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INTRODUCTION

Creating ontological security: Introduction to special issue

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Abstract
This special issue focuses on the creative ways in which agents, groups, and collectives (re-)discover ontological security in global politics. Contributions ask and then seek to answer a series of related questions: what uplifts agents and groups beyond or through challenging conditions and modes of being? What inspires, mobilises, or transforms agents from being insecure to secure beings? It develops two overarching themes. First, it considers what a creatively focused thread of ontological security studies might entail, one that can identify and explicate routines and narratives, but also other forms of experience, such as flow, aesthetics, or expressivism, that actively work towards (re-)gaining ontological security. A second theme is 'becoming', which opens the way to acknowledging the importance of creativity, and creation, in the ontological security process. In this introduction, we assess two questions. First, why has a research community with the word 'security' in its title focused so much on its lack? Second, what benefits might a refocus on examples, processes, and dilemmas for 'creating ontological security' provide? We then introduce the two themes of, and contributions to, this special issue.

Keywords: becoming; being secure; creation; experience; ontological security studies

Introduction

This special issue revisits the creative processes through which ontological security can be regained or refashioned in global politics. Acknowledging that even creative processes may be unequally beneficial for groups, this special issue focuses on the creative ways in which agents, groups, and collectives (re-)discover ontological security in global politics. Contributions ask and then seek to answer a series of related questions: what uplifts agents and groups beyond or through challenging conditions and modes of being? What inspires, mobilises, or transforms agents from being insecure to secure beings? In short, can ontological security be realised, and if so, what does ontological security look and feel like?

Offering a collection of eight further papers, the special issue explores these questions by providing two sets of general answers. First, the contributions build on theoretical understandings of 'anxiety' and how it can be channelled towards creative processes. Several contributions then revisit and further advance the creative processes through which ontological security can be regained or refashioned in global politics. Second, the contributions investigate how agents (from individuals, to groups, to broader collectives) in global politics turn from 'being insecure' to 'becoming secure'. This special issue aims to sketch, then, what a more creatively focused ontological security studies (OSS) may entail as a more agentic and relationally centred approach. By 'creatively focused', we mean a research thread of OSS that can identify and explicate routines and narratives, but also other

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forms of experience, such as flow, aesthetics, or expressivism, that actively work towards (re-)gaining ontological security. A second theme of this special issue is 'becoming', which opens the way to acknowledging the importance of creativity, and creation, in the ontological security process.

In this introduction to the special issue, we assess two questions. First, why has a research community with the word 'security' in its title focused so much on its lack? Second, what benefits might a refocus on examples, processes, and dilemmas for 'creating ontological security' provide? We begin in the next section by offering an overview of ontological security as it has evolved and expanded in international relations, and then canvassing the focus on *in*security found in OSS over time in the third section. We there provide five explanations to answer the first question on why there is a focus on insecurity. Sections four and five begin answering the second question. Section four explores how ontological security has considered creativity through the turning of 'negative' modes of being into more 'positive' ones. Section five calls forth a re-conceptualisation of ontological security as one of not only being but also 'becoming'. We conclude by introducing the contributions to this special issue.

Ontological security: An overview

Ontological security is defined as an agent's 'fundamental sense of safety in the world'[1] and the continuity of Self in time and space.[2] A stable identity or sense of being is necessary to foster a sense of agency. Ontological security is pursued through routines, which help pattern a subject's world, creating certainty and order. It is also fashioned through narratives, of a Self and Other, that help to make sense of the world and one's place in it.

Ontological security studies, as it has come to be known as a research community, developed within security studies writ large following the waves of works in the 1990s and 2000s focusing on the politics of identity in international relations.[3] The study of security had always been central to the field of international relations, but its meaning within the field rapidly expanded in both depth and breadth after the end of and following the Cold War.[4] The emergence of 'critical security studies' brought to the forefront the voices of unprivileged groups and highlighted the political character of security.[5] It developed in tandem with subsequent works that have further specified the context, practices, and effects of identity throughout global politics.[6] It was in this context that OSS emerged in international relations.

Works in the late 1990s, including especially by McSweeney,[7] Cash,[8] and Huysmans,[9] engaged with security studies' focus on identity by referencing the concept of ontological security. Since the

[1] Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 37.

[2] Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70 (p. 342).

[3] William Bloom, *Personal Identity, National Identity and International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 1990); Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil (eds), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory* (Lynne Rienner, 1996). See especially J. Ann Tickner, 'Identity in international relations theory: Feminist perspectives', in Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil (eds), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory* (Lynne Rienner, 1996), pp. 147–62.

[4] Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases* (Routledge, 2016).

[5] For an overview of this period, see the introduction to the comprehensive overview of CSS by Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (Routledge, 2020).

[6] See especially Mira M. Sucharov, *The International Self: Psychoanalysis and the Search for Israeli–Palestinian Peace* (State University of New York Press, 2005); Srdjan Vucetic, *The Anglosphere: A Genealogy of a Racialized Identity in International Relations* (Stanford University Press, 2011); Srdjan Vucetic, *Greatness and Decline: National Identity and British Foreign Policy* (McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021).

[7] Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[8] John D. Cash, *Identity, Ideology and Conflict: The Structuration of Politics in Northern Ireland* (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

[9] Jef Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean? From concept to thick signifier', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 226–55.

