Lynch 2008, 210.

[31]Vieira 2018, 150–1.

[32]Lacan 1949 [1977], 2; 2016, 117.

[33]Lacan 2016, 38–54; Stavrakakis 1999, 28–9; 52–3; 68–9.

[34]Žižek 1997, 14.

[35]Zevnik 2021, 1052.

[36]Epstein 2018, 824.

[37]Lacan 2016, 42; Mandelbaum 2020, 459.

[38]Lacan 1992, 190–203. Mandelbaum 2020, 454 translates 'jouissance' as the 'powerful, bodily enjoyment that drives human desire' (quoting Ruitenberg).

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Table 1. International society as an ontological security provider

	Lacan (i)	Lacan (ii)	Klein	Winnicott/Honneth
Theory of ontological in/security	Ontological insecurity is mitigated by the transgressive fantasy.	Ontological insecurity is mitigated when society encircles 'lack' and recognises subjectivity.	Ontological security is possible through identification with and care for the Other.	Ontological security also requires society to recognise and respect particular contributions to common good.
Prescription	Embrace anxiety	Rights and agonism	Rights and solidarity	Rights, solidarity, and social esteem
International society	?	Pluralist	Thin solidarist	Thick solidarist

which cannot be symbolised' (i.e., the lack that constitutes subjectivity).[39] A 'fantasy' for social 'objects' promising fulfilment (e.g., consumer goods, sexual partners, or political goals)[40] also serves this purpose. By giving expression to desire, and thus subjectivity, a 'fantasy' recreates the imaginary space where the ideal-I 'can take refuge.'[41] The concept of 'fantasy,' as a type of narrative, is thus important to Lacanians because it indicates how self-fulfilment, and a sense of ontological coherence, is *always* distant. This is because anxiety only increases when the subject 'realises that the imagined wholeness does not live up to the promise of the fantasy.'[42] The focus on 'fantasy' is also important because it 'renders visible'[43] the fact that all narratives perform the same function, which is to 'impose closure on the ambiguities and complexities of the social world.'[44] Once this is accepted, we begin to see the 'potential for the emergence of a radical, potentially emancipatory, politics driven by an active, wilful agency that embraces anxiety.'[45]

This is an important contribution, but the emphasis in the call to 'embrace anxiety' is on 'agency.'[46] This is understandable, given the Lacanian argument that the 'symbolic' order – the 'universe of discourse' or the 'big Other' – merely creates the illusion of security.[47] That does not help, however, when trying to answer my central question: How might the institutions of international society serve as an ontological security provider? This is why a question mark appears in Table 1. Indeed, we might conceptually locate this reading of Lacan on the lines that mark *the process of transition* between types of international society. A reflective process that questions

[39]Mandelbaum 2020, 469.

[40]Eberle 2019, 247; Bilgic and Pilcher 2023; Ermihan 2024.

[41]Lacan 1966/7, 275; Paipais 2016, 19.

[42]Solomon 2015, 49.

[43]Paipais 2016, 20.

[44]Eberle 2019, 252. See also Epstein 2018, 824 on what is known as 'traversing the fantasy': the 'necessarily lengthy, lifelong process that involves … deconstructing one's foundational fantasy and revealing it for what it is, a phantasmatic construct that regulates one's life.'

[45]Rumelili 2021, 1027; also Browning 2016, Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 44–5; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 246; Kinnvall and Svensson 2023, 4; Cash 2022, 131; Zevnik 2021; Zevnik and Mandelbaum 2023, 2.

[46]See also, Steele 2025, 217–8 on the emphasis on agency in wider OSS research.

[47]Lacan 1966/7, 14; Lacan 2016, 31.

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old routines as part of a learning process inevitably creates anxiety. But then, if Lacanians do not substantively and normatively distinguish social institutions – because all of them 'impose closure' – they are limited to a position of constant negative critique.[48] That too can be valuable as a defence against complacency, but again, it does not answer my question of how international society can provide ontological security; and for some, the lack of a positive social vision often fails to mobilise the political support that is necessary to effect emancipatory change.[49]

We might ask, therefore, if a positive vision of international society is possible from the Lacanian perspective; and, if it is, what kinds of institutions constitute that society. This (again) is a difficult question to answer, because the visions of a good society created by moral philosophy are problematic for Lacan. They attempt 'to reinstate the big Other, the symbolic system … as a harmonious unified whole by referring it to a single positive principle' and that creates anxiety for the subject.[50] Indeed, Lacan writes that the social and moral conscience attached to such visions can become 'crueller and crueller' as they 'seek us out at the most intimate levels of our impulses or desires.'[51] From this perspective, moral philosophy represses desire, and therefore subjectivity, in the name of the public good. The threat that transgressive behaviour will be named and shamed to advance norm compliance – which is central to some versions of ES constructivism – is thus a source of ontological insecurity.

