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RESEARCH ARTICLE

The positions of ontological (in)security in international relations: object relations, unconscious phantasies, and anxiety management

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Abstract

What is ontological (in)security? Recent scholarship on ontological security in International Relations has increasingly turned to the concept's theoretical origins in psychoanalysis and existential philosophy to address the field's (meta)theoretical limitations. This article argues that this development also necessitates an interrogation of the concept of ontological security itself to address the field's theoretical tensions. Further developing the nascent Kleinian approach to ontological security, this article conceptualises ontological (in)security as two distinct positions that denote the different ways in which subjects, be they individuals, groups, or states, manage anxiety. To develop this proposition, the article draws on Melanie Klein's work on the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions to elucidate these positions of ontological (in)security, their respective defence mechanisms against anxiety, and their socio-political implications. This Kleinian approach facilitates a clear theoretical distinction between security and insecurity, providing an analytical toolbox to differentiate the various ways in which anxiety is managed in different positions. This framework particularly underscores the ethical, reparative, and transformative potential of the position of ontological security, aspects that have received limited theoretical and empirical attention to date.

Keywords: ontological security; ontological insecurity; anxiety; psychoanalytic theory; phantasy; defence mechanisms; Melanie Klein; International Relations Theory

Introduction

We live in an age of anxiety,¹ characterised by the uncertainties generated by globalisation² and a never-ending cascade of political crises ranging from war³ to

¹Rumelili 2021.

²Kinnvall 2004.

³Kurylo 2023; Poberezhna et al. 2024; Sharani and Çelik 2024.

conflict⁴ to climate change⁵ to Covid-19⁶ and further compounded by myriad structural factors such as racial capitalism,⁷ institutionalised inequalities and colonial continuities,⁸ and state⁹ and gender-based violence.¹⁰ Subjects, be they individuals, groups, or states, are constantly confronted with a plethora of uncertainties and potentially anxiety-inducing issues and situations across different levels of analysis. As International Relations (IR) scholars from various traditions have noted, affective experiences have far-reaching behavioural, psychological, and political implications.¹¹ Existential anxiety is arguably the most prevalent and consequential of these affective experiences. In IR, the field of Ontological Security Studies (henceforth OSS) has developed a thriving research agenda interrogating the causes and consequences of pervasive anxiety in late modernity across micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. This scholarship is thus uniquely positioned to address some of the most pressing issues of our time.

For the study of these issues, conceptual clarity regarding ontological (in)security as well as anxiety and its resolution is paramount. However, this has been one of the field's greatest points of critique in recent years. While early work on ontological security in IR has predominantly relied on the sociological oeuvre of Anthony Giddens, more recent work has suggested a 'return to the roots'¹² of ontological security to enhance the framework's explanatory potential. However, some (meta)theoretical tensions persist. In the literature there is a tendency to identify anxiety and ontological insecurity 'more or less everywhere' and to use both terms interchangeably.¹³ Anxiety is argued to be both disruptive and debilitating,¹⁴ and, paradoxically, a source of creativity and radical agency.¹⁵ Almost no empirical attention has been paid to ontologically secure subjects.¹⁶ Indeed, following some contentious criticism of ontological security as an inherently conservative and violent concept,¹⁷ some scholars have gone so far as to suggest that ontological security is unattainable altogether.¹⁸ This article argues that these issues boil down to one central question: What *exactly* is ontological security? Scholars usually define it as the security of the self or the security of be(come)ing, but tend to shy away from in-depth discussions or conceptualisations and instead, as Gehring highlights,

⁴Fares 2023; Gutiérrez and Murphy 2023; Park 2024.

⁵Heinrichs 2024; Moulton 2024; Simangan 2023.

⁶Browning and Haigh 2022; Gellwitzki and Price 2024; Purnell 2021.

⁷Bhattacharyya 2018; Danewid 2020; Wai 2024.

⁸Abu-Bakare 2022; Achilleos-Sarll 2023; Campos 2023; Eastland-Underwood 2023; Williams and Williams 2024.

