Accounting for Change in IR: The Application of Ontological Security Considerations to IR Theory

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Abstract

Most theories of International Relations (IR) are cautious, if not pessimistic, about the potential for change in IR. In this regard, the concept of ontological security holds promising yet oft-overlooked prospects. This article argues that applications of ontological security to IR theory thus far have been limited due to the narrow conceptualisations of practices and how they contribute to one's attempts to preserve their ontological security. As such, this paper seeks to expand the theoretical framework through which ontological security is applied to IR, which involves a more comprehensive conceptualisation of practice that considers reflexivity as key. Accordingly, the theory demonstrates that a state, faced with threats to their sense of Self, can respond either by rigidising or changing their practices rather than being limited to the former. This allows one to account for change—especially big change—in world politics such as the increasingly inward-looking turn of the West.

Keywords

Change; Constructivism; International Relations Theory; Ontological Security; Practice; Social Theory

Introduction[1]

Most theories of International Relations (IR) are cautious, if not pessimistic, about the potential for change in IR. In this regard, the concept of ontological security holds promising yet oft-overlooked prospects. Ontological security has, for good reason, become increasingly attractive to contemporary IR theorists today. The concept's appeal lies in its helpfulness in framing alternative approaches that address the theoretical gaps dominant neorealist and neoliberal traditions have yet to satisfactorily fill. In particular, the application of ontological security in IR theory has proved beneficial to the study of state identity and its influence on security dilemmas and intractable conflicts (Mitzen 2006). Even so, this paper argues that the current employments of ontological security in IR theory become much less productive if used in an attempt to explain other phenomena in international relations, especially those to do with change in international norms and practices. I argue that this is due to the narrow conceptualisation of practices and how they contribute to one's attempts to preserve their ontological security, in the scholarship thus far.

This paper seeks to expand the theoretical framework through which ontological security is applied to IR so as to improve its capacity to examine more issues within the study of international affairs. The first section provides a recapitulation of the concept of ontological security as developed by Giddens (1991)—the theory that states, in order to remain secure in their sense of Self, will tend to be rigidly attached to their established practices—and how it has thus far been applied in IR theory. In doing so, I point to certain aspects of the concept that have been neglected in its transplant to IR theory, particularly the neglect of considerations of reflexivity in one's actions. The second section establishes the critical nature of this oversight in IR theory's failure to account for change and demonstrates that a more faithful exegesis and application of Giddens's concept of ontological security will produce a richer theoretical framework.

With this in mind, the third section provides my reconstruction of the theory, featuring an expanded framework through which one understands the state's pursuit of ontological security, and explains how this framework might account for change in international practices. I argue that the understanding of change as a product of both practice and reflection suggests that states tend to remain attached to routinised practices under limited disruptions (as Mitzen (2006) theorises), but will be incentivised to make considerable

changes under severe disruptions so as to resolve the suffering of chronic cognitive dissonance. Lastly, the fourth section presents cases through which my reconstructed theory finds preliminary empirical support, focusing particularly on an examination of the West and its increasingly inward-looking turn and the resulting divergence from established international norms and practices over trade, migration, and so on.

Ontological security presently

The concept of ontological security originates in Laing's psychoanalytic account (Rossdale 2015, 2) of schizophrenia which he demonstrates is a manifestation of one's experience of personal, existential alienation. This concept was then adopted by Giddens into his sociological account of "the social narratives and routines in which we are embedded and through which our self-identity is constituted" (Rossdale 2015, 4) before it was picked up by IR theorists. In essence, Giddens (1991, 47) tells us that ontological security lies in one's ability to "possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, 'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses". Answers to these questions—relating to one's existence in itself, her place in the external world, relations with other persons, and her self-identity (Giddens 1991, 48–52)—are notoriously elusive but threaten the integrity of the Self. Therefore, in order to avoid becoming overwhelmed or paralysed by such existential anxieties, one requires a stable external world that provides some 'answer' which individuals can treat as matter-of-fact so that they can 'go on' with life (Giddens 1991, 37).

How is this stable external world established? Giddens argues that our everyday activities create a "framework of reality" out of the "infinite range of possibilities open to the individual" (1991, 36). Without a bracketing of the countless possibilities open to us, Giddens argues that we would not be able to "answer even the simplest everyday query, or respond to the most cursory remark" (1991, 36). In other words, our everyday routines are based on (and impose on us) a certain conception of reality that we are then able to take for granted as true, even if closer examination would reveal to us that this reality is much less definitive than we would like. Thereafter, as one continues to engage in these routines, she also inevitably reproduces this specific conception of reality, forming a "protective cocoon which 'filters out' many of the dangers which in principle threaten the integrity of the self," and allows her to "keep a particular narrative going" (Giddens 1991, 54). In this way, one's day-to-day routines become "coping mechanisms" that allow her to maintain a coherent sense of self-identity.