The pursuit of a moral or public good can, moreover, lead to tragic outcomes. Lacan tells us this in his discussion of the fifth-century BC Greek play *Antigone*, which appears in *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*.[52] By defying King Creon's order that her dead brother is not to be buried (because the public good demands he be shamed), Antigone acts on 'pure' desire. This is because she knows her transgression will lead to her death.[53] There is a clash of social norms here, but Antigone's choice is read by Lacan as being based on desire, and the ontological need to separate herself from the symbolic order represented by Creon.[54] Once in the cave where she had been buried alive as punishment, Antigone commits suicide, only for the King to order her to be released after realising sufficient homage had been paid to the law. The King's actions, however, lead to the loss of his own family when his son, who was engaged to Antigone, also takes his own life, an action that leads to the death of his mother. The implication is that such tragic consequences could have been avoided *had the institution of law (Creon) paid more homage to human desire (Antigone)*. Creon's error of judgment, Lacan writes, 'is to want to promote the good of all … as the law without limits, the sovereign law, the law that goes beyond or crosses the limit.'[55]

[48]Cash (2020, 312) makes a similar point when he stresses the importance of the 'qualitative characteristics of the culturally organized role-identities, discourses, and practices' that are available in 'cultural repertoires.' See also Steele 2025, 214, when he encourages 'scholars to think longer term about order as a principle that might be viewed as something other than just a value of exclusion, oppression, domination, and/or one reinforcing prejudiced power structures.'

[49]Ralph 2024, 2025.

[50]Stavrakakis 1997, 85.

[51]Lacan 1992, 89.

[52]Ibid., 241–88.

[53]Ibid., 282.

[54]See Karp 2025, who notes how Hegel read Antigone as 'a tragic conflict between two sources of obligation that become irreconcilable in the world of action: the family and the polis.'

[55]Lacan 1992, 259.

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This might reinforce my point that the subject (Antigone) is moved to transgress the law (Creon) to secure subjectivity. But it can also be read as saying a legal order can be supported if it is limited in a way that respects what Lacan calls 'the Real.'[56] One can ignore the reality of a subject's anxiety (as Creon did) and continue to wonder why the subject does not comply with the public 'ethics of harmony,' or one can open up 'our symbolic resources to uncertainty'[57] and adopt an 'ethics of the Real.'[58] Contained in this latter position is, I suggest, a positive vision of an international society that goes beyond the focus on agency and negative critique. It is a pluralist vision committed to international norms and institutions because that shields multiple subjectivities against what are otherwise considered to be the overbearing demands of solidarists who are committed to an ethic of international harmony. It is, in short, committed to an international society that mitigates ontological insecurity by institutionalising the practices that allocate space for the subject to determine its self by itself.

It is important, for my subsequent analysis, to note the subtle shift of focus in this section. The issue is not simply how the subject recognises its self in society, it is how, and on what basis, the self recognises and associates with the Other. This shift to an other-regarding focus, and the practices that institutionalise it, will be a welcome shift to those who bemoan the 'Self-regarding modalities of OS.'[59] Indeed, one might argue that it is a democratic ethos that emerges from a Lacanian respect for the dignity of the subject. Importantly, however, this democratic ethos 'is not (or should not be) based on the vision of a utopian harmonious society. It is based on the recognition of the impossibility and the catastrophic consequences of such a dream.'[60] This again resonates with ES visions of international society. As noted, an international society that recognises differences and protects the principle of 'national' or collective self-determination through statehood is a check against the imperialist tendencies of philosophies that claim to identify an ethic of harmony across *world* society. At the same time, the ES vision of international society intervenes in the logics of anarchy to limit the antagonisms and misrecognitions that arise when states are insufficiently other-regarding.

The other-regarding ethos of the Lacanian-inspired pluralist international society (see Table 1) is limited for good reason, therefore. International recognition is extended to a collective subjectivity not because it complies with the moral standards and cosmopolitan identities that solidarists believe are universally applicable. International recognition is extended to subjectivities simply to mitigate their ontological insecurity and without pretension of interfering in the processes that define their collective identity.[61] International recognition in this sense constitutes something akin to a vase, which is a metaphor Lacan uses. It merely gives shape to an empty space that enables subjectivity to emerge. Put differently, international recognition 'encircles' the 'lack' that the subject feels in more solidaristic and more demanding societies. Pluralist society respects the reality of that feeling and gives space for the

[56]Lacan 1992, 17–34; Stavrakakis 1997, 86; 1999, 68–74.

[57]Stavrakakis 1999, 90.

[58]Žižek 1991, quoted in Stavrakakis 1997, 87; 1992, 17–34, 96, 130–1.

[59]Untalan 2020, 44, who adds: '[t]he consideration for the Other [in OS] is limited to how the Other threatens or satisfies the Self.'

[60]Stavrakakis 1999, 111.

[61]Steele 2025, 220.