⁹Joshi 2022; Palma-Gutiérrez 2024; Price 2024.

¹⁰Gray 2019; Mehta 2024; Sachseder 2022.

¹¹See, for example, Bleiker and Hutchison 2008; Beattie et al. 2019; Gellwitzki and Houde 2022; Gellwitzki and Houde 2024; Karamik and Ermihan 2023; Houde 2023; Melhuish 2022; Van Rythoven and Sucharov 2020.

¹²Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020.

¹³Ibid., 878.

¹⁴Ejdus, 2018; Homolar and Scholz 2019; Mitzen 2006.

¹⁵Berenskötter 2020; Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Rumelili 2020.

¹⁶Greve 2018, 861.

¹⁷See Rosedale 2015.

¹⁸See Krickel-Choi 2022 for an overview.

largely reduce the concept to a Giddensian understanding centred around questions of identity.¹⁹ This lack of debate on and clarity over what ontological security is has led to conceptual ambiguities and some fundamental questions: What does it mean to be(come) ontologically (in)secure? How can we actually determine whether a subject, be it an individual, a group, or a state, is indeed ontologically secure or insecure? What difference does that make in practice? How does (in)security relate to and influence (in)action? And how can we analytically distinguish between different forms of anxiety? I argue that the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein can help us answer these questions and move beyond this impasse.

This article joins the broader conversation in the field that has resorted to psychoanalytic theory and existential philosophy to address the framework's limitations and enhance its analytical utility. However, while OSS has increasingly emancipated itself from Giddens, debates about the implications for the concept of ontological security are still in their infancy. In 2020, for example, *International Theory* published a symposium on *Anxiety, Fear, and Ontological Security in World Politics* that sought to re-think ontological security 'with and beyond Giddens'. The symposium comprises a number of compelling interventions that discuss a variety of issues ranging from re-thinking existential anxiety²⁰ to the limits of Giddens' work,²¹ but it is also exemplary of the broader tendency of the 'post-Giddensian' literature to predominantly discuss and theorise concepts related to ontological security rather than problematise the concept of ontological security itself.²² Indeed, ontological security is often treated as the self-explanatory psychological analogue to physical security and, explicitly or implicitly, understood in Giddensian terms, that is self-identity narratives and routines.²³ In other words, instead of developing their own understanding of ontological security, Lacanian, sociological, existentialist, and Kleinian approaches have retained Giddens' essentialising conceptualisation and, at best, simply reformulated it in their own terms.²⁴ Crucially, the result is not that scholars work with a uniform understanding of ontological security, but rather with various, often implicit and unspecified modifications of Giddens' theorisation, despite a consensus on the need to move beyond Giddensian theory. Lacanian approaches argue that subjects are always ontologically insecure and ontological security is an unattainable fantasy,²⁵ some sociological and existentialist approaches insist that subjects can be ontologically secure even when experiencing anxiety²⁶ and others suggest that ontological security is a state of 'freedom from anxiety'²⁷ while Kleinian approaches argue that subjects are (almost) never ontologically insecure but rather in a space in-between security and insecurity when they experience anxiety.²⁸ Explicit debates on the

¹⁹Gehring 2023; see also Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Cash 2020.

²⁰Berenskötter 2020; Hom and Steele 2020; Rumelili 2020.

²¹Arfi 2020; Cash 2020.

²²See Arfi 2020 for a notable exception.

²³Gehring 2023.

²⁴See, for example, Cash 2017, 2020; Eberle 2019; Vieira 2018; Vulović and Ejodus 2024.

²⁵Vulović and Ejodus 2024.

²⁶Krickel-Choi 2022.

²⁷Rumelili 2015b, 200.