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mid-2000s,[10] ontological security has been more explicitly aimed to understand a variety of practices in international relations. What has emerged is a 'research community that has investigated OS in IR over the past two decades',[11] one that combines insights from the concept's original disciplines of psychology and sociology to build upon those disciplines' influences on international relations as a whole.[12]

Ontological insecurity studies

The search for ontological security is, as argued by adherents of it as an approach to international relations, *less* easily resolved by international actors than traditionally understood, 'power-based' security challenges, ones where a measurable or tangible strategic interest might be ascertained. Some of the initial works on ontological security used it as a lens for understanding security practices and highlighted this very distinction as the basis for their contributions. These focused on how costly policies and practices may 'make sense' for agents because they reaffirm such agents' senses of Self. So, for instance, Jennifer Mitzen's revolutionary study explored, in part, how security dilemmas might continue even if they are costly, because routines, even dangerous ones, can provide ontological security.[13] Steele's 2008 book used ontological security as a lens to understand why Belgium as a neutral power would have rejected in the summer of 1914 a German ultimatum to proceed through its territory, knowingly deciding to put it on a path of its own physical destruction, or why nation-state members of NATO pursued Operation Allied Force against Yugoslavia when there were seemingly little tangible material 'security' interests in Kosovo.[14] Summarised by one recent study published in this journal just in 2025, the 'pursuit of ontological security needs leads at times to behaviors that are incongruous with the commonsensical and realistic logic of political conduct'.[15]

Other ontological security studies have examined how drives for a sense of Self at one level – that of the nation-state, for instance – can impact ontological security at other levels, such as marginalised groups and individuals. This has been a hallmark of Catarina Kinnvall's work since her first studies in this area in the mid-2000s and was the basis for Croft's turn back to individuals from collectives in his early contribution to the (then) nascent work on ontological security.[16] Here, too, ontological security is elusive, and insecurity the phenomenon of focus. But even drives for ontological security do not guarantee a 'reaching' of that condition. Most often, such attempts lead to further forms of 'insecurity'. Work in ontological security studies has thus been marked instead by, as Lauren Rogers in her *EJIS* article rightly noted, 'a shift to conceptualise actors not as ontologically secure as such, but as *seeking* ontological security'.[17]

What produces this insecurity varies. In typical ontological security terms, it arises through any occasion where the Self is called into question. It could be when a narrative fails to capture the actions of the Self through time and space,[18] or routines become disrupted, or uncertainty

[10]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67.

[11]Brent J. Steele, 'Order and justice in ontological security studies', *Cooperation and Conflict,* 60:2 (2025), June, pp. 213–36 (p. 213).

[12]Sucharov, *The International Self*; McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*.

[13]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics', p. 341.

[14]Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations* (Routledge, 2008), chapters 5 and 6.

[15]Ryszard Szynowski and Piotr Gil, 'Rooted in identity, aimed at security: Polish politics towards Ukraine and its ontological security foundation', *European Journal of International Security,* 11:2 (2025), pp. 1–21.

[16]Stuart Croft, 'Constructing ontological insecurity: The insecuritization of Britain's Muslims', *Contemporary Security Policy*, 33:2 (2012), pp. 219–35.

[17]Lauren Rogers, 'Cue Brexit: Performing global Britain at the UN Security Council', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:1 (2024), pp. 122–40 (p. 124). Kinnvall's works had this framing from the beginning, with 'search for ontological security' in the subtitle of each: see *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security* (Routledge, 2007).

[18]Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27.

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emerges. A number of works in OSS have characterised these experiences through a variety of affectively charged concepts. This includes most markedly anxiety, found in a number of special issues,[19] keynotes,[20] and more philosophical renderings proliferating in journals throughout the 2020s.[21] Studies have also centralised emotions such as humiliation,[22] embarrassment, narcissism, and shame,[23] and difficult and affective conditions like trauma[24] and moral injury.[25]

These studies have provided analytical leverage for interpreting otherwise puzzling international behaviours. They help explain policies as seeking to avoid past, present, or future ontological insecurities of collective agents. But, in so doing, the more creative practices and processes for *generating* ontological security have been less of a focus. This is curious considering the ways in which 'healthy' modes of being were part of the first wave of ontological security studies in IR[26] and were a goal for many of the psychological and psychoanalytical approaches that introduced the concept.

Today, the broader lurking of *insecurity* rather than security hovers in the background of most ontological security studies. Work in OSS is voluminous, but a few studies deserve mention here for their focus on how such insecurity comes about. Lupovici's work, for instance, explores how the stability–instability paradox entangled with nuclear deterrence expounds the immanent focus on insecurity in IR.[27] Filip Ejdus addressed the important nexus between crisis and ontological insecurity, highlighting how this can become a source of conflict in IR.[28]

One can even examine how ontological insecurity has been explored in this very journal, which has published a number of key contributions to the debates, an illustrative sample of the broader lurking of *insecurity* rather than security in OSS. Kai Opperman and Mischa Hansel's vivid exploration demonstrated how special relationships provide a relational context of 'mutual assurances and symbolic affirmations' to the parties involved. And yet, the 'stability' of these relationships can also rest upon dynamics of insecurity, for instance when one party:

[19]Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Studies Quarterly*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56; Bahar Rumelili, 'Introduction to the special issue: Anxiety and change in international relations', *Uluslararası İlişkiler Dergisi*, 19:73 (2022), pp. 1–11; Catarina Kinnvall, Ian Manners, and Jennifer Mitzen (eds), Ontological Insecurity in the European Union, special issue of *European Security,* 27:3 (2018), reprinted in *Ontological Insecurity in the EU* (Routledge, 2020).

[20]Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of international relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1020–36.

[21]Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies', *International Studies Review*, 24:3 (2022), viac013; Karl Gustafsson and Nina Krickel-Choi, 'Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 875–95.

[22]Marco A. Vieira, '(Re-) imagining the "self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64; Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löfflmann, 'Populism and the affective politics of humiliation narratives', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:1 (2021), ksab002.

[23]Linus Hagström, 'Great power narcissism and ontological (in)security: The narrative mediation of greatness and weakness in international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65:2 (2021), pp. 331–42; Jeremy Youde, 'Shame, ontological insecurity and intercountry adoption', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 27:3 (2014), pp. 424–41; Zeger Verleye, 'Failing the state self: On the politics of state shame', *International Theory*, 17:1 (2024), pp. 1–29; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, chapter 6.

[24]Alexandria J. Innes and Brent J. Steele, 'Memory, trauma and ontological security', in Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte (eds), *Memory and Trauma in International Relations* (Routledge, 2013), pp. 15–29. Alexandria J. Innes, 'Accounting for inequalities: Divided selves and divided states in international relations', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:3 (2023), pp. 651–72.

[25]Jelena Subotic and Brent J. Steele, 'Moral injury in international relations', *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 3:4 (2018), pp. 387–401.

[26]Jennifer Mitzen, 'Anchoring Europe's civilizing identity: Habits, capabilities and ontological security', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 13:2 (2006), pp. 270–85.

[27]Amir Lupovici, 'Ontological security, deterrence, and the use of force', in Amir Lupovici (ed.), *The Power of Deterrence* (Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 59–86.