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subject to realise and recognise its self.[62] Legal recognition of this kind 'creates [an international] public space – a certain unifying field,' but it does not aim to establish harmony and reconciliation.[63] The aim rather is the 'partial emancipation' of establishing 'unity within an environment of conflict and diversity.'[64] Although those are the words of a Lacanian scholar, they could just as easily be the words of an ES pluralist.[65]

One final point is necessary before moving the analysis along the spectrum illustrated in Table 1. The above reference to 'conflict' hints at the way pluralist international society helps diverse national or collective subjectivities realise their selves. The conflict envisaged in a pluralist international society is not the unlimited *antagonism* of the Hobbesian international system described by the ES, but the *agonism* of a pluralist international society based on a mutual recognition. This enables the subject to realise its self by defining the other as an *adversary* but not as an *enemy* to be destroyed.[66] Chantal Mouffe explains the distinction more fully. The adversary in a pluralistic (international) society is

> somebody with whose ideas we are going to struggle, but whose right to defend those ideas we will not put into question. This category of the adversary does not eliminate, and it should be distinguished from the liberal competitor, with which it is sometimes identified. An adversary is a legitimate enemy, an enemy with whom we have in common a shared adhesion to the ethico-political principles of democracy [as mutual recognition]. But our disagreement concerning their meaning and implementation is not one that could be resolved through rational discussion, hence the antagonistic element in the relation … To be sure, compromises are possible; they are part of the process of politics. But they should be seen as temporary respites in an ongoing confrontation.[67]

Mouffe is interesting to cite here because she argued in 2007 that agonism in international society translates into 'the establishment of a multipolar world order' to check the 'unchallenged hegemony of the United States,' a theme we find articulated in the more recent geopolitical narratives on the New Right.[68] This demonstrates the political character of such an approach, and a reason why the balance of power might be prioritised over international law as an institution of international society. Indeed, Bull articulated a similar thought when he discussed the relationship between the institutions of anarchical societies and how 'the great powers' may have to violate the legal principle of self-determination to politically

[62]Burgess 2017; Paipais 2016; Stavrakakis 1997, 89; 1999, 132.

[63]Stavrakakis 1999, 131.

[64]Ibid., 112; see also Mouffe 1999, 752.

[65]'*The Anarchical Society* can … be seen as an approach to understanding the contemporary international system – a system in which economic interdependence is compelling, where the network of common rules and institutions is dense … It is also a world in which the states remain the central actors, and where the diversity of cultures (even if it is not seen as leading to a 'war of civilisations') puts into question the solidity of international society and often challenges its rules.' Hurrell 2012, xxxii.

[66]Note again the link to the IR constructivism of Wendt 1999.

[67]Mouffe 1999, 755.

[68]Drolet and Williams 2018; Mouffe 2007, 148.

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check each other's imperial ambitions.[69] This argument does not *necessarily* follow from either Lacanian OSS or pluralist ES, but it does raise a problem when considering what the balance of power as an institution of international society means for nations or peoples that are not 'great powers.' That problem was keenly experienced during the Cold War when superpower 'spheres of influence' subsumed many subjectivities in the name of the international public good. It is a problem I return to in the final section when I apply my framework to interpret Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

A solidarist and rights-based international society as an ontological security provider

To recap, the previous section argued that a conception of international society that the ES call 'pluralist' could mitigate the anxieties collective subjects experience when confronted by the Other, which may be another self, or Lacan's 'big Other,' that is, the rules, norms, expectations, and institutions of wider society. In this conception of international society, collective subjectivities are allowed to determine their self-identity and seek ontological security free from wider interference. The collective identity (e.g., nation or people) is recognised as sovereign, and international society is organised politically to provide ontological security on that basis. One way of politically organising international society along these lines is to codify the principle of national or collective self-determination in law, and that has been at the centre of the liberal order based on the UN Charter.[70] It is difficult to find a discussion of this document as an ontological security provider. For Nina Krickel-Choi, however, the practice of legally recognising a collective identity as a sovereign state is not merely a *de jure* codification of the *de facto* power to govern a particular territory; it is more emotionally charged than that.[71] Narratives of collective identity provide subjects with an ontologically secure sense of self, and because that is the case, international society's relationship to that narrative is ontologically significant. An international symbolic order that legally recognises the collective identity as a self-determining sovereign state provides ontological security; conversely, an international society creates anxiety when it does not legally recognise a collective identity with a strong sense of self (e.g., the Palestinian people).

The possibility that an international society can mitigate ontological insecurity through the mutual recognition of the subject's legal sovereign status thus exists in theory and – to a certain extent – in practice. International society can provide a degree of ontological security by recognising the collective self and its right to determine its identity free from the interference of an Other. There is a problem, however. The ontological security provided by an international society that recognises the collective identity as a sovereign state is likely to come with a correlative set

[69]Bull 1977, 97–121.

[70]Article 1 (2) states that a purpose of the United Nations is 'to develop friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and *self*-determination of peoples.' Emphasis added.

[71]'[T]o be a sovereign state is to provide citizens with a cognitive and emotional framework on the basis of which they can answer existential questions.' Krickel-Choi 2023, 72. On sovereignty as a fantasy that functions 'as a compensatory structure by which international actors – states, but also "wannabe" states – chase after an imaginary "wholeness" projected onto an idealised past,' see Epstein 2018, 825. See also Gallagher 2018 in the same special issue.

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of legal obligations and social responsibilities. These might be minimal, for instance, the self's responsibility simply to respect another self's sovereignty by not interfering in the routines it chooses to live by. Or they might be more demanding, for example, the self's responsibility to come to the assistance of another self when its security (ontological and/or physical) is being threatened by a transgressor. The latter scenario is a problem for the Lacanian argument because the agonistic relationship (with the other as adversary) is tipping over into a cooperative relationship (with the other as friend). In this case, the pluralist order is tipping over into a solidarist order, with the latter making normative claims that may give rise to anxiety in the self.[72] As we know from the Lacanian perspective, the individual and/or collective subject becomes anxious and ontologically insecure when the distance between the self and the Other collapses.