²⁸Cash 2017, 2020.

concept of ontological security are necessary due to the pluralistic nature of the field, which draws on various strands of psychoanalytic and existential thought. These different intellectual traditions inevitably have diverse implications for what we mean by the security of being, and when left unaddressed, they contribute to theoretical ambiguities. This article advocates conceptualising (in)ontological security as Kleinian positions and shows how this move offers convincing answers to the tensions and questions articulated above.²⁹

Melanie Klein argues that there are two developmental positions in early childhood: the paranoid-schizoid position and the depressive position.³⁰ To develop Kleinian theory in the disciplinary framework of Ontological Security Theory, I propose conceptualising ontological insecurity as synonymous with the paranoid-schizoid position and ontological security as synonymous with the depressive position.³¹ In the Kleinian logic, the positions of ontological (in)security denote two distinct psychological modes of relating that ultimately motivate and guide subjects' behaviour. The difference between these positions is how subjects experience and manage anxiety – in a 'split manner' in the position of ontological insecurity and a 'non-split manner' in the position of ontological security. Positing that ontological security is a position thus suggests that the concept ultimately denotes how anxiety is being experienced and managed and with what socio-political implications. Consequently, the resolution to anxiety and its political implications are fundamentally different depending on the position a subject finds itself in. It is also noteworthy that these positions do not exist merely as discrete binaries but rather as a spectrum of intensification.³² This means that the human psyche is dynamic and subjects' mode of relating regresses to different degrees depending on the intensity of the experienced anxiety. This article suggests that Melanie Klein's notion of position offers the conceptual vocabulary and analytical toolbox to address the issues identified above. It allows us to (a) determine whether a subject is ontologically secure or insecure, (b) comprehend how exactly subjects in IR manage anxiety, (c) differentiate between different forms of anxiety, and (d) understand when anxiety management becomes progressive and constructive and when it becomes regressive and destructive. It furthermore broadens the analytical scope of OSS by specifying the largely neglected political implications of ontological security. Indeed, as this article will show, the position of ontological *security* is politically just as consequential as the position of ontological *insecurity*, albeit in a rather different way as it opens the possibility of reparative anxiety management. From this perspective, the *position* of ontological security is the condition of possibility for progressive and ethical politics rather than an inherently conservative and violent political project.

²⁹This is, of course, not to say that this is the ultimate and singular correct way to conceptualise ontological (in)security but rather one possible way to re-organise the framework for the sake of clarity, consistency, and analytical utility.

³⁰Klein 1975.

³¹See also Kinnvall et al. 2018, 251. As discussed in detail below, these positions are two development sequences in early childhood to which humans fall back throughout their lives to manage anxiety.

³²Klein 1975, 16.

Overall, this article further develops and formalises the emerging Kleinian approach³³ to ontological security in IR in two ways. First, building on and extending the existing Kleinian research,³⁴ the article offers a systematic and comprehensive discussion of Kleinian psychoanalytic theory and contextualises it in key debates of OSS. Additionally, it expands the catalogue of defence mechanisms against anxiety explored in the literature through its discussion of reparation. Second, departing from existing approaches and pursuing Klein on her own terms, the article proposes a distinctively Kleinian understanding of ontological security in IR. Thus, rather than simply suggesting that Kleinian theory can help us improve the established Giddensian framework, the article advocates a Kleinian conceptualisation of ontological security with a sole focus on anxiety management. This conceptual innovation addresses some of OSS's limitations. It offers a solution to the aforementioned tensions, providing a consistent analytical framework that highlights the importance of psychological mechanisms in managing anxiety. Simply put, the article argues that the notion of (in)security denotes a particular way of managing anxiety, relating, and experiencing affectivity. Importantly, this re-conceptualisation does not suggest that Giddens or Giddens-inspired work in IR is to be dismissed, but rather suggests decentring the field from a rather constraining, conservative, and limited conceptualisation of what ontological security is and should be as the ultimate reference point for the literature.³⁵ Instead, it opens an avenue to move towards a minimalist consensus that aligns with the diverse intellectual traditions of the field. Furthermore, this emphasis on affectivity allows further integration of the fields of OSS and emotion research in IR.