This behaviour, which Giddens terms "practical consciousness" (1991, 36), is what anchors one's ontological security such that one can 'go on' even in the face of disruptions or crises. Where disruptions may potentially snowball into the "loss of a sense of the very reality of things" (Giddens 1991, 36), practical consciousness serves to maintain a system of basic trust that keeps existential questions at the peripheries of our reflection. Without this, crises may drive us to question our reality to the point that it undermines our confidence in even the cognitive stability of our environment. With established routines, disruptions are then less likely to cause significant emotional turmoil. Altogether, having routines to fall back on allows us to proceed with a 'business-as-usual' attitude and prevents any disruptions from triggering an existential crisis or downward spiral.

At this point, it should be noted that though these everyday practices are routinised, it does not mean that they are carried out automatically, as if in a "dogged adherence to habit" (Giddens 1991, 40). Rather, the "constant vigilance" and "creativity" of the actor is necessary to manage disruptions "innovatively in relation to pre-established modes of behaviour" (Giddens 1991, 40–41). Reflexivity is necessary for such processes. In fact, Giddens tells us that reflexive awareness is "characteristic of all human action" (1991, 35) while "a blind commitment to established routines, come what may, is a sign of neurotic compulsion" (Giddens 1991, 40). Therefore, one's sense of Self is seen not as something that is simply maintained through practical consciousness, but as an identity that is continuously "created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual" (Giddens 1991, 52).

Ontological security in international relations theory

Ontological security was first brought into the study of IR through scholars of security studies who believed that states—beyond the pursuit of physical security—also experience a need for ontological security and that such a need motivates and shapes their foreign policy. Of course, one might question whether the application of ontological security onto states can be justified; surely individuals and states are not the same. Here, Mitzen (2006, 352) argues that states are likely to "act at least 'as if' they are ontological security seekers" because a coherent national group identity is arguably consequential to the preservation of its members' ontological security. In other words, states are motivated to preserve their distinct sense of Self because it is necessary for their citizens' ontological security. Importantly, this marks a divergence from mainstream IR traditions that typically only consider matters relating to states' physical security.

Mitzen (2006, 342) argues that states have to be secure in their sense of Self, "as being rather than constantly changing—in order to realise a sense of agency." Here, she sees agency

as the ability "to know how to act and therefore how to be herself" (Mitzen 2006, 347). Essentially, a state must be able to know what to expect so that it can systematically relate its ends to its means (Mitzen 2006, 342). Without this, the state would essentially be *paralysed* by the infinite possibilities and dangers it has to process. In this way, just as routines bracket the infinite range of possibilities available and serve as coping mechanisms for individuals, routines governing interstate relations create a "stable cognitive environment" (Mitzen 2006, 342) where international actors are endowed with "automatic responses to stimuli [that] bound the arena of deliberate choice" (Mitzen 2006, 347). This "bring[s] uncertainty within tolerable limits" (Mitzen 2006, 346). In this way, they are imbued with some level of confidence in knowing what to expect and, therefore, what to do.

One should note that this is possible only because state identities are not taken to be the product of any intrinsic qualities of their own (Mitzen 2006, 354), but rather intersubjective roles that come to constitute the actor through their expression in practices that then come to be recognised by other actors as fulfilling those roles (Mitzen 2006, 358). Routinised practices reproduce and sustain a state's identity, which allows other states to have some certainty as to how it might act and, therefore, what they should do. For instance, under an anarchic international system, Mitzen (2006, 360) argues that "each state sees itself privately in the role identity of a security-seeker, but each is recognised publicly in the role of a potential aggressor" due to tendency towards "worst-case thinking." Consequently, states engage in a vicious cycle of competitive behaviour that comes to form the "basic trust system" (Mitzen 2006, 361) that reinforces their identities as competitors.

Once there is a certain level of cognitive certainty, Mitzen (2006, 347) predicts that actors will become attached to these practices due to the sense of agency they derive from it. As mentioned, practices impose the narrative through which one's sense of Self is maintained, which implies that the stability of one's self-identity is dependent on the continual engagement in said practices. This, however, leads actors to become rigidly attached to particular practices—even when they are harmful or self-defeating—because not doing so threatens the ability of states to *even 'go on'*. Against this backdrop, a state seeking to determine its course of action would likely prioritise its ontological security considerations over physical security ones, thereby contributing to the 'intractable' nature of some interstate conflicts.

