**Abstract**

*Harm does not happen to humans in isolation, but rather to worlds composed of diverse beings. This article asks how worlds and the conditions of worldliness should be framed as ‘subjects of security’. It explores three possible pathways: rejecting anthropocentrism; expanding existing ethical categories; and adopting ‘new materialist’ ontology and ethics. Ultimately, it argues for a fusion of the key elements of each of these pathways. This offers the basis for a new concept of harm (‘mundicide’) specifically intended to reflect harms to worlds and the conditions of worldliness. The value of this concept is demonstrated in light of an empirical example: the ‘Rainforest Chernobyl’ case. The article concludes that a worldly approach is necessary in order to capture the full enormity of the harms confronted by international security.*

**Introduction**

“Protect the human”

* *Amnesty International UK slogan*

This slogan succinctly captures one of the most powerful beliefs in contemporary international relations (IR): that ‘the human’ is the ultimate subject of security, and that its protection should trump all other concerns. But security threats do not affect humans in isolation. Rather, they irrupt within the heterogeneous collectivesthat humans co-constitute with diverse nonhuman beings. War, for instance, destroys human lives and habitations, but also animal and plant life, landscapes, cultures and the complex linkages between these phenomena. Similarly, so-called environmental collapse or nuclear warfare could eliminate not only unique ecosystems but also the very basis of biological life. The enormity of these threats lies in the fact that they threaten not only certain beings, but rather whole worlds – that is, irreducible, heterogeneous forms of collective being.

If the norms, practices and processes of international security are to offer an adequate response to these kinds of threats, then they need to be based on a conception of harm that reflects the conditions of worldliness. However, existing approaches to security are radically anthropocentric – that is, they frame the human subject and the institutions that produce it as the only possible ‘subjects of security’ (see Walker, 1997). Moreover, worlds are unique and their co-constituents cannot be pre-determined in the abstract. This makes it very difficult to conceptualize harm in terms of the ontological and ethical categories required to coordinate large-scale responses to acute events. Is it possible to formulate a ‘worldly’ conception of harm in which these issues are resolved?

This article explores three possible pathways to achieving this aim. First, it considers whether rejecting anthropocentrism can offer the basis for a worldly account of security. It concludes that the best option is in fact weak anthropocentrism, which harnesses human agency and values as an important basis for ethical responsiveness. Second, it asks whether a worldly concept of harm can be derived simply by expanding existing ontological and ethical categories to include nonhumans. However, it argues that this approach retrenches the ontological divide between beings and simply aggregates harms to various subsets of beings; it does not reflect harms distributed across worlds. Third, it assesses ‘new materialist’ proposals to transform the ontological and ethical sensibilities of IR, which better reflect the conditions of worldliness. However, their indeterminacy makes them difficult to reconcile with the need to respond to acute harms in a coordinated manner, which requires a degree of abstraction and ethical prescription.

Each of these alternatives offers something indispensable to a worldly approach to security, but none is sufficient in itself. Moreover, the key features of each pathway seems to preclude the others: ‘expanding ethics’ and ‘new materialist’ approaches reject anthropocentrism; and the indeterminacy of ‘new materialism’ seems to undercut the abstraction of the ‘expanding ethics’ approach. I argue, however, that it is possible to resolve or embrace these tensions in a way that makes a worldly conception of harm possible. This involves retaining an element of abstraction, but rendering ethical categories open (at least potentially) to all beings; pluralizing the grounds for protective action to include non-rational bases for value; and activating human agency as a component of lively ‘assemblages’ of beings.

By fusing these elements, we can imagine an alternative concept of harm designed to reflect the destruction of worlds and the conditions of worldliness: mundicide. Rather than a legal category, mundicide is a phenomenological concept intended to help humans to grasp to grasp the depth, complexity and distributed nature of harm. It can help to make the harms faced by international security thinkable whilst reflecting their worldliness. To demonstrate the value of this concept, I apply it to an empirical case - the ‘rainforest Chernobyl’ (*Aguinda v. Chevron-Texaco,* 2011). In so doing, I argue that only a worldly approach to security can adequately capture the enormity of international security threats and enable humans to respond to them.

*Can worlds and worldliness be the subjects of security?*

In the early 1990s, the medical anthropologist Carolyn Nordstrom (1995) carried out an ethnographic study of the harms caused by Mozambique’s brutal civil war. Her respondents shared harrowing experiences of the physical suffering, mutilation, torture and killing of humans. However, these were ‘not the focal point’ of their narratives, nor did they capture the full extent or depth of the harm that took place. Indeed, these respondents also mourned the loss of their collective social structures and gathering places; of everyday patterns of work, cultivation, harvesting and eating; of their deceased ancestors, whose spirits they believed to be embedded in the landscape; of mythical spaces and timescales accessed through ritual and ceremony; of fields, nonhuman animals and treasured belongings. The harm they decried did not only accrue to human bodies; rather, it was distributed across, and instantiated in, a collective that could not be reduced to ‘component parts’. It was this unique, heterogeneous *world* that was lost in the war.

It is commonplace in anthropological or phenomenological studies of harm to speak of ‘worlds’ as the phenomena that are lost, destroyed or unmade by violence (see, for instance, Das, 2007 and Scarry, 1985). But what, exactly, is meant by the concept of ‘worlds’ or ‘worldliness’? For Jean-Luc Nancy, the term ‘world’ refers to the conditions of ‘being-together’ – that is, to the “rapport, relation, address, sending, donation, presentation…of entities and existents to each other” (Nancy, 1997: 8). From this perspective, world is not a pre-determined place, but rather a set of conditions in which all beings *co-constitute* one another. Each form of being exists only in relation to others, and no particular form of being has ontological primacy; as Nancy (2000: 18) puts it, “we would not be ‘humans’ if there were not ‘dogs’ and ‘stones’” (and vice versa). Although all beings are singular, they are also irreducibly plural because they are co-constituted by other beings. Furthermore, because each world is instantiated in a unique way, by singular-plural beings, the ‘content’ of worlds cannot be pre-determined in the abstract. So, from this perspective, worldliness consists in a specific set of conditions: the co-constitution of heterogeneous beings and the irreducibility of the collectives they form. If we approach ontology in this way, it is impossible to think of harm accruing to one being or set of beings in isolation. For this reason, Nancy argues that genocide cannot be understood adequately as an attack on peoples, but rather as the destruction of the ‘singular plural’ – that is, “the putting to death of the *world*” (Nancy, 1997: 145).