[28]Filip Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession* (Springer International Publishing, 2020).

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> May thus be able to strategically 'exploit' the ontological security needs of their partners in that they threaten to 'insecuritise' them. For example, they might challenge the self-identity of their partners by accusing them of violating the expectations of a special relationship. This, in turn, may 'shame' a partner into adapting its behaviour in a way that benefits the other state and sustains the special relationship[29]

The title of Steele and Subotic's study reflects a similar dynamic via icons, which they argue provide 'ontological (in)security', in that they

> serve the role of fulfilling ontological security by relating to and reflecting a political community's biographical narrative. Yet that they have to fulfil that role also reveals an underlying ontological *in*security in political communities of needing icons in the first place.[30]

Lauren Rogers's aforementioned study states powerfully and simply what is the basis for this current special issue's pivot: 'Much of the empirical work within OSS deals less with the notion of security and more with that of *insecurity* and how anxiety weaves into daily life for international actors'.[31] Rogers calls attention in the process to how 'the clash between self-understanding and international representation can lead to a cocktail of shame, anxiety, and insecurity'.[32]

Explaining the focus on insecurity

The focus on insecurity over security is not without good purpose in OSS. We acknowledge here at least five reasons for, or functions of, the focus on insecurity over security in ontological security studies. These may also be considered candidate reasons for a focus in critical security studies more broadly on not only 'security' but also its lack.

First is something that goes beyond just this research community or even critical security studies more broadly. Insecurity is an *evolutionary* feat. Disgust is the most well-known example,[33] along with other negative emotions, such as fear, anxiety, or anger. These are all conditioned into humans to prime them for survival. To 'create ontological security' is, in some ways, to run up against millennia of evolution. No matter how hard an agent tries to create ontological security, the behemoth of evolution is there to make one more anxious because to be anxious is to survive. Anxiety, in short, is in this rendering an adaptive condition.

A second reason for the focus on insecurity, related perhaps to this evolutionary trait, is that the concern is broader than just the emphasis found in OSS and proceeds to at least security studies, if not all of international relations. Much of international relations emphasises the 'bad' or dark side because that is what is most destructive. To borrow a journalism phrase, 'what bleeds leads'. The clinical settings where Laing explored ontological insecurity are perfectly in line with a wider concern in international relations more broadly with diagnosing a 'problem' (which is much more identifiable than a state of security), and then addressing it. The field of security studies itself emerged from experiences of radical insecurity, such as World Wars I and II, nuclear weapons and the Cold War, decolonisation, and civil wars.[34] The study of security originated in strategic (military) studies, with security studies crystallising as a field of study after World War I. Even though

[29]Oppermann Kai and Hansel Mischa, 'The ontological security of special relationships: The case of Germany's relations with Israel', *European Journal of International Security*, 4:1 (2019), pp. 79–100 (p. 87).

[30]Brent J. Steele and Jelena Subotic, 'Icons and ontological (in)security', *European Journal of International Security*, 9:2 (2024), pp. 143–59 (p. 147).

[31]Rogers, 'Cue Brexit', p. 127.

[32]Rogers, 'Cue Brexit', p. 127.

[33]See Michelle Bentley, 'A new model of "taboo": Disgust, stigmatization, and fetishization', *International Studies Review*, 24:3 (2022), p. 11–25.

[34]Barry Buzan and Lene Hansen, *The Evolution of International Security Studies* (Cambridge University Press, 2009), chapters 1–2.

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critical security studies reframed insecurity as political, rather than natural,[35] insecurity epitomises security studies itself.

Some of this is also found, thirdly, in the original resources and their theorisations of ontological security that help shape the account of late modern subjects. Ronald Laing's chapter in his oft-cited and referenced *The Divided Self* is notably titled 'ontological insecurity'. Understanding existence as 'being in the world', a state of ontological insecurity epitomises an agent overwhelmed with anxieties and dangers.[36] The state of insecurity is entangled with the 'experience of himself' and 'of this order can no more live in a "secure" world'.[37] Ontological insecurity means that

> [h]e may lack the experience of his own temporal continuity. He may not possess an overriding sense of personal consistency or cohesiveness. He may feel more insubstantial than substantial, and unable to assume that the stuff he is made of is genuine, good, valuable. And he may feel his self as partially divorced from his body.[38]

The world of an ontologically insecure agent will be 'correspondingly different from that of the individual whose sense of self is securely established in its health and validity'.[39] An ontologically insecure agent 'is preoccupied with preserving rather than gratifying himself: the ordinary circumstances of living threaten his *low threshold* of security'.[40] A low threshold of security represents an unstable category, and 'if such a basis for living has not been reached, the ordinary circumstances of everyday life constitute a continual and deadly threat'.[41] Oppositely, an ontologically secure agent 'will encounter all the hazards of life, social, ethical, spiritual, biological, from a centrally firm sense of his own and other people's reality and identity'.[42] Laing's understanding of ontological insecurity stems from an existential–phenomenological account drawing on a clinical study of psychosis, and while it is surprising that much of ensuing ontological security has focused more on this rather state-of-exception, this special issue seeks to correct this balance by providing an account of how ontological security can be created and normalised. In Giddens's work, ontological security is often theorised in relation to ontological *in*security. Describing ontological insecurity, similarly to Laing, Giddens underscores that anxieties disrupt a coherent sense of 'being in the world':

> The chaos that threatens on the other side of the ordinariness of everyday conventions can be seen psychologically as *dread* in Kierkegaard's sense: the prospect of being overwhelmed by anxieties that reach to the very roots of our coherent sense of 'being in the world'.[43]

So we only know what ontological security *is* because of what it is *not*.

While an emphasis on insecurity has been present both in security studies for decades and in the original conceptualisations of the concept just noted, the strongest intervention in providing an account of insecurity has become central in OSS via Lacanian interventions,[44] especially around elements of lack, desire, anxiety, fantasy – all concluding in the impossibility of security. Lacan saw subjectivity as characterised by a sense of lack and incompleteness, and a desire to rectify this

[35]Keith Krause and Michael C. Williams, 'From strategy to security: Foundations of critical security studies', in Michael C. Williams and Keith Krause (eds), *Critical Security Studies* (Routledge, 1997), pp. 33–59; David A. Baldwin, 'The concept of security', *Review of International Studies*, 23:1 (1997), pp. 5–26.