Theoretical gaps

While the predictions of Mitzen's theory prove to be somewhat consistent with the empirical cases she advances, this may not be so if one were to move beyond the study of

security dilemmas and their homeostatic tendencies. This is by no means a failing of her theory since Mitzen's aim is precisely to explain stability. Even so, while the intractable nature of many interstate conflicts is surely a key feature of international relations, one must take care not to neglect the phenomenon of change. To be sure, we are interested in (and also observe) change in international relations. In this regard, I argue that Mitzen's IR theory does not give a satisfactory account of how change—*big change*—might happen in world politics.

A comparison of Giddens's original conception of ontological security and Mitzen's application provides some insight as to why this is so. At its core, the theoretical gap left by Mitzen's theory of ontological security is a neglect of the role of reflexivity in one's actions. While she is successful in demonstrating that state actors, guided by ontological security concerns, may often choose to privilege the status-quo, why might we still observe change in international relations? In other words, does the pursuit of ontological security necessarily preclude the possibility of change? Without proper consideration of reflexivity, one is led to conclude that one's response to disruptions or crises are largely limited to the rigidisation of one's established behaviours even though—as I will demonstrate—actors could very well respond to disruptions by changing their practices.

Recall Gidden's "practical consciousness," which is the mechanisms for which one maintains a system of basic trust that safeguards the integrity of one's sense of Self (1991, 36). Giddens emphasises that reflexivity is vital to this system as "constant vigilance" and "creativity" are still needed to respond to disruptions based on the pre-established practices available. In this manner, one's identity, though partly constituted and maintained by established routines, is not simply a matter of blindly adhering to such routines but also involves a continuous process of reflection by the individual. After all, to harken back to Mitzen's empirical case, surely the state does not just adopt unthinking automatic responses to the security dilemmas that they are embroiled in. Even if pre-established routines incline the state to engage in "worst-case thinking" (Mitzen 2006, 360), reflexivity is necessarily involved in shaping how it applies such thinking to policy analyses and practical responses. Furthermore, one may also question whether the empirical support, in pointing to the inflexible nature of responses to security dilemmas, may find its explanation in the particularly intractable character of Prisoner's Dilemmas rather than the state's rigidity in securing their sense of Self.

In sum, any attempts to transplant the theory into the study of IR cannot neglect this aspect of reflexivity, for doing so would be to leave out an essential element of an actor's preservation of the Self.

Conceptualising practices and change

Reflexivity in practices

In his theory, Gidden emphasises that the reflexive awareness of individuals is "characteristic of all human action" (1991, 35). Reflexive awareness is inextricable from any action because some degree of interpretation and improvisation is always necessary, even in the most established routines. As aptly summarised by Hopf, "necessarily all of us must act in situations under-specified by the necessarily non-existent rulebook" (2018, 692). In all important respects, the necessarily nonidentical nature of every situation we encounter means that routines—and even established rules—cannot completely determine our actions. Instead, we inevitably make improvisations, however minor, in each routine act (Hopf 2018, 693). Of course, this has little bearing on our critique of Mitzen's theory, which does allow for practical agency and the incremental changes it brings.

What Mitzen's conceptualisation of ontological security lacks is the critical understanding that "habit frees up the reflective mind to consciously deliberate about the world" (Hopf 2018, 689). Instead, the role of routinised practices in Mitzen's theory seems to be limited simply to the prevention of actor paralysis. This is not a trivial difference. Mitzen (2006, 343) herself acknowledges that although all actors engage in routinisation, they necessarily vary in their "mode of attachment: some actors rigidly repeat routines, while others participate more reflexively." Even so, Mitzen (2006, 361) maintains that states are likely to rigidly repeat routines rather than engage reflexively due to the diminishing of basic trust that change brings, taking away one's ability to even 'go on'—an option untenable for states.

Even if one allows her this, systems of basic trust are likely to be much more nuanced than suggested by Mitzen's depiction. As previously established, basic trust is necessary for the purpose of "bring[ing] uncertainty within tolerable limits by taking most questions off the table" (Mitzen 2006, 346). According to Giddens (1991, 36–37), these are the fundamental existential issues—concerning our existence, place in the world, relations with others, etc.—which hold no easy answers. In comparison, one questions the extent to which such existential issues apply to states as international actors and whether all their attempts at change will, in fact, induce crises of such existential proportions that they are eventually paralysed. Of course, this is not to say that states are immune to the anxieties that one experiences when change is made. The question is simply whether states will indeed become as impotent and vulnerable as Mitzen suggests. Indeed, it is not hard to imagine that the U.S., with its discursive and material power, would have enough confidence—if not in the

international system, then at least in their own abilities—to embrace change without completely destabilising itself. One could see that a good number of countries can be characterised in this way as well. If so, Mitzen greatly underestimates states' capacity for reflexivity and change.