There are also stakes beyond the purely theoretical and analytical advantages of a Kleinian approach to ontological security: The very knowledge about the world that OSS produces and, thus, what security practices it implicitly and explicitly advocates, justifies, and legitimises. Ontological security scholarship has been charged with having a status quo bias, enacting 'significant limitations on political critique and possibility'³⁶ and potentially even 'serve as an apology' for reactionary or nationalist projects.³⁷ The Kleinian approach, in turn, suggests that ontological security is about the ability to endure ambivalence, accept responsibility and feelings of guilt, make reparations, and see the self and the other in a nuanced way and capable of good and bad. This means that the Kleinian approach (re)produces and (re)constructs a world in which change, ambivalence, and openness are not bringers of chaos and insecurity but inevitable aspects of being-in-the-world that may be engaged with constructively (or not). This suggests that ontological security is key for peaceful coexistence, be it between different groups in pluralistic societies or between different states in the international realm, as it allows groups to take responsibility for their action, engage in reparative and transformative action,

³³See Cash 2017, 2020 for an elaboration of the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive position in relation to ideology and international anarchy, respectively; see Gellwitzki and Houde 2023 and Houde 2024 for discussions how the paranoid-schizoid position underpins defensive narrative practices.

³⁴Cash 2017, 2020; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023; Houde 2024.

³⁵For detailed criticism of Giddens' conceptualisation of ontological security, see Cash 1996; Gehring 2023; and Rossdale, 2015.

³⁶Rossdale 2015, 369.

³⁷Vulović and Ejdus 2024, 125.

and endure ambivalence rather than idealising their own in-group and vilifying out-groups and to see others as friends or adversaries rather than enemies. Thus, recasting ontological (in)security as a position encourages us to ask different analytical questions, broaden the field's focus of analysis, and produce different knowledge about international politics. In other words, while to date ontological security scholarship has been a poignant critique of traditional accounts of security and a powerful explanation of the ways in which subjects manage anxiety and the consequences thereof, conceiving ontological (in)security as a position unlocks this scholarship transformative potential by outlining viable alternatives to the politics of fear, closure, and certainty.

The rest of this article will fully develop and advocate for a Kleinian approach to ontological security. It will begin with discussing recent developments in the field of OSS to contextualise the Kleinian approach. It will then elaborate on how and why Kleinian psychoanalytic theory has been adopted by other researchers to highlight its strengths and distinctiveness from other psychoanalytic approaches to OSS. Subsequently, it will discuss the depressive and the paranoid-schizoid position, their respective defence mechanisms against anxiety, and how they can enhance our comprehension of ontological security in IR. Lastly, the conclusion will outline areas for future theoretical expansion and empirical application of the Kleinian approach to ontological security.

Ontological security in International Relations

Early scholarship on ontological security in IR drew primarily on the sociology of Anthony Giddens, who borrowed the concept from Ronald Laing, to explore how anxiety management played out at the state level.³⁸ Indeed, the Giddensian literature has shed light on how states seek ontological security, including the establishment and performance of consistent autobiographical narratives, relationships with significant others, and routinised practices more generally.³⁹ Beyond the state-centric literature, another burgeoning strand of literature interrogated the meso- and micro-level of IR to explore how international politics impinge on individuals and groups, how they manage anxiety, and with what consequences.⁴⁰ In the Giddensian tradition, ontological security is a state of being associated with a sense of trust in others and the consistency of the world, as well as a positive, consistent, and coherent self-identity narrative.

Critiques of Giddensian approaches to ontological security have pointed out that there are some inherent limitations in Giddens' work that constrain its utility for the field of IR. Points of contention have been, *inter alia*, the inherent status quo bias,⁴¹ the limited theorisation of the unconscious and, as a corollary, the neglect of the psychological mechanisms underlying anxiety management,⁴² the notion

³⁸Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Zarakol 2010.

³⁹See, for example, Ejodus 2018; Ku and Mitzen 2022; Rumelili and Sofuoglu 2024; Rogers 2024; Steele 2008; Subotić 2016.

⁴⁰See, for example, Dingott Alkopher 2018; Gellwitzki et al. 2024; Innes 2017; Nicolson 2023; Roshier 2022.