[36]Ronald D. Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (Penguin Books, 1965), pp. 19, 43.

[37]Laing, *The Divided Self*, p. 42.

[38]Ibid.

[39]Ibid.

[40]Ibid.; original emphasis.

[41]Ibid.

[42]Ibid., p. 39.

[43]Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 37; original emphasis.

[44]Catarina Kinnvall and Ted Svensson, 'Trauma, home, and geopolitical bordering: A Lacanian approach to the COVID-19 crisis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:3 (2023), sqad053.

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by identifying with various signifiers through which a sense of identity and purpose can be generated. To conceal the void associated with a constitutive lack, agents thrive as desiring subjects, pursuing identification with various symbolic objects, which are fantasised as being able to fill the lack.[45] Of course, fantasies inevitably fail to deliver, but rather than killing the fantasy, the sense of falling short typically only reactivates the desire for something that will resolve the lack.[46] Zevnik and Mandelbau describe the utility of applying a Lacanian lenses: it 'forces us to face the ontological void at the heart of our existence, accept the anxiety and neurosis'.[47] Lacanian works point out how these dynamics can be exploited by political forces offering promises of security that epitomise transgressive fantasies.[48] Lacanian processes can, ironically, be inherently stabilising, with 'desire' being 'the engine of our life and the glue of social orders'. Yet it all rests upon a perpetually 'incomplete' subject whose desire pushes them forward to 'go on' and reproduce social order itself.[49]

One of those structural practices that plays upon the lack is, of course, consumerism, and even the capitalist order itself. This brings up a fourth reason for the foregrounding of ontological *insecurity*: it is a lucrative business. There is a political economy that both facilitates and promises to 'resolve' negative affective states like rage, anger, and anxiety, states that are never quite resolved, fuelling more consumptive practices. You can see this on almost any form of mass media from radio and TV to websites and apps. Talk radio across the United States has long played up economic Armageddon to get people to buy things, usually gold, but other products as well. And all political orientations are fed by, and feed upon, the 'anger economy'.[50] Algorithms on apps and websites find it not only useful but also profitable to promote negative emotions like rage, frustration, anger, and sadness. Some preliminary studies of Twitter, for instance, found an increase in 'affective polarisation' resulting from a changed algorithm after Elon Musk took it over (although those who used it before may recall a pretty affectively polarised environment prior to even Musk's takeover). This political economic thread, however, is surprisingly understudied in OSS, save a few studies such as Elke Krahmann in 2018 on the 'market for ontological security', which looked at private security industry in providing OS, or other interventions examining how anxiety is 'treated' on a pharmacological level.[51]

A fifth current for focusing on insecurity involves the same risk one finds for those doing work on humour,[52] or joy, or other positive emotions. Simply talking about, let alone articulating, how creativity and positive forms of agency lead to ontological security is itself a risk, an *indulgence*, something tone deaf and borne of cushy privilege. For so many who work on insecurity, precarity, and oppression, identifying and elevating creative forms of agency can run up against not only what they research but also who they are.[53]

[45] Cf. Solomon, *The Politics of Subjectivity*, p. 38; Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (Verso, 1999).

[46] Christopher S. Browning, Pertti Joenniemi, and Brent J. Steele, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations: Self, Security, and Status on the Global Stage* (Oxford University Press, 2021).

[47] Andreja Zevnik and Moran M. Mandelbaum, 'Introduction to special issue: Interrogating the void: Lacanian psychoanalysis in international relations', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:3 (2023), pp. 1–3.

[48] Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22:1 (2019), pp. 243–68.

[49] Ibid., p. 245.

[50] Carlos Perez, 'The anger economy: How we've traded our hearts for swords', Medium (13 May 2025). available at: {https://medium.com/intuitionmachine/the-anger-economy-how-weve-traded-our-hearts-for-swords-df6a55ab49b9}.

[51] Walker Chavatel, 'Ontological security studies in the age of constructed anxiety', paper presented at the 2023 Annual Meeting of the ISA-Northeast (November 3rd - 4th, 2023), Providence, Rhode Island.

[52] James Brassett, Christopher Browning, and Muireann O'Dwyer, 'EU've got to be kidding: Anxiety, humour and ontological security', *Global Society*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 8–26; Daniel Beck and Alexander Spencer (eds), 'From resistance to legitimation: The changing role of humour in politics', special issue of *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political,* 50:1 (2025).

[53] Martin Seligman remarked on the first time he addressed the APA as president, calling for a move towards positive psychology. The reaction was, as he called it, 'bimodal': 'On the positive side, when I started to speak about this, I noticed that people in the audience were often weeping and would come up to me afterward and say, you know, this is what I always

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So, to sum up, there are plenty of reasons for ignoring or avoiding accounts on ontological security, its realisation, and its achievement, since there are so many factors driving scholars to focus on its lack or even absence. It comes down to a basically successful and somewhat 'safe' research design strategy in ontological security studies and likely international relations more broadly. In order to demonstrate a unique contribution, the scholar points out that there is something either empirically puzzling, or politically urgent, for certain subjects they study. Then they can show how the drive for ontological security leads to insecurity, then explore or understand the empirics that follow, and put all of that in the vernacular of OSS via routines, narratives, expertise, or vicarious identity. They then leave in place that insecurity without addressing why ontological security itself is still so attractive (or even should be?) and how it might still be realised, let alone what kind of politics would emerge if it was.

Negative into a positive

There has been some work in OSS that we acknowledge here that sees 'positive' or creative processes as being possible. Yet it often treats these as ends, coming as a reaction to more negative emotions that challenge the Self of the subject. We focus on three strands here, before moving in the next section to a conceptual shift that may provide some guidance for how creating ontological security can come about.