Hence, I have demonstrated that Mitzen's conceptualisation of reflexivity in practices is fairly underdeveloped, which greatly limits her theory's ability to account for change in state behaviour. This leaves us with a significant theoretical gap for a few reasons. Firstly, this misleadingly privileges securitisation practices over desecuritisation practices, where states are shown to invariably "reassert established patterns of behaviour, routines, and identities rather than embrace change" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 31–32). In doing so, we may end up conflating the achievement of ontological security with "the ability to uphold stability and defend the prevailing state of affairs" rather than the more accurate understanding which has to do with one's "ability to cope with change" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 35). Although the preservation of ontological security may indeed require securitisation practices, i.e. rigidising routines, it is not always the case. On the contrary, Browning and Joenniemi (2017, 39) assert that "securitising practices have just as much potential to generate ontological anxieties as desecuritising practices." What is key, then, is not simply "a question of stability but also adaptability" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 31), and one finds the answers to this through reflection.

By extension, Mitzen's theory also offers no solution to the problem of insecurity *arising from* rigidising practices. Giddens (1991, 59) warns that a rigid attachment to established routines may well lead to further insecurity and existential anxieties due to its disembodying effect. Using the example of a cheating husband who has to maintain a false persona to his unaware wife, Giddens (1991, 58–59) states that the husband's established routines of a faithful partner—now a false performance, a staged routine—becomes discrepant from his actual biographical narrative. Eventually, this inconsistency between his self-identity and his day-to-day routines, if left unaddressed, dislocates and detaches him from his sense of Self because "the narrative by means of which [he] sustains a coherent biography is no longer adequate" (Giddens 1991, 65). Eventually, his "effort to keep up normal appearances" might become so burdensome that he ends up "literally unable to 'go on'"(Giddens 1991, 60–61). This shows that, beyond the pursuit of stability, one needs to achieve coherence in their identity, narrative, and actions so as to maintain a consistent sense of Self. If established routines become discordant within this relationship, a rigidisation of routines ends up creating further insecurity.

In summary, the idea that routinisation is the only route to preserving one's ontological security lies in the faulty premise that feelings of insecurity automatically trigger one's tendency towards an unconscious rigidisation of practice as means to avoid the anxieties that a closer examination of the present state of affairs—and the unsatisfactory answers we usually take for granted—inevitably evokes. However, rigidisation is never free from reflexivity and, hence, does not provide the insulation from anxieties that one might desire. As a matter of fact, rigidisation can further increase one's sense of insecurity if the established routines become forced and contrived, detaching one's sense of Self from her reality.

Understanding change

Rather than focusing solely on rigidisation, a conceptualisation of practice cannot possibly leave out the consideration of reflexivity. I define practices, then, to be socially meaningful and organised patterns of activities that are routine in their day-to-day nature, but reflexive in how they are "produced and reproduced by the agent as part of 'going on' in the variegated settings" of life (Giddens 1991, 35). With this in mind, we can observe how this deeper understanding of practice influences our theorisation of change.

The power of practice lies in its proselytising and reproductive functions. This means that social practices have the capacity to impose and reproduce "the intersubjective meanings that constitute social structures and actors alike" (Hopf 1998, 178). I have already shown that practical agency brings about what Hopf (2018, 692) calls the "changes in practice through practice". At the same time, the reflexivity of agents means that there can also be "changes in practice through reflection" (Hopf 2018, 692). Hopf (2018, 697) states that such changes are triggered when one is confronted with prolonged and extreme non-routine problems that challenge the contingent yet taken-for-granted ideas that determine the way we live our lives. Similarly, Flockhart (2016, 804) points out that though the "routinisation of practice and a stable identity may be preferred by agents, action that changes established routines is sometimes a necessary undertaking in response to disruptive events" that can be dislocating for our sense of Self (2016, 804). The need to maintain a continuous, coherent biographical narrative requires reflexivity to address disruptive events by determining their impact on one's identity and the necessary actions that shall be undertaken which include making changes to one's practices, and so on.

One therefore understands the pursuit of ontological security as reflexive endeavours aimed at maintaining one's Self. Such endeavours compel deliberate action through routinisation or change—as opposed to simply routinisation, suggested by Mitzen's theory—

as possible means to this end. Consequently, one can provide a more comprehensive conceptualisation of practice that considers reflexivity as key in producing a richer IR theory that can explain both continuity and change in world politics.