If worlds and worldliness are the bearers of harm, then it seems necessary to give them consideration within discourses and practices of security. However, existing accounts of security – both statist and critical - cannot account for world(s) because they frame the human subject as the only conceivable locus of harm. According to R.B.J. Walker (1997), in traditional, state-centred accounts of security, the subject of security (that is, the phenomena to which it attends) has been elided with the *subject* (a being possessing human subjectivity) and the institutions that produce it. In this model of security, states seek to protect themselves as the collective embodiments and guarantors of human subjects. As Walker argues, states have invested considerable effort into ensuring that they are the only kind of political community that can be conceptualized in this way. Critical approaches have challenged this notion of security by placing alternative political communities at its heart: for example, societies of states and networks of individuals linked by global political-economic structures or cosmopolitan norms. Yet, although they are bound together in different ways, human subjects remain the dominant (if not exclusive) constituents of these communities. For instance, Andrew Linklater’s (2011) recent work expands the concept of security to encompass a plethora of harms, from the ‘concrete’, strategic violence used in warfare to the ‘abstract’, nonviolent, structural harm caused by unjust economic relations and processes. However, although he advocates the ‘widening of moral sympathies’, to include all humans (and, he implies, some animals) he grounds his conception of harm in human *suffering*. The ability to suffer, let alone to articulate this suffering as part of an ethical discourse, requires the form of subjectivity possessed only by humans and a handful of other species. Harms to non-sentient nonhumans are considered only if they cause suffering to humans (for instance, in the case of ‘environmental’ degradation that reduces human wellbeing). As I shall argue below, the norm of ‘human security’ takes this line of reasoning to a greater extreme. Its proponents seek to produce autonomous, individual human subjects (see Chandler and Hynek 2011) by instrumentalizing nonhumans as ‘resources’ for human wellbeing. In other words, they attempt to secure human subjects by dominating nonhumans in the same way that states secure their subjects by colonizing territory.

So, both statist and critical conceptions of security incompatible with the conditions of worldliness because they frame the human subject as the only thinkable subject of security. Nonetheless, the emancipatory impulsethat drives Linklater’s work offers a starting point for developing a ‘worldly’ account of security. It hones our attention on multi-faceted harms, underscores the plasticity and plurality of moral-political communities, encourages an ethos of interconnection and calls for responsiveness to radically different (human) others. This impulse can be redirected so that, instead of restricting its scope to humans or amplifying the dominance of the human subject it embraces the diverse beings that co-constitute worlds. I begin with this basic image of security as the complex of logics, practices, processes and norms that humans have developed to respond to harm on multiple scales. But I aim to open it up even more radically, so that harms to world(s) and the conditions of worldliness are its central concern. I shall now explore three possible pathways to achieving this goal.

*Rejecting anthropocentrism*

Many authors suggest that anthropocentrism is the main obstacle to recognizing the constitutive role and ethical status of non-humans in IR (see, for instance, Coward, 2009; Eckersley, 2007; Cudworth and Hobden 2013). Indeed, the logics of security discussed above are premised on a radically anthropocentric belief: that only human subjects can be the subjects of security. Would it, then, be possible and desirable to reject anthropocentrism as a feature of international security?

To answer this question, it is crucial to distinguish between different kinds of ‘anthropocentrism’. This term usually brings to mind what I shall call ‘anthro-instrumentalism’: an ethical orientation that reduces the value of nonhumans to their instrumental usefulness to humans. Within anthro-instrumental logic, politics is defined by a ‘Great divide’ (Latour, 1993) in which human beings are placed on one side and all ‘non-humans’ on the other. On the upper side of this divide, human beings are prioritized, to the extent that their non-essential needs (for instance, for luxury or entertainment) are elevated above the survival or non-suffering of nonhumans (see Derrida, 2004; Nussbaum, 2006). Moreover, the relation between the needs of humans and nonhumans is assumed to be zero-sum. That is, any consideration given to nonhumans is thought to detract from the attention or effort devoted to human needs (see Bennett 2010).

Anthro-instrumentalism lies at the foundations of the subject-based notions of security described above. It has reached its zenith in discourses and practices of ‘human security’, which frame the individual human subject as the ‘ultimate end’ of international politics (Tadjbaksh and Chenoy, 2007:13), seeking to ensure its physical integrity and health, environmental conditions, economic and political participation, rights and dignity (see UNDP 1994; CHS 2003). Sustaining a ‘secured’ human requires the instrumentalization of many nonhumans: the material beings produced and traded to ensure economic security; the plants and nonhuman animals cultivated and killed to provide food security; the production of chemical compounds and the destruction of bacteria to ensure health security. Although non-humans lend their names to various dimensions of human security, they are only *indirect* referent objects; that is, they are secured only insofar as they contribute to the well-being of humans, who are the real referent objects ( see Buzan et al, 1999). ‘Environmental security’, for instance, is not concerned with securing the environment in and for itself. Rather, it aims to ensure natural resources for humans – that is, ‘environmental security *for people’* (Barnett, 2001: 122, italics mine). Anthro-instrumental logics of this kind reduce the relations between humans and nonhumans to the mere satisfaction of the needs of the former, and so are utterly incompatible with the conditions of worldliness described above.