The first strand of OSS 'negative into a positive' research is the Lacanian account, via jouissance, or enjoyment. In Lacan's works, the paradigm of jouissance changes over time from an 'imaginary figuration' to 'unattainable and therefore impossible antagonist of desire, before also representing a discursive and therefore symbolic element of repetition'.[54] Jouissance has a 'double polarity, first in respect to desire', and then 'in respect to pleasure'.[55] Here, though, there is not much enjoyment at all because jouissance is elusive and ultimately unattainable. It mobilises a subject towards fantasies of wholeness that they can never attain. Enjoyment then is mixed with other, more negative affects, like a desire that can't be satiated, so much that it becomes painful. Further still, this enjoyment is something that *others* seem to experience (making our desire for it even stronger), because of *our* pain that they have generated due to stealing the objects we desire. Pleasure for others creates pain for the Self. So, for Lacan, negativity is instantiated by loss, lack, repetition, or pain. This is enjoyment, then, that really isn't enjoyable.

A second strand follows from the existentialist interest of OSS via Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Blumenberg,[56] and Laing. This takes a couple of sub-forms. One can be seen within Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi's 2020 study, which went back to Laing, distinguishing a 'normal' anxiety that exists within an ontologically secure subject from what Laing called a 'neurotic' anxiety for the ontologically insecure agent. Here their focus on Laing's and May's existentialism drew out particular emphases that enabled agents to 'go on' even with anxiety. Most notably, Gustafson and Krickel-Choi pivoted from May's anxiety theory to examine the ways in which creativity, rather than debilitating paralysis, can follow from anxiety.

A second sub-form of the existentialist intervention here sees anxiety itself as a positive fuel, providing productive potential as a way to realise an 'authentic life'. Anxiety epitomises a 'precondition for creative change',[57] and embracing anxiety constitutes the 'starting point for living a more

wanted to do, to work on happiness, but the only game in town was misery … On the other hand, dyed in the wool clinical psychologists who saw the world through a pathology lens were and are threatened by it' (quoted in Laurie Santos, 'The man who invented happiness science', The Happiness Lab podcast [2023], available at: {https://www.pushkin.fm/podcasts/the-happiness-lab-with-dr-laurie-santos/the-man-who-invented-happiness-science-marty-seligman/}).

[54]Dany Nobus, *The Law of Desire: On Lacan's 'Kant with Sade'* (Springer International Publishing, 2017), fn. 7, pp. 21–22.

[55]Néstor A. Braunstein, 'Desire and jouissance in the teachings of Lacan', in Jean-Michel Rabaté (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Lacan* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 102–15 (p. 104).

[56]Xander Kirke, *Hans Blumenberg: Myth and Significance in Modern Politics* (Springer, 2018).

[57]Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear and ontological security', p. 247.

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authentic and morally fulfilling life'.[58] Starting from the assumption that 'anxiety results from a gap between the actor's biographical narrative and its Self-identity',[59] anxiety here pushes agents to overcome their status quo. Whether anxiety can be overcome remains uncertain, but the willingness to endeavour to overcome a certain restraining condition transforms agents into a state that is better off than before, propulsating them into further thriving and viable existence.

Work in this sub-strand includes Kirke and Steele's conclusion of their study about political myths, including how counter-myths developed in light of an anxious present might be mobilised towards progressive possibilities. It is found as well in Kurylo's work on counter-populist protest, providing a vivid example of the mobilisational possibilities of myths.[60] Other works in this vein mention the importance of ethical anxiety as fostering a solidarity from the more privileged to the marginalised.[61] Browning's work deserves special note, as it has through a series of studies cultivated this more positive potential of anxiety. In his 2017 co-authored study with Joenniemi, it is presented succinctly: 'anxiety need not necessarily be something to be assiduously avoided, but may actually be welcomed as offering chances for renewal and the pursuit of a more authentic and (potentially ethically) fulfilling life'.[62] Rogers's aforementioned work in this journal fits comfortably in this strand of 'negative into a positive' when she writes about 'the productive quality of anxiety because without this imperative to go on, there would be no incentive to reinvent, to shake away the sedimentation and redefine not only the self, but also the world in which the self exists'.[63] Indeed, it is in *this* line of inquiry and argument – the positive and community-building possibilities resulting from anxiety and crisis – that Fakhoury and Gricius,[64] Heinrichs,[65] and Kirke's[66] contributions to the current special issue extend.

Within these sub-strands, there are important insights regarding the management of ontological insecurity, and/or its mitigation, specifically in how insecurity is treated and attempted to be turned into security. Flockhart conceptualises a mechanism of ontological security maximisation, according to which, actors adopt actions that ensure cognitive consistency, but they also adopt change when this can contribute to a sense of integrity and pride, outlining the complex processes in the constitution of the self.[67] Other studies provide an understanding of ontological security as feeling at home in the international order, in which hope epitomises simultaneously a site of 'constancy',[68] 'cognitive control'[69] over their regional and international environment or protection,[70]

[58]Christopher Browning, 'Ethics and ontological security', in Jonna Nyman and Anthony Burke (eds), *Ethical Security Studies* (Routledge, 2016), pp. 160–73 (p. 160).

[59]Hom and Steele, 'Anxiety, time, and ontological security', p. 323.

[60]Xander Kirke and Brent J. Steele, 'Ontological security, myth, and existentialism', *Review of International Studies*, 49:50 (2023), pp. 905–23; Bohdana Kurylo, 'Counter-populist performances of (in)security: Feminist resistance in the face of right-wing populism in Poland', *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 262–81.

[61]Subotic and Steele, 'Moral injury'; Brent J. Steele, 'Ethical anxiety in global politics', in Simon Koschut and Andrew A. G. Ross (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Emotions in International Relations* (Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 81–92.

[62]Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', Cooperation and Conflict, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47 (p. 45).

[63]Rogers, 'Cue Brexit', p. 127.

[64]Renato Fakhoury and Gabriella Gricius, 'Eco-anxiety and the self in a warming world: Conceptualizing ontologically insecure communities', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[65]Pauline Heinrichs, 'Climate change and the production of ontological security: Towards transformative politics, reflexivity and emotive agency', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security', p. 1–21.

[66]Xander Kirke, 'Political myth and the generation of ontological security: The case of UK responses to terrorism', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[67]Trine Flockhart, 'The problem of change in constructivist theory: Ontological security seeking and agent motivation', *Review of International Studies*, 42:5 (2016), pp. 799–820.

[68]Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67 (p. 747).

[69]Filip Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 883–908 (p. 888).