An expanded framework for IR theory

I now proceed to construct an IR theory based on an interpretation of ontological security that is more faithful to Giddens' initial conceptualisation. Before that, though this has been treated as tacit knowledge thus far, it should be stated that this IR theory is built upon the theoretical commitments of constructivism, which takes the institutions, practices, and identities that make up our social reality to be intersubjective phenomena that come together to form an "intersubjective social context" (Hopf 1998, 173) or "shared framework of reality" (Giddens 1991, 36). This means that each state understands others through the identities it attributes them and responds accordingly to this understanding, which is likewise perceived by others to be fulfilling a certain identity, thus creating a framework where all are "simultaneously reproducing [their] own identity" (Hopf 1998, 175) and thereby "organising predictable social interaction"(Giddens 1991, 52).

Our social reality—the prevailing order for affairs in the international arena—is then socially emergent and contingent, negotiated through the interactions of actors rather than derived from certain intrinsic qualities of states or their interactions. This order guides our perception of the international system, produces "norms, institutions, procedures, [and] rules" that prescribes a range of appropriate social practices (Hopf 1998, 173), and is sustained through the routinised relations and actions of states. At the same time, once a given order is established, it is thereafter also policed and continually reproduced by the established patterns of practices. Therefore, we can understand international phenomena as the product of actions by agentic actors within the constraints of "the webs of understanding of the practices, identities, and interests of other actors that prevail in particular historical contexts" (Hopf 1998, 177). Yet, because of the agentic capacity of the actor, the existing norms may constrain but not determine one's actions, and this leaves open the possibility that the "constancy of structure" may also be disrupted by practice (Flockhart 2016, 800). We might then see practices as both *structured*—due to the constraints imposed upon them— and *structuring*—based on the changes and adjustments one's practices might beget.

With that in mind, one might observe that states, *ceteris paribus*, tend to be attached to routines due to the cognitive stability and stable sense of Self they maintain. While this allows states to preserve their ontological security, this inadvertently fuels the processes through which order and the status quo are constantly reproduced. Even so, the previous section

shows that the rigidisation of routines is not the only method through which states can preserve their ontological security. Instead, states can also change their practices in order to preserve it. How might we then understand change in world politics?

Change seems to come in two forms: practice and reflection. Change through practice, as mentioned previously, happens through continuous, minor modifications that agents inevitably make in applying norms designating appropriate behaviour to their unique situations. This change is "mostly unintentional, non-directional, and unpredictable in their consequences"(Hopf 2018, 705). Modifications are mostly marginal and hence unlikely to impede the reproduction of a given order. On the other hand, change through reflection has the potential to induce great change. As Giddens (1991, 59) notes, certain external stimuli or disruptions may induce a cognitive dissonance so severe that the adherence to routines comes at the risk of eroding one's ability to even 'go on,' compelling considered reflection and resulting in changes to their practices.

To this end, cognitive dissonance is experienced when there is a clear "disconnect between the ideational structure and agents' experience of who they are and what they do" (Flockhart 2016, 807). The most obvious source of this lies in the exogenous disruptions that crises bring. Examples include "war, revolution, or economic depression" (Hopf 2018, 700) which tend to pose extended, non-routine, and extreme disruptions to one's way of life and therefore provide the impetus for big change. Furthermore, they, more than any phenomena, also have the capacity to change production relations, unmask previously overlooked underlying power relations, and offer plausible alternatives to the status quo (Hopf 2018, 700). Hopf (2018, 700) argues that the need to "survive or endure" the challenges posed by exogenous shocks requires serious reflection on the individual's part since minor adjustments to established habits or routines are unlikely to be sufficient in managing the new circumstances.

Another source of cognitive dissonance worthwhile considering points to the uncertainties that liminars present to individuals. Liminars, as Hopf notes, "are entities that are simultaneously partly us and partly them, partly self and partly other" (2018, 699). These could pertain to individuals, identities, ideas, or even events, and they prompt conscious reflection because they are undesirable but inextricable from the Self such that one is simultaneously presented with the undeniable similarities *and* differences to herself which she must then confront and resolve (Hopf 2018, 699). In considering the possibilities for big change, one focuses on the fundamental need for one to maintain a consistent sense of Self, achieved through a coherent account of one's identity, narrative, and actions. The power of

crises and liminars lie in the discordance they wreak upon one's biographical narrative and their capacity to keep 'going on', which prompts the reflexivity necessary for big change.

Such extreme disruptions prompt considered reflection and action, not just to make minor adjustments to one's habits, but to make considerable changes in order to adapt to the extraordinary circumstances one is confronted with. In other words, states that encounter significant threats to their sense of Self may realise that changing their routines is better suited for their efforts to preserve ontological security. In fact, states may find that routinisation, rather than pushing existential anxieties back to the periphery, further dislocates them from their sense of Self and reality. Just as the adulterous husband who rigidly adheres to the routines of a faithful, loving husband may experience cognitive dissonance between his actions and sense of Self (Giddens 1991, 58), a declining superpower state that sticks to the expansive economic, military, and diplomatic policies of a superpower may find it increasingly difficult to reconcile its activities and its current sense of Self.