This might be where the answer to my opening question concludes. Lacanian-inspired pluralism may insist that the way international society provides ontological security is to politically construct an order through a thin layer of law. This enables the national subject to determine its self by itself but places strict limits on solidaristic appeals to the international common good. That, however, is potentially unsatisfactory for reasons I alluded to above. It does not satisfactorily deal with the question of legal transgression. What happens to a collective subjectivity – such as the Palestinian and Ukrainian one – when they are denied full recognition (and therefore ontological security) because power is stacked against them? If international society is to provide ontological security, should it not act in solidarity with these collective subjectivities? That is an important question, but OSS also forces us to ask a prior question. *Can* international society demand this level of solidarity *without itself causing anxiety* in the subject? The Lacanian argument suggests it cannot, but from another perspective, it is possible that the collective subject can realise its self not by rejecting the demands of the big Other but by caring for another self in ways that are consistent with the expectations of a solidaristic international society. I argue in this section that this is possible for reasons the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein alerts us to.[73]

The aspect of Klein's approach that is important here is what she referred to as 'the depressive position.'[74] This is the moment in psychological development when 'ego capacities enlarge' and 'anxiety is also felt on behalf of the object.'[75] This enables engagement of the other 'as like the self.' From there, a relationship can be based on 'mutual recognition, even if as adversaries (but not as enemies).'[76] Gellwitzki and Houde apply this, and Klein's related concepts of 'introjection' and 'projection' to IR, and specifically to the case of Germany's identification with the European Union (EU) during the so-called refugee crisis of 2015. Where that crisis caused a rupture in the German sense of its wider European identity, a sense of solidarity was

[72]I interpret the U.S. 'sovereigntist' opposition to the International Criminal Court in these terms, demonstrating how U.S. narratives appealed to pluralist conceptions of international society to protect self-understandings of American 'exceptionalism' and 'exemptionalism' (Ralph 2007).

[73]The differences between Klein and Lacan and their implications for IR are now being articulated in OSS. See Gellwitzki 2025, 10, who writes that 'Kleinian and Lacanian theories are "mirror opposites in their premises about the nature of self."' On Klein and OS, see also Cash 2017, 2020, 2022; Gallagher 2018; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023; Houde 2024.

[74]Klein 1950, 282–338.

[75]Bott Spillius et al. 2011, 84.

[76]Cash 2020, 312. See also Gellwitzki 2025, 5–6, 15–22.

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nevertheless maintained through introjection. In other words, German identity discourses were able to internalise the 'good part' of the European other (e.g., Brussels) and that part of a 'contemporary German' self. At the same time, those discourses were able to externalise the 'bad part' of a past German self by projecting it onto a "bad other"' (e.g., Visegrád).[77] In this instance, ontological security was found not by retreating from the social expectations of – and solidarities toward – a wider society, ontological security was, in fact, found in a positive identification with that society. That positive vision then enabled the subject to consolidate the process of *becoming* a different self.

There is an overlap here with my first reading of Lacan and the emphasis on agency. It is important for my purpose, however, because it also suggests national or otherwise collective subjects *can* positively and securely identify with a solidarist form of international society that recognises them as sovereign states *and* requires them to protect others (and the legal institution of sovereign equality) when they are threatened by transgressive behaviours. It suggests, in other words, that self-determining states can securely identify as being part of a wider collective or international self. From a Kleinian perspective, it is possible for the subject to do this without causing the kind of anxiety that the Lacanian anticipates. This is because the otherwise threatening Other can be 'split' between the 'good part-object' – that is, an international society that protects sovereign equality based on national or collective self-determination – and 'bad part-object' – that is, a transgressor that violates these principles because it is acting out certain (e.g., imperial) fantasies. In this way, the principle of collective security, which we also find codified in the liberal order based on the UN Charter, can (in theory) act as an ontological security provider. The principle of sovereign equality enables the national or collective subject to recognise its self by existing without foreign interference, but the same subject is also able to see its self as part of a solidarist international society that protects that principle when it is threatened.

Indeed, this is how John Cash interprets Kleinian psychoanalysis and its implications for international society. He does not use ES language, but the inference is similar. He 're-conceptualises' Wendt's cultures of anarchy 'and their different modes of relating,' and argues subjects can draw on these as 'cultural repertoires' to mitigate anxiety.[78] These repertoires are 'co-present' and always available (thus the subject 'dwells in ambivalence'),[79] which means ontological security can be restored after disruption by 'rebalancing' or 'reweighting' their 'performative presence.'[80] The self's 'need to maintain a sense of a coherent identity that is centred, consistent, and continues through time and changing circumstances' is thus regarded by Cash as a helpful self-misrecognition. It is helpful because it can 'support the imaginary sense of self as continuous across any actual discontinuities of narratives, mentalities, and practices that follow from a reconfiguration of the cultural repertoire.'[81] This relates to my point because it suggests the 'ambivalent' self is capable of acting in support of Wendt's 'Lockean' culture, or solidarist international society, which protects the sovereignty of an adversary, without that creating anxiety or ontological insecurity.