However, Eugene Hargrove (1992) argues that ‘anthropocentrism’ is not a synonym for ‘instrumentality’. It simply refers to values rooted in the human experience, which can take many forms. So, a ‘weak anthropocentrist’ *might* value nonhumans because they meet instrumental human needs, or because doing so fits within a wider worldview – for instance, the belief that human connection with ‘nature’ is spiritually fulfilling (see Norton, 1984). Humans can also attribute ‘intrinsic’ value to nonhumans – that is, value independent of their usefulness to humans (see also O’Neill, 2003). Indeed, Hargrove identifies four kinds of value that humans might recognize in nonhumans:

i) anthropocentric instrumental value (as described above)

ii) non-anthropocentric instrumental value (the instrumental value that nonhumans – animals and plants, say - have for each other);

iii) non-anthropocentric intrinsic value (the value that nonhumans have, independent of human judgment)

iv)anthropocentric intrinsic value (value attributed by humans to nonhumans, regardless of the latter’s usefulness to the former).

Hargrove argues that the first form of value is too narrow, and that humans cannot truly appreciate the second and third forms because we can only, at best, imagine what it is like to be another form of being. So, from this perspective, our best bet is to embrace the fourth form of value and harness the power of human reflection, agency – and indeed, imagination - to act ethically towards other kinds of beings.

This argument seems to fit with a worldly approach to understanding harm and security. Accepting that humans cannot entirely transcend their own perspective, it mobilizes their capacities for reflection and agency as a means of protecting nonhumans. It acknowledges that humans are co-constituents of worlds, but does not privilege them in ontological terms or afford them an exclusive ethical status. It also offers a range of reasons for humans to protect the worlds of which they are part, and to activate their own capacities to this end. If we accept this argument, then the question is not whether a worldly approach to security can be anthropocentric, but rather whether it can fit with existing ontological and ethical categories. I shall now explore two alternative answers to this question.

*Expanding ethics*

The first alternative pathway retains the existing ontological and ethical categories that dominate international security and politics, but extends them to include *some* nonhumans. I shall briefly explore two of the most salient strands of this approach.

1. *The ‘expanding circle[[1]](#footnote-1)’ approach*

The first approach applies to animals or other sentient beings and advocates including *some* of them within the human ‘moral community’ and thus within the scope of security. It is epitomized by the work of Paola Cavalieri (2001) ,who advocates the application of human rights to any animal that meets the criterion of being an agent – an “intentional being that has goals and wants to achieve them” (Cavalieri, 2001: 131). In so doing, she rejects criteria for inclusion such as autonomy, cognitive ability, or linguistic/communicative capacities, which would also rule out many ‘non-paradigmatic’ humans (such as the disabled, young children, or people with low intelligence). According to this logic, ‘human’ rights as they stand should be extended to all those beings that meet the criterion of being an agent (mammals, birds and ‘probably all vertebrates’). Alasdair Cochrane (2012) advocates extending ‘human’ rights to *all* sentient beings, on the basis that sentience is a necessary and sufficient condition for possessing interests, which command basic rights.

Some authors writing in this vein argue that the best way to convince humans to protect nonhumans is to translate their intrinsic value into the language of human interests. For instance, where nonhumans can be framed as ‘enablers’ of human rights or security, it is possible to offer them protection under existing laws, norms and conventions (see Woods, 2006). In such cases, the intrinsic value of nonhumans can be reconciled with the instrumental value placed on them by humans (see Norton, 1984). It also applies in cases where humans and certain groups of nonhumans are affected by the same harm. Robin Eckersley (2007) identifies two hypothetical cases in which this kind of argument could be used to justify international intervention: environmental emergencies with trans-boundary spillover effects (e.g. a radiation leak) or ‘ecocide’ involving serious human rights violations (e.g. the destruction of an ecosystem that also involves the loss of livelihood or health for humans). In these cases, anthro-instrumental efforts to restore human rights or ensure access to resources can be used tactically to protect nonhumans. However, this works only in cases where the protection of a set of nonhumans can be *directly* reconciled with the instrumental interests of humans.

There are, Eckersley (2007) argues, some situations in which this logic still holds even when no humans are subject to the harm in question. She sketches out one such scenario, suggesting that it may be possible to justify military intervention in the case of ‘ecocide’/ ‘crimes against nature’ (the deliberate and irreversible destruction of an entire ecosystem or species). Indeed, she contends that the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ might be extended to apply to such cases, where human intervention is possible. In each of these cases, then, the argument is that *some* nonhumans should be encompassed within the human moral community as it stands, and be subject to the same protections it affords to humans.

1. *The extension of humanity approach*

A related approach, which I shall term the ‘extension of humanity’ perspective, also calls for the protection of specific categories of nonhumans. However, instead of treating humanity as a discrete category of being, it suggests that the distinctive qualities of humanness are made possible and even mediated by nonhuman, material beings. This approach embodies a narrowly co-constitutive ontology: it recognizes the intersectionality of humans and nonhumans, but restricts it to the relations between humans and the material beings that they ‘make’. From this perspective, made objects and built environments act as mediums onto which human genius, knowledge, memory or values are projected, or as prostheses for human bodies. They provide safety, mediate relations of care between individuals separated by time and space (Scarry, 1985), and may even offer a form of material ‘immortality’ to living beings (see Arendt 1998; Mitchell, 2014). One of the most influential articulations of this approach is found in Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition* (1998). According to Arendt, material beings – and human-made objects in particular - separate and connect human beings, making genuine plurality possible. They also provide a public ‘stage’ upon which humans can act and be witnessed by their peers. The possibility of this kind of action, she argues, is definitive of, and therefore integral to, a distinctly human life. For Scarry (2011: 10), made objects can even *embody* humanity in the sense that "something, or someone, gave rise to their creation and remains silently present in the newborn object". From this perspective, an attack on human-made objects is a threat to the conditions of humanness.