In fact, a failure to diverge from previous routines, beyond producing chronic cognitive dissonance, also tends to further dislocate the state from its sense of Self. Going back to the example of the superpower in decline, the policies characteristic of a superpower are likely to be extremely burdensome to a flagging state and can end up accelerating its decline. In such cases, the state will eventually be forced, internally or externally, to accept a completely new sense of Self and the new routines and practices that come with it. Thus, states facing significant cognitive dissonance will diverge from the practices that were previously routinised. In these cases, a change in practices is usually aimed at safeguarding and restoring the state's sense of Self, though it may sometimes serve to adjust the state's policy to a new sense of Self. Since practices are critical in the shaping and reproduction of the intersubjective social context in which states relate to one another as well as the framework of reality through which states see themselves, their external environment and their relations with others change with their practices and have the potential to cause fundamental change in the international arena.

How might this relate to our study of IR? This expanded theory can provide predictions or—at the very least—explanations for certain phenomena observed in world politics. Under cases of limited disruptions, states will remain attached to their routinised practices, focusing on making minor adjustments in order to 'go on' with life. However, severe disruptions and the experience of the chronic cognitive dissonance they impose surely incentivise change. A failure to change in the face of such a situation simply pushes existential anxieties back from the periphery, making them much more pronounced and threatening to

one's sense of Self. Conscious reflection is the only way through which a state can determine the changes they need to take for their day-to-day actions to be reintegrated with their reality and sense of Self (Giddens 1991, 60) and their confidence in the cognitive stability of the world to be restored. We thus gain a better understanding of the security calculations states make when seeking to determine their actions within a given range of options.

One might also be able to extrapolate that divergences, if made by a state with significant discursive and material power or carried out by many states in quick succession, may induce a system-wide shift away from established practices. This is because a state's initial divergence from its routinised behaviour changes the range of possible actions it may thereafter take, as well as the identity that others will then attribute to it. As expectations of what the state might do change, other actors inevitably have to prepare and respond accordingly to the new expectations. These states then come to adopt new practices through which they engage with one another and are eventually assigned new identities that these new practices will thereafter reproduce. If these changes are significantly widespread, the practices which the international system operates through inevitably change and this produces new norms, institutions, procedures, and rules that come to form a new status quo.

Empirical support: Change in the West

My expanded theoretical framework finds empirical support in many Western industrialised societies, including Europe and the U.S. and their increasingly inward-looking turn and divergence from international norms and routinised practices. Importantly, the case of the West is highlighted due to its traditionally clear sense of Self, the historically well-established knowledge of its international outlook and policies, as well as its noticeable shift in norms and practices in recent years. This makes for a clear explication of the empirical support it provides to the theory, though other empirical cases can surely be found. Furthermore, though this phenomenon is observed across the West—and my anecdotal evidence will include European countries in a general sense—the concrete empirical evidence will be specific to the U.S. Even so, there are strong grounds to believe that this inward-looking turn is common to the West for similar reasons and, thus, the paper will continue to refer generally to the West.

The West, once the champions of free trade, international cooperation, and—to some degree—internationalism, has become increasingly inward-looking. Economically, countries like the U.S. have become more protectionist, imposing tariffs on goods from China, the European Union (EU), Mexico, and so on. Elsewhere, rising Euroscepticism has highlighted concerns over the economic integration of Europe. In terms of immigration, a

rise in xenophobia and greater support for further restricting migration have been observed. Commonly cited concerns include fears of cultural dilution, a decrease in job security, terrorism, and so on (Grzymala-Busse 2019, 36–39; Homolar and Scholz 2019, 348–49). In particular, the 2015 refugee crisis in Europe highlighted the anti-migrant policies of the West. This inward-looking turn has also affected regional and international cooperation for the West, which can be observed in the rise Euroscepticism and in Brexit itself as well as in America's growing hostility and withdrawal from the UN and its norms along with its persistent disputes over NATO funding.

How might considerations of ontological security account for this change? The existing order, which espouses neoliberal values, is sustained by practices in adherence to the norms of free trade and international cooperation. In turn, the intersubjective framework of reality it imposes on states is one that proclaims neoliberal values to be the best route to prosperity and security. For example, the justification of free trade rests on the argument that the efficiency brought about by the capitalisation upon comparative advantage and the deregulation of competition increases the economic welfare of all countries. In common parlance, free trade 'increases the size of the pie for all'. However, the inherent tension implicit in free trade is that its mechanisms inevitably create 'winners and losers' on both the international and domestic levels. This means that though the size of the pie shared by the world is larger because of free trade, 'losers' of the free-market process may end up with a slice that is smaller than if there was less trade. This, perhaps, is indicative of the liminal nature of free trade as an idea, which inevitably positions states as cooperators but also as competitors.