[70]Jennifer Mitzen, 'Feeling at home in Europe: Migration, ontological security, and the political psychology of EU bordering', *Political Psychology*, 39:6 (2018), pp. 1373–87.

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while homelessness is characterised by 'impermanence and discontinuity'.[71] Gellwitzki highlights anxiety management as 'reparative actions directed at the self and the other that change the status quo' for moving from ontological insecurity to ontological security, in which anxiety 'becomes a creative force but can also become the source of ethical political action'.[72] Vicarious identity has been theorised as a further mechanism encapsulating ontological security functions 'by enabling the individual to internalise the community's collective achievements'.[73]

By focusing on the idea that anxiety does not necessarily incapacitate (first sub-strand), but can even be a fuel for authentic life (second sub-strand), these works portray anxiety as inevitable, and even potentially socially and politically generative. They provide important foundations for thinking more theoretically about the mechanics, aesthetics, or even metaphysics of turning the negative into positive, or its attempt of, but also for identifying the conditions that might support or restrain such attempts.

A third 'negative into a positive bridge' area can also be found in a number of studies. One example is in Browning's subsequent work, including especially his 2018 *Political Psychology* article exploring how Parisians responded to the terror attacks of the 2010s. Here it is the role of positive emotions and behaviours as *forms of resistance* that disclose creative possibilities in ontological security drives.[74] Brought forth in the subtitle taken from Tillich – the courage to be[75] – it was the going back into mundane settings, as Parisians did by flooding into cafes and bars following the ISIS attacks of November 2015, that represented something of a striving for ontological security by restarting routines in a defiant, resistant way. Similarly, a recent article by Hall and Steele examined joy as a form of resistance.[76] That study was indebted to work in feminist, Black, and Black queer political thought,[77] which has long disclosed how positive emotions like joy are powerful for marginalised groups at times because *there is no other option*. Their work builds on important interventions in feminist pedagogy, as expressed through Roxani Krystalli's recent works, which involve two important features she describes as working to:

> facilitate both critique and the re-imagination of worlds, acknowledging that critique is not just about fault-finding, but about envisioning and enacting more just ways of living [and] teach about violence, injustice, and loss with an eye towards practices of joy and care, not just an analysis of harms and destruction.[78]

This is the flip side, then, to the aforementioned view that creative and even positive processes attending to and following from ontological security are an indulgence by the privileged. Creative processes of enacting are, for marginalised groups, a *necessity* in the face of struggle. We want to close this section by reference to music, one obviously creative endeavour. Beck Hansen, an artist who broke onto the US music scene in the 1990s with such pessimistically inflected hits such as 'Loser', 'Where It's At', and 'Devil's Haircut', was asked in one interview with *Rolling Stone* magazine why his music was (despite many of the song titles) cheery, ironic, humorous, and even

[71] Amir Lupovici, 'Ontological security, cyber technology, and states' responses', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:1 (2023), pp. 153–78 (p. 156).

[72] C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, 'The positions of ontological (in)security in international relations: Object relations, unconscious phantasies, and anxiety management', *International Theory*, 17:1 (2025), pp. 118–50 (p. 141).

[73] Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 336–55 (p. 339); Browning, Steele, and Joenniemi, *Vicarious Identity in International Relations*.

[74] Chris S. Browning, '"Je suis en terrasse": Political violence, civilizational politics, and the everyday courage to be', *Political Psychology*, 39:2 (2018), pp. 243–61.

[75] Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Yale University Press, 2008).

[76] Alexander Hall and Brent J. Steele, 'Joy as subversive defiance', *Journal of International Political Theory*, 20:3 (2024), pp. 232–46.

[77] Reagan Patrick Mitchell, 'The art of ridicule: Black queer joy in the face of the fatigues', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 35:9 (2022), pp. 943–59.

[78] Roxani Krystalli, 'Teaching and learning reflexivity in the world politics classroom', *International Political Sociology*, 17:4 (2023), olad018 (p. 5).

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uplifting. He would respond that 'If you have time to make really dark music, then it's a privilege. But I didn't come from suburbia. I couldn't relate to sitting around and complaining about being miserable. That wasn't an option for me.'[79] The importance, then, for creative processes being the basis of resistance, resilience, and empowerment represents a second theme of this special issue – 'becoming', which opens the way to acknowledging the importance of creativity, and creation, in the ontological security process.

Becoming ontologically secure

How might this move be realised within, and from, ontological security studies? We argue it follows from both a shift in sensibility and a re-conceptualisation of 'what' security means.

The sensibility takes inspiration from the critical security studies traditions that in part gave rise to OS in IR in the first place. Following from Krause and Williams's original formulation, and Peoples and Vaughan-Williams's seconding of it, of critical security studies as an 'orientation' rather than a 'precise theoretical label', our purpose is to 'reorient' those working in or adjacent to OSS to think creatively about ontological security, and about how ontological security *is created*. This reorientation was part of some of Critical Security Studies' (CSS) most important early interventions. Huysmans's crucial work, for instance, revealed manifold facets of security, turning the spotlight on the broadening of security as a concept but also on its immanently subjective meaning, hence demonstrating that security is 'self-referential'.[80] Critical security studies shifted the focus from a perspective of permanent security maximisation and seeking to understudied agents and their security lacks. In so doing it moved from negative critique to more affirmative analytics, such as reparation, care, or hope. This transformed the understanding of international relations from security as a state of being to security as an emotion that is perceived, experienced, and valued by human beings.

Thus, secondly, in the remainder of this section we call for a re-conceptualisation, in which moving from security as 'being' to security as 'becoming', we think, holds some promise. Works on ontological security generally refer to it as 'security-as-being' (contrasted again with the traditional security understanding 'as-survival'),[81] and as 'security-in-the-world'. McSweeney defined this as 'confidence in an actor's capacity to manage relations with others'.[82]

What does this mean, exactly, in straightforward terms? The potential can be seen when one reverses each word set, making each a verb rather than a noun: 'being secure' and then 'becoming secure'. Being secure is active, but it may also be defensive, an attempt to *return* to some kind of state that may never have existed and proves elusive through time. 'Becoming', we argue, has a dynamic quality; it embraces the uncertainty of what was, is, and especially what will be, because that knowledge is never static or perfectly known. As opposed to how uncertainty is rendered into insecurity and anxiety, 'becoming' ontologically secure is hopeful, exciting, potentially transcendent, and alive.