[77]Gellwitzki and Houde 2023, 439. See also Gellwitzki 2025, 15–22.
[78]Cash 2020; Wendt 1999.
[79]Cash 2020, 312; see also Gellwitzki 2025, 5.
[80]Cash 2020, 311.
[81]Ibid., 317.

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Cash demonstrates this with reference to his own work on Northern Ireland. That case is an example of

> one society where a re-weighting of the cultural repertoire by Lockean forms – introduced and strengthened by decades of concerted and conflicted political action – has established the legitimacy and propriety of alternative cultural supports and routine practices that organize social relations differently. Friend–enemy (or Hobbesian) formations have been partially, but not thoroughly, displaced, by adversary-neighbor (or Lockean) formations *that support ontological security in a qualitatively distinct way*, although not without some haunting after-effects.[82]

It is possible then to conceive of (international) society as an ontological security provider in these – solidarist – terms. What I have referred to so far, however, is best referred to as a 'thin' form of solidarism. It is thin because the only expectation it has of national or collective subjects is that they recognise the right of each other to pursue ontological security through a process of self-determination that is free from outside interference. In this respect, it overlaps with the Lacanian-inspired pluralism, which insists international societies should merely 'encircle the lack' to mitigate the subject's anxiety. But Kleinian-inspired thin 'solidarism' is conceptually distinct from pluralism because this kind of society also provides ontological security through institutionalised collective action that protects the right to self-determination. This, of course, begs the question of what 'thick' solidarism entails, and why some argue it is needed to provide ontological security. To answer that question, I now turn to the work of Axel Honneth.

A solidarist and esteem-based international society as an ontological security provider

Axel Honneth's work is rarely referenced by the ES and OSS.[83] This is probably because he is pigeon-holed by IR as a Critical theorist who rarely writes on international matters. Honneth's work is relevant to my question, however, because it connects the psychoanalytic theory of Donald Winnicott to a theory of social institutions and the role they play in helping the subject secure its self.[84] OSS has drawn on what Winnicott said about the home as a protective space in which the subject develops that sense of self,[85] but Honneth draws on Winnicott to support his Hegelian-inspired claim that the self relies on the recognition of others. Drawing on Winnicott, for instance, Honneth notes how the mother's care, and child's 'absolute dependence,' cannot be regarded as secondary to the processes forming subjectivity, which is an implication of Lacanian thought. The relationship to the mother (an Other) is more fundamental than that.

This is important for my argument because, as Honneth explains, the 'narcissism' that Freudian theory sees as 'primary,' is, in fact, replaced by 'primary intersubjectivity': mother and child (self and other) cannot be separated. Of course, the mother

[82]Cash 2020, 309, emphasis added; see also Cash 2017.
[83]See, e.g., Greve 2018.
[84]Honneth 1995, 97–105; 2014, 208–12.
[85]Cash 2017; Mitzen 2018; Steele 2019.

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and the child do learn to separate, but the nature of the relationship remains crucial to the formation of an intersubjectivity. Mutual recognition of different selves is possible after the initial use of transitional objects (e.g., the child's silk blanket), which point to a separate domain of reality, and then personality struggles (e.g., tantrums). In this phase of 'relative dependence,' the child learns that the mother's continuing care involves recognising her subjectivity, and the mother learns that her subjectivity involves recognising the child's emerging independence. In this way, the two subjects see their selves *in* the Other, and they are each constituted by the Other's love (solidarity).[86]

From Honneth's Winnicott-inspired perspective, the subject needs the Other's recognition to become (and secure) its self. Or, as Honneth puts it, the subject needs the Other's recognition 'to be alone without anxiety.'[87] He goes on to argue that relationships built on friendship or love provide this kind of 'confidence' (which I take to mean ontological security). This is because relationships built on friendship or love strike an appropriate balance between 'the subject-based pole of an inter-subjective tension' and 'the capacity for boundary-dissolving merging with the other.'[88] In other words, those in loving relationships draw ontological security from an 'us' identity that recognises, respects, and cherishes the individuality of its constitutive selves. It is difficult to transpose this kind of thinking to IR and the ontological security of collective subjects. Some do, however, use the concept of friendship at this level.[89] Friendship is, for instance, the defining feature of Wendt's 'Kantian' culture. Writing more specifically in the field of OSS, Browning and Joenniemi characterise friendship as a relationship that entails 'equality, respect, and solidarity.' It is 'premised on far-reaching similitude but also entails an acceptance of difference.'[90]

At this point, there is nothing to distinguish this approach from the 'thin' solidarism protecting the legally codified sovereign rights of subjects, as discussed in the previous section. The international society that bestows the legal rights of statehood on collective identities, such as nations or peoples, has the same effect as love or friendship. It provides the kind of ontological security associated with what Honneth calls 'self-respect' because it creates the 'sense of possessing the universal dignity of persons.'[91] The *legal* recognition of a subject is not, however, a simple matter of recognising an empirical reality. It is, in practice, a political act that reflects the *social values and culture* of international society.[92] This is important because it demonstrates that the ontological security that comes from being legally recognised as a sovereign state is dependent on a prior (*and thicker*) level of social and political solidarity across international society. Honneth makes this point, which I have adapted with square brackets to make the link clearer:

[86]Honneth 1995, 97–105.
[87]Ibid., 104.
[88]Ibid., 105.
[89]Wendt 1999.
[90]Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 43, drawing on the work of Berenskötter 2014.
[91]Anderson 1995, xiv. This does not mean that those (national) subjects denied (international) recognition (e.g., Palestinians) can have no self-respect; indeed, they often find self-respect in the struggle for recognition. However, it does mean 'that the *fullest* form of self-respecting autonomous agency' can only 'be realized when one is recognized as possessing the capacities of "legal persons,"' i.e., sovereign statehood. Anderson 1995, xv.
[92]Honneth 2014, 141–3; Honneth 2016, 28–30.

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> Even before legal agreements aimed at promoting peace [or providing recognition] can do their work, and even before the cultivation of diplomatic relations and economic agreements can reduce international tensions [and provide ontological security], we need publicly visible signals that the history and culture of other nations are worth being heard among the cacophony of world's peoples.[93]

An example of a 'publicly visible signal' cited by Honneth is Willy Brandt's 1970 *Warschauer Kniefall*, which socially recognised the victims of the Warsaw ghetto, as well as the need for atonement, before the treaties of the détente period could legally recognise the political borders of the post-war Europe.[94]

The point being made is this: if international society is constituted *only* by international law, and if (thin) solidarism is limited to protecting the rights of states under that law, it may fail to provide ontological security because not all collective identities have been allocated these legal rights. Furthermore, not all subjectivities live vicariously through those states that have been legally recognised. *Individual* subjectivities might seek recognition from international society in ways that cannot be satisfied if international recognition is based only on national or collective self-determination. This calls for a thicker sense of *social* solidarity with those individual subjectivities, and that implies a more demanding conception of international society based on, for instance, *human* as well as *state* rights. It ultimately means working to change the power structures that deny (international) legal rights to those subjectivities struggling to find ontological security.

This form of *social* recognition is also important because it has implications for ontological security *after* legal recognition is granted. While legal recognition is necessary for self-realisation, it is also insufficient. This is because legal personality is a form of recognition that is shared with all other members of (international) society. It is important in creating – in Honneth's terms – 'self-respect,' but it cannot create 'self-esteem.' This is because legal recognition as a universal principle does not recognise the self's *particular traits*.[95] In order to *fully* realise and secure the self, therefore, subjects need to 'assure themselves of the social significance of their individual capacities' in the light of a community's 'value-conviction.'[96] In other words, there needs to be something akin to a division of social labour in the context of common values if universal rights-bearing subjects are to feel a deeper sense of self-esteem. That comes from the solidarity that first motivates the self to contribute to the realisation of common values, and then leads the Other to appropriately recognise that individual contribution.

This is so important to Honneth's theory of recognition that it is worth expanding with the following quotation, which also links it back to the themes Honneth took from Winnicott. Honneth writes:

[93]Honneth 2014, 149; Honneth 2016, 35. Zarakol makes a similar point. States 'rely on recognition from other states for their sovereign existence, which implies that there is a shared understanding about what a modern "state" is. There are criteria for recognition as a state … [and] … the Standard of Civilization, the distinctions between modernity and barbarism, the obsession with development, etc., are all examples of shared normative ground between the established and the out siders of the international system.' See Zarakol 2010, 21; see also Zarakol 2018. See also Heins 2010, 166 and Bartelson 2013, 114–5, 122–4 on the distinction between legal recognition and the politics of underlying normative and classificatory schemes.

[94]Honneth 2014, 149–50.

[95]Honneth 1995, 88, 121, 126; 2007a 224–7, 2007b, 129–33.

[96]Honneth 1995, 87, 111–3; 2014, 204–8.

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> The esteem that the child directly experiences, to begin with, in the affectionate attention of concrete others must dissolve into a form of recognition that offers intersubjective confirmation of one's individually chosen way of life. In order to arrive at a 'me' that can provide this sort of ethical support, every individual must learn to generalize the value-convictions of all of [their] interaction partners sufficiently to get an abstract idea of the collective goals of the community. For it is only within the horizon of these commonly shared values that one can conceive oneself as a person who is distinguished from all others in virtue of a contribution to society's life-process that is recognized as unique.[97]

If international society is to provide ontological security, therefore, it needs – from this perspective – to be based on a commonly shared value system and extend social (as well as legal) recognition to a collective subject by virtue of those 'traits and abilities' that make a specific contribution to the realisation of that value system.[98] Here, the sense of 'we-ness' in what we might call an 'ontological security community' enables the subject to fully realise its self by acting in solidarity with that community and contributing, in its own way, to its values.[99]

Such a society is based on a thicker sense of shared values, as well as a solidarity with other nations or peoples that contribute to the realisation of those values. I illustrated this point with reference to human rights, but I make no judgement here on what those values are. Clearly, there has been a strong tendency within the ES to equate solidarism with a commitment to human rights norms,[100] but there is nothing here to say collective subjectivities cannot draw ontological security from an international society that esteems a different set of shared values. Indeed, nations and peoples do experience self-esteem when contributing to other socially valued aspects of international and world society, for instance, scientific advancement, health care, cultural development, environmental stewardship, and sporting achievement.