Within contemporary security studies, Martin Coward (2009) has adopted this approach in his work on ‘urbicide’, applying the insights of Arendt, Heidegger and Nancy to the destruction of urban spaces. Specifically, Coward argues that deliberate attacks on urban and public spaces during warfare should not be treated as ‘collateral’ damage or unintended consequences of attempts to kill their human inhabitants. Rather, he claims, urban spaces and built environments foster conditions of plurality and heterogeneity, which are the real targets of violence. Applying this analysis to the Bosnian war, he suggests that attacks on major urban areas such as Sarajevo and Mostar were attempts to eradicate the conditions of multi-ethnic plurality and cohabitation that existed before the war. As such, we should not reduce these attacks to the destruction of mere ‘objects’, but rather recognize them as an “an assault upon humanity" (Coward, 2009: 6). Similar arguments can be found in the work of Douglas Porteous and Sandra Smith (2001), who are concerned with ‘domicide, or the deliberate, global-scale destruction of ‘home’. From their perspective ‘home’ can include buildings, public spaces and ecosystems, but it is defined primarily as the place in which humans can “truly be ourselves and display and nurture our being…" (Porteous and Smith: 3). In the same vein, Robert Bevan (2006) condemns ‘memoricide’, or the destruction of cultural artefacts that enable a group of people to maintain their integrity and way of life – often in contravention of international law. Indeed, the existing international law protecting artefacts and habitations in times of war is a prime example of this approach. For instance, the 1954 Hague Convention (UNESCO, 1954) protects ‘property of great importance to the cultural heritage of every people’, and the UN has designated thousands of sites and objects for special protection through UNESCO’s World Heritage programmes (UNESCO, 2003).

Both of these approaches seek to challenge the dominant anthro-instrumentalism of IR by expanding its ontological and ethical categories. They offer a number of advantages. First, they responsibilize human beings to protect some non-humans, harnessing human agency and value judgments to this end. Second, both approaches make it possible to alter existing ethical categories to include some nonhumans. In particular, the ‘extension of humanity approach’ argues convincingly for a (limited) co-constitutive ontology and manages to reconcile it with existing legal and normative categories. Third, this approach lends itself to abstraction. It offers clear grounds for protecting certain nonhumans as members of the human moral community. This fits well with existing security logics, and institutions, which are designed to protect this moral community. Moreover, it specifies conceptions of harm that can be applied generically to similar situations (e.g. ‘ecocide’, ‘urbicide’, ‘domicide’, ‘memoricide’) and which are linked to concrete ethical prescriptions. This makes it possible for security actors to use existing categories, norms, laws and institutions to offer protection to some nonhumans.

But does the ‘expanding ethics’ pathway reflect the conditions of worldliness? Not very well, it seems. Crucially, it reproduces hard boundaries between humans and nonhumans, treating them as radically different kinds of being whose interests sometimes overlap but often diverge. It erects the same kind of boundaries between different kinds of nonhumans (e.g. sentient versus non-sentient beings, or ‘made’ versus ‘natural’ things). It also depicts harm in aggregate terms – that is, as harms to humans plus ecocide/urbicide/domicide/memoricide – and simply adds each category to a list of referent objects of security. An example of this can be found in the Watson Institute’s ‘Costs of War’ project, (see Watson Institute, 2011), which aggregates the harms caused by the Iraq war to human bodies and social structures, animals and the ‘environment’. However, as argued above, worldliness inheres not in the irreducible relations between diverse beings, which cannot be derived simply by aggregating discrete beings or their interests.

Furthermore, the abstract categories offered by the ‘expanding circle’ approach make it possible to identify generic categories of harm and to work from precedents, which makes it possible for international actors to develop repertoires of response and principles to guide them. However, these categories also strictly pre-determine the kinds of beings offered protection. So, no matter how far one ‘expands the circle’ of the human moral community, millions of beings are *prima facie* excluded from consideration (see Weston, 2006). As I argued above, each world is a unique instantiation of the conditions of worldliness; it is impossible to determine in the abstract which beings co-constitute worlds. For these reasons, simply expanding existing ontological and ethical categories cannot offer a basis for protecting worlds. Does this mean that the entire basis of IR needs to be transformed in order to reflect the diverse co-constituents of worlds?

*Transforming ontology*

A new wave of literature on the theme of ‘new materialism’[[2]](#footnote-2) in philosophy and, increasingly, IR, seems to suggest precisely this. This approach rejects an ontology that enforces dichotomous divisions between humans and nonhumans on the basis of agency. Instead, it focuses (human) attention on the lively and even quasi-agential properties of matter (see Coole and Frost, 2010). Amongst proponents of this approach, the work of Jane Bennett (2010) has been particularly influential. She contends that the material beings which tend to be treated as ‘dull matter’ within the rationalist tradition actually have ‘trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own’, which “can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, [and] in any case call for our attentiveness, or even 'respect'" (Bennett, 2010: ix). To conceptualize the sources of this quasi-agency, she draws on the work of Bruno Latour (1992), who argues that causation results not from intentional human agency alone, but rather from the properties of networks, collectives, or ‘political ecologies’. She also adopts Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of the ‘assemblage’ to explain how collective agency can emerge from the confluence of heterogeneous bodies. For instance, Bennett claims, electrical grids can bring about massive disruptions to human life and food may alter human propensities towards warfare. The form of quasi-agency that these beings possess is not individual or linear, but rather ‘confederate’. That is, it is the emergent product of myriad interacting forces and bodies that collide, respond, react and counter-act one another. It is not intentional human *agency*, but rather what Latour calls ‘actancy’: the ability of a material being to ‘make a difference’ in the world by helping to produce and shaping the dynamics of complex networks. According to this viewpoint, nonhumans may also have a speaking role in politics. Specifically, their bodies can make ‘propositions’ interpretable to humans, which are frequently found in scientific and media discourses as ‘facts’ or ‘evidence’. Indeed, Eyal Weizman (2011) demonstrates that the propositions made by a range of ‘objects’ – topographical maps, rubble, fragments of bone - are also used in legal settings to ‘testify’ about the nature of past or planned violence. From this perspective, nonhumans are creative and lively features of the worlds humans share with them.