We thus find a category of 'becoming' useful because it can help us understand how questions of being (ontology), knowing (epistemology), and acting (ethics)[83] can be creatively and productively entangled. Becoming here can be understood in the emancipatory sense of realisation of desires – defined as a projected and imagined order, along its intrinsic values – through creative processes. It is the freedom and agency of this immanent order and desire that would make agents feel secure. This definition implies transcending the traditional focus of ontological security studies

[79]Mark Kemp, 'Don't call him a rockstar: Beck, the *Rolling Stone* interview', *Rolling Stone*, available at: {http://dailykemp.com/2021/03/04/beck-the-rolling-stone-interview/}, accessed 17 April 1997.

[80]Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean?'

[81]This is the distinction Steele draws out in his first works on ontological security; Steele, 'The power of self-identity', esp. p. 527, table 1; and Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, p. 51.

[82]McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*, p. 157.

[83]Kathrin Thiele, 'Of immanence and becoming: Deleuze and Guattari's philosophy and/as relational ontology', *Deleuze Studies*, 10:1 (2016), pp. 117–34 (p. 130).

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from a logic of repetition and routinised practices to a more dynamic and potentially transformative becoming. Re-rooting the focus from a logic of repetition to becoming and order as a stability anchor allows us to make the much needed conceptual jump from the first generation individual-level oriented ontological security theory (OST)[84] to the second generation international-level oriented OST.[85] Tweaking the traditional focus on routine repetition with a spotlight on becoming enables us to re-think ontological security. Is it possible, mutatis mutandis, to achieve ontological security without a focus on routinised practices per se? We assert that yes, this is possible, and we explain in the following how this is attained.

Becoming appears as a natural category of ontological security, given that the external environment permanently evolves. The changing nature of events that are happening and produce anxiety shape a permanent and ever evolving state of anxiety. Evolving states of anxiety set into motion perpetually new productive and creative ways.

Becoming, then, prompts and even invites agents to create, re-create, and uplift others to be part of that crafting. So considered, 'becoming' marshals a reservoir of works in ontological security studies that emphasise, even at the margins, this creativity. This includes Mitzen's work on home and homespaces, where 'being-with-becoming' involves spaces that are alive with not only what is but also what might become.[86] It is evident in Solomon's work on the 'circulations of affect' that obtained during the Arab Spring,[87] to the 'ritualized atmospheres' he explored in the context of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations.[88] Work on humour and ontological security also emphasises not only a performative form of 'becoming' but also a creative envisioning of possibility to challenge dominant biographical narratives in ways that foster change.[89] So too does the powerful work on migrant agency and performativity one sees as a core sub-area of ontological security studies.[90] Whereas, following Bolton, being is 'unbearably light' and precarious, in our rendering, 'becoming' is part of the process of 'revitalising' moral orders that provide the bonds of solidarity across agents.[91]

But perhaps no other intervention in OSS has paved the way for thinking about not only changing problematic routines but also nurturing growth and finding new ways of becoming than Jason Ralph's powerful recent article drawing from the pragmatism of Mead, Dewey, and James. There Ralph argued that

> Normative value for philosophical Pragmatists is not ontological, i.e., found in a fixed identity or concrete rules; it is processual [via learning and growth] … This is the ability to adapt identity (and its constitutive routines and narratives) to improve the lived experience in ever more complex environments.[92]

[84]Laing, *The Divided Self*; Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

[85]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*.

[86]Mitzen, 'Feeling at home in Europe'.

[87]Ty Solomon, 'Ontological security, circulations of affect, and the Arab Spring', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21 (2008), pp. 934–58.

[88]Ty Solomon, 'Up in the air: Ritualized atmospheres and the global Black Lives Matter movement', *European Journal of International Relations*, 29:3 (2023), pp. 576–601. These studies are engaged with directly in Steele's contribution to this special issue.

[89]Emil Edenborg, 'Creativity, geopolitics and ontological security: Satire on Russia and the war in Ukraine', *Postcolonial Studies*, 20:3 (2017), pp. 294–316; Brassett, Browning, and O'Dwyer, 'EU've got to be kidding'.

[90]Alexandrian J. Innes, 'In search of security: Migrant agency, narrative, and performativity', *Geopolitics*, 21:2 (2016), pp. 263–83.

[91]Derek Bolton, 'The unbearable lightness of being? Reconfiguring the moral underpinnings and sources of ontological security', *International Theory*, 15:2 (2023), pp. 234–62 (p. 247).

[92]Jason Ralph, 'Securing the self, embracing anxiety, or nurturing growth? How the pragmatism of Dewey, James, and Mead speaks to ontological security studies', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:2 (2024), ksae032 (p. 3), https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksae032.

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This, then, leads Ralph to rightly assert that pragmatist thought is shot through with creative processes that speak to 'an understanding of ontological security as a "security of becoming"'.[93] Learning and reflexive awareness are premises for becoming.

In the contributions that follow, we hope to go one step further, unpacking the creativity that is fostered but not beholden to desire. While we propose understanding OS as becoming (ontology), we also theorise some of the concrete becoming dynamics that manifest at the level of knowing (epistemology) and acting (ethics). How do we know that actors have become? We suggest that internal and external recognition and appreciation are key to processes of becoming (see Baciu[94]), as they are self-validating. At the level of acting (ethics), we propose a notion of security that is focused on the phenomenological level of experience, suggesting the possibility of shifting the focus of OSS on emotions, feelings, and sensations.

Through these new lenses, we are able to expose the creative element from the logic of repetition that underlines ontological security theorising, and we show that ontological security marks an emancipatory breakthrough from the past. It is emancipatory in (following Ralph's use of Dewey) an appropriately *pragmatic* sense. OSS understood through the lenses of becoming can help improve lived experience by creating better narratives and routines to live by.[95]

The contributions to follow

The contributions in this special issue explore the creative processes through which ontological security can be renewed or reshaped within the global political sphere through providing illustrative case studies. While we have developed the ways in which, theoretically, one can think about creating ontological security in this introduction, we provide no core 'framework' for our contributors to import and utilise in their own individual papers. Rather, we have encouraged authors to approach the special issue theme flexibly, rather than uniformly, in a variety of ways that we think has enabled their own creativity in the process.