Operationalising the framework: the past and possible transatlantic security community

An implication of Honneth's Winnicott-inspired argument is that international society can provide mutual ontological security if its legal *and* social institutions are based on an intersubjective 'we-ness.' This finds expression in the concept of an (ontological) security community. I understand the end of the Cold War, and the articulation of a common security agenda based on a trans-Atlantic community – 'from Vancouver to Vladivostok' – in these terms.[101] But that begs the question of how we got from that moment to the present situation, where Ukrainian sovereignty and identity have been so blatantly violated by Russia. In this final section, I use the

[97]Honneth 1995, 87.

[98]On this as a 'thick' form of recognition, see Bartelson 2013, 118; Gustafsson 2016a, 617, 2016b; Strömbom 2014; Wendt 2003, 511–2. See also Zarakol 2018, 850, who draws the distinction between a thin sense of 'legal' and a 'thicker' sense of 'existential' recognition.

[99]As Greve 2018, 858 puts it, 'security communities need not only to reinforce a sense of 'we-ness' but also to recognise members' distinctiveness. Denying this recognition threatens the self, undermining trust and eroding "we-ness".'

[100]Starting with Vincent 1986.

[101]Kempster 1991.

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framework illustrated in Table 1 to answer that question and to interpret what is, of course, a profound challenge to liberal international society. I then draw recommendations for policymakers as they seek to move beyond that challenge.

Perhaps the most prominent argument on why Russia othered, securitised, and ultimately invaded Ukraine is John Mearsheimer's Realist-inspired claim that the NATO alliance provoked such actions by expanding up to Russia's border.[102] Mearsheimer's Realism is centred on materialist explanations and concerns about physical security, but other arguments, with similar implications, speak more directly to questions of Russia's ontological insecurity and the institutions of international society. For instance, Richard Sakwa argues that the Russian self left behind by Gorbachev was not imperialist. It was, in fact, committed to what I have called a 'thin solidarist' version of the LIO, which was based on the UN Charter. This kind of international society enabled the national or collective self-determination of states (including those of the former Soviet Union) by codifying in law the principle of sovereign equality. Furthermore, Russia's permanent position on the UN Security Council was sufficient recognition of its particular traits as 'a great power.'

The problem started, according to Sakwa, when Western states in effect marginalised the United Nations as the preeminent institution of the post-Cold War order. Their use of NATO and other ad hoc (but Western-centred) coalitions to (recklessly) promote liberal democracy (in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Eastern Europe) created a sense of misrecognition in Russia. It disrespected Russia's self-image as a political equal.[103] That then created the political conditions for Putin's form of national renewal, which involved the transgressions of liberal norms, *including* the principle of sovereign equality and national or collective self-determination (especially in the post-Soviet space).[104] The implication here is that if Western policies had paid greater homage to 'the Real' (to repeat a Lacanian formulation), they would have recognised Russia's ontological security needs and avoided these perverse outcomes.

Looking forward, one might conclude that international society should now, belatedly, recognise 'the Real' of Russian subjectivity. That would mean accepting Russia's desire to occupy Ukraine as an expression of Russian authenticity, and – if we recall Mouffe's 2007 point – because that checks the power of an overbearing Western-led liberal hegemony. As I noted, however, accepting that is difficult because 'Russian authenticity' and 'the balance of power' disrespect the national or collective subjectivities of others, particularly those living on Russia's borders. The deeper implication, therefore, is that if international society is to provide ontological security, it must be based on legal norms that codify the principle of national or collective self-determination and that demands, at least, a condemnation of Russian action. It further demands international solidarity with the Ukrainian subject as it defends its self – and its internationally recognised status as a sovereign state – against Russian misrecognition. It does not necessarily follow that international solidarity

[102]Mearsheimer 2022.

[103]Honneth seemingly anticipated the difficulties of liberal solidarism when he referred to 'Western nations' delusions of omnipotence.' Honneth 2007c, 212.

[104]Sakwa 2023. See also Akchurina and Della Sala 2022; Hansen 2018; Kazharski 2020, 25; Zarakol 2010, 225–9; 236–7. Pouliot recalls how, during the period of NATO-Russia cooperation, Western practitioners saw themselves as the 'teachers' of Russian diplomats, who were represented as 'irrational and emotional.' Pouliot 2010, 143. Predictably, Russian diplomats 'despised' NATO's 'self-attributed role as a teacher,' and this experience contributed to a resurgence of the 'great power' habitus. Ibid., 144.

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requires a commitment to provide military support, and there are well-rehearsed arguments why that may be imprudent. But as a social symbol of the esteem in which the Ukrainian self is held, the international provision of material support is an important way of providing ontological security.