Once the greatest beneficiary of free trade, the West now finds that its slice of the pie is getting smaller. Strong economic growth across regions such as Asia and South America have eroded the economic competitiveness of Western states. While free trade remains beneficial on the whole, particular subgroups within states may be disproportionately affected by it. For example, the rust belt of the U.S. highlights how free trade has contributed to offshoring leading to the demise of the American steel and heavy production industry, leaving many from this industry unemployed. This means that subgroups within the population are now experiencing a vast discrepancy between the economic benefits or 'good life' that free trade 'promises' and the reality of their economic hardships. Since members' ontological security contributes to the national group identity that is a state's sense of Self (Mitzen 2006, 352), if those experiencing this cognitive dissonance come to form a significant

proportion of the population, their anxieties will inevitably have negative implications for the state's sense of Self.

Furthermore, Homolar and Scholz (2019, 350) point out that an ever-increasing number of citizens hold the view that "America's best days lay in its past." Given that the U.S.'s sense of Self is at least partially built on its status as a great power, the 'leader of the free world,' 'city on a hill,' and so on, it is not difficult to see how these developments might threaten its ontological security. Similarly, declining competitiveness across Europe may also trigger anxieties and feelings of insecurity due to the international state of affairs that has thus far imposed a hierarchy that privileges Western countries and the norms defined by them. Experiencing a loss of eminence as leading or 'inspiring' models for civilization—the parameters of which it was responsible for defining—the West might find that it can no longer sustain the narrative on which its biographical continuity has thus far depended on.

Faced with such threats to their ontological security, why might Western states choose to change their practices rather than rigidise them? One recalls that, above all, a state's interests lie in maintaining the stability of its sense of Self and preventing existential paralysis. A state's choice over whether to continue or change its established practices then depends on whether these ends are achieved. In this case, rigidising its practices, i.e. maintaining free trade, international cooperation, and open borders, is unfeasible as it exacerbates the economic hardships faced by the already affected groups, which further dislocates them from reality and worsens their anxieties. Instead, one can observe a trend of Western states engaging in a process of "Othering" and shifting away from international practices for the sake of maintaining their ontological security.

Scholars note that the process of "Othering" is a common strategy engaged by actors in their bid to safeguard their self-identities. For example, Rossdale (2015, 2) argues that the processes of achieving or maintaining ontological security often involve "forms of exclusion and othering that are both violent and counter-productive." Mackay (2016) also notes that imperial Chinese elites pursued a deliberate strategy of "Othering" steppe societies in order to provide a stable source of identity to China. In fact, ontology security at its core can be said to revolve around questions of "how narratives shape not only the self, and who gets to belong, but also the Other and who gets excluded" (Steele and Homolar 2019, 216).

In this particular case, the process of "Othering" allows states to assert that they continue to possess the qualities and capacities for global eminence and domestic prosperity which have been constitutive of Western states' sense of Self in modern history. Instead, the blame for any discrepancy experienced by the citizenry is placed on these "Others." For

instance, Trump points to "foreigners who either flow into the country or lead countries that want to exploit the US for economic and security reasons" as the cause of America's decline (Homolar and Scholz 2019, 351). Mälksoo, focusing on Europe, points out that deep anxieties arising from recent shocks from Brexit, the refugee crisis, the Euro crisis and so on, have brought back the 'Othering' of 'Eastern Europe' as the "troublemakers of European unity and peace" (2019, 365). Effectively, this process of creating a 'scapegoat' allows the West to escape the paralysing effects of ontological insecurity against the backdrop of the economic and cultural upheavals it faces. By shifting 'blame' to other countries or external factors, the state is then able to address the anxieties of its citizenry and yet—in attributing its cause to the 'exploitation' or problems caused by other countries rather than any internal failure—maintain that it remains fully capable, therefore protecting its identity.

Interestingly, studies of political actors such as Trump also highlight the use of 'crisis stories' to "simultaneously instil ontological insecurity within the public [to] transform this anxiety into confidence in [their] policy agenda as the effective route back to normalcy" (Homolar and Scholz 2019, 347). Other attempts to restore ontological security may also include "promises of restoring what once was—to a retrospective recasting of the past as stable, predictable and comforting" (Homolar and Scholz 2019, 357). In any case, this process of 'Othering' and shifting blame initiates the process through which states move away from established practices, since such practices are now deemed to facilitate one's exploitation and harm at the hands of other states. Some divergences in practice could then include increasing protectionist trade policies, paying less heed to international rules, or even the complete withdrawal from international organisations.