William Connolly’s (2011) work on the politics and ontology of ‘becoming’ has been similarly influential in the emergence of ‘new materialism’. He argues that we cannot understand the world in terms of linear time or as a static object. Rather, he claims, it is composed of heterogeneous ‘force fields’, or patterns of motion that unfold in multiple time-scales and frequently metamorphize. When this occurs, they throw previously stable systems into states of disequilibrium and powerful ‘resonances’ emerge. Resonances consist of forces that collide, modify and often magnify each other – for instance, the fusion of globalized capitalism and climate change. The scale and amplitude of these resonances is such that they exceed human control (and, in some cases, human comprehension). As such, we cannot assume that human agency is the only creative – or destructive – force in the universe. In fact, Connolly suggests, human agency is not a property of individual humans; rather, it is enabled by a range of sub-agential influences exerted by nonhuman bodies. Efficacious (human) action in these conditions involves not only the ability to act, but also to pay attention to diverse patterns of time and motion, to dwell within moments of disequilbrium and to activate the creativity that they can engender.

Contributions to IR influenced by new materialisms have, so far, focused primarily on the ontological implications of this approach and its consequences for understanding processes or events that shape international security. For instance, Claudia Aradau (2010) argues that critical infrastructures should not be treated merely as instrumental tools for maintaining the stability society, but also as beings that disrupt its smooth functioning by breaking down, stopping, , leaking or otherwise malfunctioning. In a similar vein, Tom Lundborg and Nick Vaughan-Williams demonstrate that critical infrastructures can produce effects independent of human agency. For instance, they can generate (often erroneous) predictions of terrorist attacks, or engage in self-repair after a disaster with no human interference. In a related sense, Mike Bourne (2012) argues that arms technology is not a neutral tool that merely conduces human agency, but rather an assemblage of heterogeneous materials that shapes the systems through which it is traded and deployed. For these authors, a central priority is to transform the ontology of IR, making it attentive to the ‘material’ of security and its integral role in the banal functions of everyday life – and its disruption.

However, the new materialist pathway also suggests that there are ethical implications arising from this ontological shift. Instead of presenting a prescriptive ethics, Connolly (2011) gives an account of the general ethical *sensibilities* that are required by a ‘world of becoming’. Most importantly, he states that it is crucial to reject the sense of resentment humans may experience when they recognize that the world is not entirely subject to their control and that events are not reducible to their agency. Drawing on the Nietszchean concept of *ressentiment*, he warns that maintaining the fiction of dominant human agency and resisting the transformations of a heterogeneous world can lead to destructive, hubristic action such as wasteful over-consumption and military adventurism. Instead, he argues, we need to affirm and even embrace the conditions of becoming and engage in micro-political interventions that, magnified by the force-fields into which we act, can make large differences. We must also, he claims, cultivate a deep sense of attachment the world – even as it constantly transforms (around) us. This, he states, entails a “presumptive care for the diversity of life and the fecundity of the earth” (Connolly, 2011, 79). So, although he does not prescribe any particular forms of *protective* action, Connolly’s approach seems to suggest that humans should care for their world(s) based on a sense of attachment to them. Bennett’s work delves into this problem slightly further, arguing that a new basis for political communities can be found in “human-nonhuman collectives that are provoked into existence by a shared experience of harm" (Bennett, 2010: xix). Due to their irreducible interconnection, she avers, harm to any section of an assemblage constitutes harm to any other one. In other words, humans should understand their vulnerabilities as being entwined with those of other beings, not distinct from them. So Bennett, too, avoids offering specific guidelines for the protection of assemblages, but she hints that co-constituted experiences of harm could form the basis of political action.

The new materialist pathway seems to reflect the conditions of worldliness much more closely than the ‘expanding ethics’ approaches discussed above. First, it is fundamentally grounded in the co-constitution of heterogenous beings, and refuses to privilege human forms of being or agency above other kinds of being. It is also attentive to the fact that nonhumans can be sources and loci of harm. The notion that ‘human-nonhuman collectives’ can form an alternative conception of community seems to offer an ontological framework for positing worlds and worldliness as the subjects of security. Moreover, this approach pluralizes the ethical foundations of politics, suggesting that ethical action need not respond exclusively to rational value calculations, but can also be based on affective experiences. Indeed, as Rosi Braidotti puts it (2010, 217), humans can act ethically towards nonhumans ‘for the hell of it and for love of the world’. As such, this aproach offers a much wider and stronger basis for engaging ethically with the nonhuman constituents of worlds. Why, then, should we not simply abandon the existing ontological and ethical categories of IR for a new materialist approach?

The most salient problem is that the indeterminacy of this pathway, which makes it reflective of worldliness, also makes it almost impossible to reconcile with the demands for coordinated response to acute threats and harms. Crucially, new materialism offers little guidance for conceptualizing harms in an abstract or generic way. It treats various phenomena (for instance, war and anthropogenic climate change) as destructive or undesirable. However, it offers no basis for generalizing about harms to assemblages, and no concepts to make them thinkable as a distinct category of harm. This means that every harmful event would need to be treated as if it were unique and unprecedented, and each response would need to begin from scratch, making it slow and unwieldy. As Elaine Scarry (2012) argues, effective human responses to acute harms requires repetition and the development of habits; confronting totally unexpected and unprecedented events can paralyze human thinking and action. In a related sense, new materialism encourages an ethical sensibility that, while attentive to worlds and worldliness, can only be realized over time through the emergent properties formed by micro-political action. Indeed, Connolly suggests that humans should respond to potentially destructive resonances through micro-level, gradual actions that might ultimately contribute to large-scale changes in harmful cultures, norms and practices over time. But threats to international security also include acute harms: emergent conflict, massive weather patterns and earthquakes, explosions and meltdowns. Long-term, micro-political interventions may help to prevent or ameliorate these issues in the long run. However, they offer little guidance for responding to emergent events through large-scale, strategic action – for instance, the complex civilian-military interventions carried out be international actors. This kind of action requires categories that specify particular kinds of harm, as well as possible and appropriate repertoires of response. In the absence of such abstractions, a new materialist approach on its own cannot offer an adequate basis for worldly security.