A final consideration stems from a point Honneth informed, which is that collective subjects only *fully* realise their self (and experience ontological security) if international society goes beyond legal recognition to socially recognise their specific contribution to the international or global common good. I made the additional point that international society can do this by esteeming nations or peoples that contribute to the international and global common good across a wide range of indicators, for instance, cultural, scientific, environmental, and sporting achievement. When this is read alongside Kleinian-inspired arguments, it opens up what I would call a 'thick solidarist' response to Russia's sense of ontological insecurity. Cash noted, for instance, that subjects hold a 'repertoire' of identities at any one time, and that over time, the self can rebalance their significance.[105] Similarly, Gellwitzki and Houde argue that a subject can identify with (and express solidarity toward) the 'good part' of an object while rejecting the 'bad part.'[106]

A thick solidarist international society would build on this and provide ontological security not only by esteeming the *Ukrainian* self, but also by addressing *Russia's* ontological insecurity – condemning the narratives and routines that threaten Ukraine while esteeming those specific Russian traits that contribute to the international and global common good in other ways.[107] The practical recommendation, therefore, would be for international society to provide ontological security by defending Ukrainian subjectivity but without essentialising the Russian one. That recognises and values those individual subjects who identify as Russian but feel the affective pull of a post-imperial identity.[108] It mitigates their sense of anxiety, which might otherwise push them to support Putin and the kinds of policies that make others ontologically and physically insecure.

Conclusion

My objective has been to answer the question: How might international society serve as an ontological security provider? This is a valid question for theoretical and practical reasons. OSS tends to see states and substate groups as the containers of anxiety or providers of ontological security. It is useful to extend that focus, however, because just as individuals live vicariously through collective identities, such as nations, those collective identities themselves live and evolve in their own social context, international society. It is theoretically significant, therefore, to consider how

[105]Cash 2020.

[106]Gellwitzki and Houde 2023. See also Gellwitzki 2025, 15–22.

[107]Such an argument resonates with Gellwitzki's (2025, 26) Kleinian-inspired analysis, which values the construction of states 'in ambivalent terms rather than as enemies. In the case of Russia, we may want to focus on actors who articulate an ambivalent self, as well as guilt, possibly shame, and promote debates about reparations (real or mock) to compensate for (some of) the inflicted harm.'

[108]On lack of reckoning with Russia's imperial past and how that enabled the invasion of Ukraine, which may yet prove to be a decolonizing moment, see Mälksoo 2023. Of course, a full reckoning on one state's imperial past is made more difficult if other states in international society are unwilling to recognise their own harms, or indeed celebrate the imperial great power identity.

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the institutions of international society may (or may not) provide ontological security. Furthermore, this theoretical research has practical significance in our current moment. This is because the institutions that have constituted the so-called 'LIO' are now in a state of flux and possibly transition. Theoretically understanding what is at stake for processes that constitute the self, and how new *orders* may or may not provide ontological security, has a very practical significance therefore.[109] As I noted, however, the answer to my question is far from straightforward. This is in part because the theoretical approach that is most strongly associated with the study of international society – the ES – has not fully engaged with research on ontological security. My aim then has been to follow the lead set by Brent Steele and build a bridge between OSS and the ES approach.[110]

I have demonstrated that the conceptual multiplicity of the ES approach, in particular the way it identifies pluralist and solidarist international societies, makes the construction of this bridge possible. With these concepts, the ES can help us understand how international society may provide ontological security, despite the existence of various arguments within OSS on the way the subject relates to social institutions. It is useful to think of this bridge as having three lanes, therefore. In lane one, I identified a pluralist international society, which mitigates the anxieties Lacanians tell us are persistent by 'encircling the lack,' that is, respecting the space in which the subject can determine its self without the demands of an overbearing society. In lane two, I identified a 'thin' solidarist international society, which provides ontological security by acting collectively to protect the legal right to national or collective self-determination when that is transgressed. We know from Klein and Winnicott's psychoanalytic work that the subject can do this without experiencing anxiety because it can identify with – even care for – the Other. That can create an intersubjectivity or shared identity in which both self and Other are secure. The 'I' is secure in, and secured by, the 'we.'

In lane three, I identified a 'thick' solidarist international society, which I developed from Honneth's theory of recognition. This provides ontological security by focusing on social recognition as something that both precedes *and* follows legal recognition. It is worth lingering on Honneth to make one final concluding point. I noted at the beginning that the ES focus on international society as the provider of 'order' had not engaged with the OSS focus on 'self,' but it had built a research agenda around the way institutions of international order interacted with conceptions of 'justice.' Honneth, in fact, argued that the self-respect and the self-esteem that subjects drew from legal and social institutions were forms of justice.[111] If we adopt the same language, then I think my framework can be used to bring a critical edge to the ES and OSS research agendas. If we walk with Honneth across my bridge in lane three and accept his view of the (collective) subject and (international) society, and if we accept that legal *and* social recognition is a matter of (international) justice, then it enables us to be critical of an (international) society that is not constituted by what I have called 'thick' solidarism. We might also experience 'ethical anxiety' amidst such injustice.[112] It follows that if we walk across my bridge in lanes one and two, we will come to a different conclusion.

[109]Steele 2025, 221, for an emphasis on the plurality of possible orders.
[110]Steele 2025.
[111]Honneth 2004.
[112]Subotic and Steele 2018.

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