Brent Steele[96] looks to the work of the late Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihaly and the concept of 'flow' or optimal experience. Steele proposes that ontological security may not, in contrast to the Lacanian account, be a 'fantasy' if one looks for it in the process of acting rather than an elusive 'outcome' of a Self's wholeness. Steele explores what they term the 'takeaways' ontological security as flow provides, including work on homes and homespaces. Explored through empirical contexts where flow has already been applied or could be, such as in elite decision-making or soldiers in combat, Steele not only situates flow as a contrast to other accounts of the subject but also suggests that flow has been part of subject formation in global politics for some time and deserves attention for its creative promises.

In 'Express your self: Expressivism and ontological security', Cornelia Baciu[97] investigates how international organisations might attempt to create ontological security. She does so by exploring expressivist practices of such institutions that help members avoid overwhelming fears and anxieties. Proposing a theorisation of expressivism inspired by arts, law, and philosophy, she investigates how expressivism relates to ontological security-creation, highlighting the process of becoming. Utilising the pivot mentioned in this introduction regarding 'being secure' versus 'becoming secure', Baciu's framework draws from the latter as a way to understand how ontological security is expressively created and proposes a re-thinking of routines informed by a new notion of becoming. It illustrates these dynamics through the case study of EU counter-measures adopted after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022.

[93]Ralph, 'Securing the Self', p. 3; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics', p. 252.

[94]Cornelia Baciu, 'Express your self: Expressivism and ontological security', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[95]We thank Reviewer 1 for helping us to further expand our meaning and operationalisation of emancipatory OSS.

[96]Brent Steele, 'Re-creating ontological security: Flow and optimal experience', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[97]Baciu, 'Express your self'.

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As mentioned in this introduction, one thread of ontological security studies that has opened the door to creativity treats forms of anxiety as engines towards creative practices of authenticity. In 'Eco-anxiety and the Self in a warming world: Conceptualising ontologically insecure communities', Renato Fakhoury and Gabriella Gricius[98] examine how shared 'eco-anxiety' around environmental change creates ontological security in how states form communities. The cases of the Amazon and the Arctic provide what they call examples of 'ontological insecurity communities', transboundary spaces for state anxieties that can, in turn, enable creative forms of becoming secure.

Work on environmental issues within OSS reflects the broader focus on *insecurity* over security that this introduction has highlighted. In 'Climate change and the production of ontological security: Towards transformative politics, reflexivity and emotive agency', Pauline Heinrichs[99] explores these struggles and proposes a conceptual shift from the 'tenets' of crises, routines, and anxiety, towards more creative concepts such as transformative politics, reflexive responsibility, and emotive agency. The shift is more than just conceptual; it is also hopefully normative, one that pivots from insecure subjects facing climate crisis to resilient and empowered ones forming bonds of solidarity in realising collective agency.

Irem Cihan[100] focuses on the 'Aesthetics of ontological security' in her contribution. As she explains, while aesthetics in critical security studies work can be and has been manifested as a vulnerability of actors, aesthetic practices can also elevate subjects beyond what they once were. Cihan's article thus explores aesthetic experience as an *aspirational* dimension of ontological security through the case illustrations of the Candlelight Protests in South Korea demanding the impeachment of Park Geun Hye. The provocation of this contribution is clear – might aesthetically represented cultural productions constitute a spatial context in which the routines of a nation's existence are performed, and thus a self of that community transformed?

In 'Mass consumerism and ontological security', Martin Kirsch[101] turns to the context of West and East Germany in the 1950s and 1960s to explore consumerism as a form of ontological security-seeking. Kirsch argues that citizens' expectations are generated by a state's position in international recognition hierarchies of mass consumerism and living standards. If fulfilled, this helps citizens to gain system trust, a sense that their social environment is stable and enduring, while, in contrast, misrecognition of those economic expectations generates grievances and discontent and erodes state legitimacy.

Political myth has been of increasing interest in ontological security studies. As Xander Kirke[102] asserts in their contribution, regardless of their 'truth' value or note, myths can provide ontological security because they are repeatedly recalled and incorporated as narratives that provide constancy and certainty. In 'Political myth and the generation of ontological security: The case of UK responses to terrorism', Kirke analyses the debates around the 2017 attacks in Britain, and how those were rhetorically treated by British policymakers.

In 'The iron road home: Ukrainian Railways, resilience, and ontological security under Russia's terror', Bohdana Kurylo[103] explores Ukraine's railway system (*Ukrzaliznytsia*) as a wartime case of how the resilience of critical infrastructure can help sustain collective ontological security amid a radical disruption of the usual socio-material environment. Using a multi-modal narrative analysis, Kurylo traces how ontological security-making takes shape through the material operation of the railways, narratives formed around them, and passengers' embodied everyday encounters with

[98]Fakhoury and Gricius, 'Eco-anxiety and the self in a warming world'.

[99]Heinrichs, 'Climate change and the production of ontological security'.

[100]Irem Cihan, 'Aesthetics of ontological security', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security'.

[101]Martin Kirsch, 'Mass consumerism and ontological security', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security', p. 1–21.

[102]Kirke, 'Political myth and the generation of ontological security'.

[103]Bohdana Kurylo, 'The iron road home: Ukrainian Railways, resilience and ontological security under Russia's terror', *European Journal of International Security*, special issue: 'Creating ontological security', p. 1–23.

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the infrastructure. She demonstrates that railways can nurture ontological security by restoring a sense of basic trust through their role in civilian protection, international connectivity, maintaining mobility under attack, and enabling homecoming despite mass displacement.

In conclusion, this special issue's relevance stems from the novelty of uncovering how ontological security is created and how creative processes generate ontological security, as applied to pressing past, current, and future global challenges. From Russia's invasion of Ukraine to climate emergencies to terrorism to post-war practices, to norms within and from the European Union, this collection examines how anxiety – often seen as a destabilising force – can instead act as a catalyst for renewal and transformation. We hope it can also provide a sense of 'becoming ontologically secure' for scholars who seek to further examine creative processes of security in global politics for years to follow.

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