*A worldly approach to security*

None of the pathways outlined above can, on its own, offer a basis for worldly security, but each offers something indispensable. Weak anthropocentrism invokes human perspective, agency and values as bases for ethical responsiveness; the ‘expanding ethics’ approach offers a degree of abstraction and ethical prescriptiveness that can enable human actors to identify harms and link them to repertoires of collective response; and the radically plural, fluid ontology of ‘new materialism’ reflects the nature of worlds and an ethos of attentiveness to them. A worldly conception of security should synthesize these features. However, the most promising aspects of each approach seem to make it incompatible with the others. Specifically, most ‘expanding circle’ and ‘new materialist’ approaches claim to reject anthropocentrism or deem it an obstacle to their aims. Meanwhile, the indeterminacy of new materialism seems incommensurable with the ethical abstraction and prescriptiveness that recommend the ‘expanding ethics’ approach. I shall now argue that the basis for a worldly conception of security lies in resolving these two apparent sources of incompatibility.

The issue of anthropocentrism is simplest to resolve because it is, in fact, a false opposition. As Hargrove (1992) claims, many arguments that claim to be ‘non-anthropocentric’ actually espouse a form of weak anthropocentrism, and this is true of both ‘expanding ethics’ approaches discussed above. These approaches call for the protection of some nonhumans because they are deemed *by humans,* and according to human values, to be worth protecting, or because they are deemed to be constitutive of humanity. For instance, to illustrate her argument that ‘ecocide’ might be grounds for military intervention, Eckersley (2007) gives the hypothetical example of the conscious destruction of Rwanda’s mountain gorilla population by humans. Her argument could appeal either to non-anthropocentric noninstrumental value (e.g. the idea that the gorillas and their habitats should be protected regardless of human-derived value) or to weak anthropocentric intrinsic value (e.g. the judgment that the loss of this species is a wrong in terms of human values). Eckersley adopts the latter approach, suggesting that ecocide ‘shocks the [human] conscience’ and ‘reflects badly on humanity’. As such, it appeals to values rooted in the experience of humans, but not exclusively oriented towards them. Similarly, Coward (2009) explicitly stakes his approach ‘against anthropocentrism’, calling for discourses of security to acknowledge harms to more-than-human assemblages. His approach most certainly challenges *anthro-instrumental* accounts of harm. Nonetheless, the rationale behind his argument is actually weakly anthropocentric: he contends that urban spaces should be protected because they embody aspects of humanity and enable humans to be human. These values advocate attention to nonhumans, but are derived from a human perspective.

New materialism is weakly anthropocentric in the same sense: it invokes *human* values, experiences and forms of agency as means for responding to harms to nonhumans. Although this pathway emphasizes the actancy of nonhumans as crucial contributors to the (trans)formation of worlds, it ultimately appeals to *human* action and affect. For instance, when Connolly highlights the need to ‘mobilize actions and ethical sensibilities’ to counter destructive resonances, he does not interpellate buildings, machines, animals or, indeed deities. Rather he asks *humans* “to amplify a care for this world that already courses through us to some degree” (Connolly, 2011: 79). Indeed, all of the actions that Connolly calls for - inducing cumulative changes in individual and group conduct, applying collective pressure on large-scale institutions, or infusing gratitude into artistic practice - are forms of *human* agency, but not of a linear, anthro-instrumental kind. Instead, they encourage humans to act *as part of* heterogeneous assemblages, and to understand their actions as co-constituted with and by other beings. Bennett’s (2010) political-ecological approach also invokes weak anthropocentric reasoning as one important basis for ethical action. For instance, she suggests that anthropomorphism can be used tactically to engender attachment to nonhumans, and, as discussed above, she appeals to humans to act ethically towards nonhumans at least in part because it is ‘good for them’(Bennett, 2010: 13). Bennett sees no contradiction in this; indeed, she openly invokes *human* values as a means of protecting the human and nonhuman constituents of assemblages.

This suggests that there is no incompatibility between the basic *ethics* of new materialism and weak anthropocentrism. The differences between them derive from the ontological assumptions to which weak anthropocentric reasoning has traditionally been applied. However, if weak anthropocentrism it is understood simply as an ethics developed from the viewpoint of humans, it could encompass any conception of humanity. It follows, then, that a ‘new materialist’ account of agency could be equally compatible with weak anthropocentrism as the rational, agent-centred accounts discussed above. Specifically, the ‘anthro’ in weak anthropocentrism would understood as part of a diverse assemblage; protecting ‘the human’ would entail protecting the collectives of which she was part. Indeed, the ‘human’ values at stake would correspond to an understanding of worldliness as an integral condition of humanness – and vice versa. Human agency may still play a crucial role in protective action, but it would be understood as being distributed across these collectives and reliant upon them. For instance, protective action might involve mobilizing human agency, but would acknowledge the extent to which this is conditioned and enabled by the actancy of nonhumans. It might also entail thinking about ways in which the magnifying properties of assemblages could be used to amplify the power of human agency[[3]](#footnote-3).

Moreover, the grounds for ethical judgment and action would not be limited to rational calculations of needs or interests. It would also include affective experiences such as attachment or enchantment – which, as Norton (1984) claims, transform human values in any case. Whilst human experience would be the starting point for this perspective, it would not necessarily be its focal point. Rather, it would encompass a ‘multi-centric’ orientation: instead of envisioning a single ethical ‘circle’ with humanity at the centre, it would frame ethics as the space created between multiple, overlapping circles, each with a different form of being at its centre (Weston, 2006: 69). This approach would mean that the subject of security would still be ‘human’, but that ‘humanity’ would be reconceptualised in both ontological and ethical terms.