For instance, former President Trump imposed stiff tariffs on goods from the EU, Canada, Mexico, and China, citing the international community's long-term exploitation of the U.S. through unfair trade practices and offshoring as responsible for the country's trade deficit and economic woes (Pramuk 2019). Similarly, Trump's support for a variety of limits on legal immigration, guest-worker visas, and skilled foreign workers was said to be a response to the depressed wages and unemployment rate brought about by an influx of foreign workers (Sink, Banjo, and Carville 2020). In this manner, the Trump administration was able to paint the US's economic competitors and foreigners as 'Others,' blaming them for the country's economic decline while ignoring the internal root causes such as the currency and tax policies that incentivise offshoring, inadequate investment in infrastructure, and the decline in American manufacturing (Scott 2020). This then allowed the state to continue asserting its sense of Self as the most powerful and advanced country in the world

and take up increasingly inward-looking international policies that seek to realign its reality with its sense of Self.

This phenomenon is not unique to the U.S. Across Europe, states are increasingly inward-looking in terms of economic, migration, and other international policies (Mehta 2019; Anandhika 2017). As established routines change, they no longer support the reproduction of the same norms, practices, and institutions. In this way, the values that once governed international relations may change and allow for different values to take their place. As states increasingly perceive interstate relations to be competitive or exploitative in nature, there may be less incentive for cooperation. Existing regional and international bodies such as the EU and the UN may lose their appeal. Such a development is possible largely due to the significant role that the West plays in sustaining these bodies. Similar divergences by less powerful states may not have any meaningful impact on international practices or norms. In any case, if such changes to practice are wide-ranging and sustained across the West, the entire framework that governs international relations at present may change.

Conclusion

I have argued that current applications of ontological security considerations in IR have been limited due to their narrow conceptualisation of practices and how they impact one's sense of Self. In particular, the current theoretical framework's neglect of practices as necessarily reflexive activities—a key element of Giddens' original conceptualisation—limits a state's response to a rigid attachment to previously established routines. I have demonstrated that though rigidisation is indeed a possible route through which states can alleviate anxieties and restore their sense of security, states can also choose to respond by changing their patterns of behaviour. My expanded framework suggests that both the adherence to and divergence from pre-established routines have the potential to further destabilise one's sense of Self and trigger greater anxieties if inappropriately exercised. In this, reflexivity is vital to the state's response to assess whether change or continuity allows one to restore a stable sense of Self. In most cases, states will fall back on their routinised practices when experiencing minimal disruptions but will be inclined to diverge from such practices when experiencing significant or sustained crises. This prediction finds preliminary empirical support in the recent inward-looking turn of the West, which I argue is the result of their divergence from previously held internationalist norms due to the internal economic decline that threatens their sense of Self.

In sum, considerations of ontological security have major implications and offer important opportunities for the study of international practices and IR in general. Therefore,

it might be helpful to identify further areas of interest in the conceptualisation of ontological security which will surely benefit the study of IR. Firstly, applications of ontological security in IR largely presume that states will invariably seek to hold on to the existing identities that constitute their ontological security. Indeed, both my theory and Mitzen's take this for granted. However, Browning and Joenniemi (2017) challenge this notion, arguing that states can also choose whether to preserve or change their self-identities. This also makes relevant Lupovici's (2012) argument that states hold many identities rather than just one, which necessitates a multi-layered analysis of state behaviour especially in cases where some or all of its identities are threatened. Secondly, one might also consider whether ontological security is only achieved through 'doing,' or if it can also include strategies of 'being' as suggested by Flockhart (2016).

Finally, we might question whether the application of ontological security in IR is but an elusive and fruitless endeavour. Indeed, the concept of ontological security itself remains one that cannot be fully articulated. Adding to this difficulty, Flockhart notes that "neither the 'self' nor 'the world' are ever solidified but are constantly evolving" (2016, 803). In the face of such difficulties in articulating and operationalising what one calls the 'Self,' will any attempt to apply the concept of ontological security in IR be found wanting?

At the risk of undoing all that this paper has established—and possibly even triggering the deep existential anxieties lurking within us—a harken back to Giddens suggests that even our most basic assumptions about life might very well end up appearing fallacious and ill-founded when closely examined. Even if this were the case, I do not intend or wish for us to then embrace existential nihilism or abandon our scholarly endeavours. The suggestion I offer is this: even if it is impossible to fully articulate what the 'Self' entails, we still have—*at the very least*—some understanding of its role in helping us 'go on' and how our need for it motivates and shapes the actions that we take when it is undermined. I expect that simply understanding the driving forces of this elusive concept is sufficient for us to glean valuable insights into the motivations that influence state behaviours and the resulting state of affairs that they may produce.

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