The second problem – the apparent incommensurability of abstraction and the indeterminacy of worlds – can be addressed not by resolving the tension but rather by embracing it. In ethical terms, the value of abstract categories is that they underpin the recognition of harms and prescribe responses, enabling coordinated protective action. As I have argued above, it is inadequate simply to add more subsets of beings into existing ethical categories, but this does not mean that they can or should be done away with entirely. Rather, they need to be rendered open and ‘agnostic’ (see Calarco, 2008) – that is, to offer ethical responsiveness without predetermining the kinds of beings which can evoke it. Drawing on the Levinasian notion that ethics is a form of response, Matthew Calarco argues that nonhuman animals can evoke this reaction in humans. He builds on the work of Thomas Birch (1993), who extends ethical consideration even further – indeed, universally. Birch argues that every attempt to pre-determine the recipients of ethical consideration has led to the uncritical privileging of the interests of the powerful and to exclusions that were later found to undermine ethics (e.g. slavery). The only way to avoid such errors, he contends, is to maintain openness towards ‘deontic experience’- “the experience, in response to something or someone, that one *must* do something” (Birch, 1993: 322) – which can potentially be invoked by any and all kinds of being. Crucially, an ‘agnostic’ ethics does not automatically call upon humans to ‘protect everything’, or to give everything equal consideration. Instead, it is a matter of “giving others of all sorts a chance to reveal their value, and of giving ourselves a chance to see it" (Birch, 1993: 328). This ethical orientation would make it possible retain categories of ethical responsiveness – for instance, the recognition of particular kinds of harm – without pre-determining the beings to which they applied.

By addressing these apparent obstacles, it is possible to unite the fundamental contributions that each pathway makes to a worldly concept of harm. This approach retains an element of abstraction, but renders ethical categories porous and permanently open; offers grounds for protective action, but pluralizes these beyond values and rationality; and emphasizes human agency, as a *component* of lively, diverse assemblages of beings.

*Mundicide*

Adopting the approach discussed above makes it possible to imagine an alternative category of harm: mundicide, or the destruction of worlds and the conditions of worldliness. This is an *ontological* concept, which refers to the dissolution of irreducible, heterogeneous collectives, in whatever specific forms they emerge. Moreover, it is ‘ontological’ in the sense that it conceptualizes harm in terms of the loss not only of particular beings, but rather of entire, unique ways of being-together. Within this concept, the conditions of worldliness – the co-constitution of irreducible collectives by diverse beings – are abstracted, but the beings that co-constitute each world need not be pre-determined. In other words, it is possible to generalize about situations of mundicide whilst remaining permanently open, in ethical terms, to the kinds of beings it might encompass. Furthermore, this conception of harm does not refer to the destruction of particular categories of beings, but rather to the relations of co-constitution between diverse beings. Crucially, it is also a *phenomenological* concept intended to help humans to grasp the full enormity of the harms with which they are faced and to engender agnostic relations of responsiveness to other beings. It is not necessarily intended to function as a legal concept, and therefore does not specify either particular actions or criteria such as intentionality (or indeed, the identification of a human agent as the responsible party)[[4]](#footnote-4). Instead, it is a means of identifying and comprehending threats and harms specifically to *worlds* and the conditions of worldliness.

Adopting ‘mundicide’ as a conception of threat would have profound effects on how security is conceptualized and carried out: for instance, how ‘violence’ is defined and interpreted; in what circumstances intervention (military or otherwise) should be contemplated; and what ‘peace’, ‘reconstruction’ or preventive action might entail. It is far beyond the scope of this article to demonstrate all of these possible implications. Instead, my aim in this article is to show the difference that adopting a worldly perspective would make to the apprehension of harms by actors and scholars of security.

To this end, I shall explore the case of the ‘Rainforest Chernobyl’, a name given to the harms caused by Texaco-Chevron’s oil extraction activities in the province of Sucumbrios in north-eastern Ecuador. In the early 1990s, Texaco-Chevron dumped billions of gallons of toxic waste into the rainforest, leaving it in over 900 unlined waste pits. This waste seeped into the soil and groundwater, contaminating an area about the size of the US state of Rhode Island with levels of petroleum and hydrocarbons hundreds and sometimes thousands of times higher than allowable norms in the US and Ecuador (Donziger et al , 2010: 9). This led to an epidemic of cancer, lower life expectancies for human communities living in the affected area, the destruction of indigenous fauna (either from poisoning or from drowning in the unattended pits), the permanent scarring of the landscape, as well as the contamination of air, water and plant life. Five indigenous groups living in the area were decimated, losing part or all of their territory and dispersing. How should harm of this kind be understood?

The actual response reflects textbook anthro-instrumental thinking. The complaint was treated as a civil case (specifically, an instance of tort law) and it was decided Chevron-Texaco should offer financial compensation to the human inhabitants of the area for the damages incurred. Indeed, in February 2011, the Lago Agrio court in Ecuador, where the case was eventually tried, imposed on Chevron-Texaco at total of $18.2 billion in damages, including $8.646 billion for ‘reparation’. These funds were to be used to restore polluted soil and water, create a health system for the communities and treat the sick, recover native species and create a ‘community cultural reconstruction program’(see O’Neill, 2013). This judgment treats the harm in question as a set of direct and indirect, instrumental *damage* to human interests (that is, the devaluation of human goods). It assumes that this damage can be reversed simply by ameliorating harms suffered by humans. In this vein, it seeks to restore a level of human well-being similar to that which existed prior to the harms in question or, where this is not possible, to provide other goods as compensation (for instance, aboriginal groups could not be restored, so a ‘cultural reconstruction programme’ was offered in lieu). Although whole ways of being-together (including human communities) were destroyed, the ontological loss is not acknowledged.

From an ‘expanding ethics’ viewpoint, this case would almost certainly count as ‘ecocide’ (see above), and, from Eckersley’s perspective, may then be considered in similar terms to the ‘Responsibility to Protect crimes’ (genocide, ethnic cleansing, war crimes and crimes against humanity). It might also fall under the categories of ‘urbicide’, ‘domicide’ and ‘memoricide’ in that entire human habitations, cultures and ways of life were destroyed or dispersed. However, in order to capture the full extent of the harm, an ‘expanding ethics’ approach would need to aggregate these harms, and, potentially, formulate separate responses to each of them. Even if this were possible, such an approach would focus on harms to particular, pre-determined and separate beings, not the loss of the linkages between them or the irreducible collectives which they co-constituted. So it might offer protection to certain objects of harm – ecosystems, settlements or indigenous flora and fauna. But it would fail to capture, for example, the aesthetic or spiritual relations between humans, nonhuman animals and landscapes, or the relations between nonhuman beings.

A strictly new materialist approach would focus attention on the ‘propositions’ of harm made by the members of this assemblage: scars on surfaces of landscapes and human bodies or the empty spaces where indigenous dwellings stood. Crucially, it would urge humans to frame this harm as distributed across integral assemblages, rather than as a set of instrumental harms to humans. It would also encourage humans to engage in micro-politics intended to change the conditions in which it took place. For instance, it might urge humans to protest against exploitative mining practices, to reduce our consumption of fossil fuels or mobilize socio-political pressure to regulate oil companies. However, it would not enable human actors to generalize about the kind of harm in question or to relate it to other, similar cases in a way that could help to enable immediate protective responses.

How would this harm look if it were interpreted through a worldly lens – that is, as an instance of mundicide? First, it would be framed as a loss at an ontological level– specifically, the destruction of a unique way of being-together co-constituted by all of the beings discussed above (and others that are not captured by existing approaches). Second, it would understand the harm as being distributed across and amongst the complex collective of which these beings were a part, rather than accruing to specific subsets of beings. So, instead of framing the integrity of human cultures or nonhuman bio-diversity as the main loci of harm, it would focus on the integrity and diversity of the collective as a whole, and all of its co-constituents. Third, whilst it would identify an abstract harm – the destruction of the conditions of worldliness – it would not pre-determine the beings that were subject to this harm. Instead, it would remain agnostic and open to any being that was deemed to be ethically considerable. In line with weak anthropocentric ethics, this would mean that any and all humans could ‘speak for’ whichever beings and relations between them that they considered to be harmed. It would also be open to the ‘propositions’ of harm made by material beings, and to human representations of these. For instance, the open pits filled with the corpses of nonhuman animals would ‘testify’ to the harms suffered by nonhumans in human courts or public discourses. Fourth, it would rely on human capacities – not only for reflection and judgment, but also for affective relations - to determine which beings were given consideration in this manner. In this vein, it would appeal to human values, but multi-centric ones. For instance, the harm might be understood in terms of human values (such as the attachment of human communities to specific landscapes). But it would also be open to appeals to multi-centric bases for protective action: for instance, the nonanthropocentric instrumental value of water for indigenous fauna; or to the affective attachment between humans and their dwellings. Sixth, it would urge humans to respond *as* members of diverse assemblages – not as external forces acting instrumentally upon others. So, restoring ‘human well-being’ would not merely involve treating human health concerns or ensuring access to social and economic resources. It would also entail protecting and restoring the relations between humans and nonhumans that constituted this world before its sudden destruction.

The same kind of analysis could equally be applied to more traditional categories of security such as ‘war’ or ‘natural disaster’ - indeed, to any situation in which harm is distributed across diverse constellations of beings. Re-framing these kinds of harms as instances of ‘mundicide’ would much more accurately reflect their nature, scope, depth and complexity. It would render them ‘thinkable’ as subjects of security discourses whilst transforming the very bases of these discourses. This, in turn, would better enable actors and scholars of security to respond to the enormity of the harms they face.

**Conclusions**

Harms caused by violence and destruction do not accrue to humans alone. Rather, they are distributed across unique, irreducible worlds that are co-constituted by diverse forms of being. If the norms, processes and practices of international security are to offer adequate responses to such harms, then then they must be grounded in world(s) and the conditions of worldliness. This cannot be achieved by rejecting anthropocentrism wholesale, by simply extending existing ethical categories or by replacing them with a purely ‘new materialist’ approach. Rather, core elements of these three pathways should be reconciled in order to develop a worldly conception of harm. This involves embracing a *weak* anthropocentric ethics, in which the ‘anthro’ is construed as one dimension of a lively assemblage which co-constitutes her being and agency. This ethics retains an element of abstraction, but renders ethical categories permanently open and multicentric. It draws on a range of values, derived not only from human rationality but also from affect and human imaginations of the experiences of nonhumans.

Fusing these elements makes it possible to imagine a concept of harm – mundicide – which is specifically designed to recognize and mobilize responses to harms to worlds and the conditions of worldliness. By making these harms ‘thinkable’ as subjects of security, it renders them amenable to human action, whilst transforming the bases of security to acknowledge the co-constituted nature of being. This ‘worldly’ approach to security makes it possible for humans to comprehend the depth, complexity and heterogeneity of the harms they face, and of which they are sometimes primary causes. Exploring the case of the ‘rainforest Chernobyl’, this article has demonstrated the radical difference made by this worldly approach with regards to how harm is apprehended and interpreted. The further implications of this argument for concrete security practices should be the subject of future debate and research.

The threats that dominate the sphere of international security– from ecological crisis to nuclear disaster to bio-chemical weaponry – are distributed across, and emerge from, complex worlds. If humans are to grasp the nature of these threats and respond ethically in the face of them, then it is necessary to conceptualize harms to worlds and the conditions of worldliness. By offering a basis for ‘worldly security’ and the concept of mundicide, this article takes a step in this direction.

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1. I borrow Peter Singer’s (2011) famous phrase. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. There is also an emerging literature applying varieties of posthumanism and complexity theory(see Cudworth and Hobden 2013; Urry 2005) to IR. I have focused on new materialisms because they engage more directly with the ethical implications of adopting a more-than-human approach to IR. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. It is beyond the scope of this article to explain this in depth. However, the role of emergent, globalized social movements mediated through the digital infrastructures of social media offers one example. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Whether or not mundicide could or should function as a legal category is beyond the scope of this article, but is a topic for further debate. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)