⁴¹Rosdale 2015.

⁴²Cash 1996, 2020.

of the (pre-social) unitary subject,⁴³ the conflation of self and identity,⁴⁴ its subject-centrism,⁴⁵ and the binary understanding of ontological security/insecurity that strictly differentiates between the routinised capacity to 'go on' with everyday life and debilitating anxiety and 'chaos'.⁴⁶ This is why an increasing number of scholars have begun to 'return to the roots' of ontological security.⁴⁷ This effort to expand the framework's explanatory power draws on various existentialist⁴⁸ and psychoanalytic⁴⁹ theoretical sources that are roughly consistent with its general focus on anxiety.

Existentialist contributions predominantly evolve around the very concept of anxiety and its relationship to ontological (in)security. Drawing on the work of Paul Tillich,⁵⁰ some scholars suggest disaggregating existential anxiety into different sub-forms, that is the anxieties of fate and death, emptiness and meaninglessness, and condemnation and guilt.⁵¹ Other authors argue that anxiety is not only paralysing and debilitating but can also open the possibility for creativity, change, and radical agency.⁵² To make sense of different intensities and degrees of ontological security-seeking practices, as well as the circumstances and conditions under which anxiety becomes creative or debilitating, recent interventions propose distinguishing between 'normal' and 'neurotic' or 'existential' anxiety.⁵³ Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi⁵⁴ suggest grounding the differentiation in observable behavioural outcomes. Krickel-Choi⁵⁵ further argues for differentiating between the two based on a temporal dimension, with normal anxiety purportedly being temporary, whereas existential anxiety is supposedly a longer-term condition. These attempts to differentiate between different forms of anxiety are an analytical fruitful endeavour and a significant step towards more conceptual clarity in Ontological Security Theory in IR. However, as the article will argue below, this theoretically intriguing distinction between different forms of anxiety can only be convincingly employed empirically by drawing on insights from Kleinian theory.

Besides these existentialist insights, Lacanian theorists have made a number of important interventions in the field to reconceptualise key elements of the ontological security framework. Most notably, they conceptualise the ontological security-seeking subject as split, decentred, and characterised by an ontological lack that allows for a clear distinction between the self and its multiple subjective identifications.⁵⁶ Lacanian scholars further posit that the lack at the centre of

⁴³Browning and Joenniemi 2017.

⁴⁴Krickel-Choi 2024.

⁴⁵Solomon 2018.

⁴⁶Houde 2024.

⁴⁷Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020.

⁴⁸See, for example, Bachleitner 2021; Kirke and Steele 2023; Rumelili 2020; Rosher 2022.

⁴⁹See, for example, Browning 2019; Eberle 2019; Houde 2024; Kinnvall, 2018; Mitzen 2018; Vieira 2018.

⁵⁰Tillich, 2000.

⁵¹Rumelili 2015b.

⁵²Berenskötter 2020, Gellwitzki 2022, Rumelili 2020.

⁵³Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020; Krickel-Choi 2022.

⁵⁴Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 877.

⁵⁵Krickel-Choi 2022, 877.

⁵⁶Browning et al. 2021; Kinnvall 2018, 530; Vieira 2018. It is noteworthy, however, as Gehring 2023, 420 points out, that in practice these Lacanian approaches nonetheless tend to collapse 'the subject into questions of identity and enemy construction'.

subjectivity is an ever-present source of anxiety leading to a desire for wholeness, which translates into fantasies of fulfilment through which this desire can purportedly be fulfilled; in other words, ontological security-seeking is not merely guided by anxiety avoidance but also by fantasies of fulfilment that pull subjects in certain directions in a never-ending quest to fill the lack at the centre of subjectivity.⁵⁷ However, from a Lacanian perspective, ontological security can *never* be achieved, it remains forever elusive and will never be attained as subjects' identities will never be whole and stable.⁵⁸ This re-imagining of ontological security allows Lacanians to successfully address the issues of the unitary, arguably asocial, subject and the status quo bias of Giddensian theory.⁵⁹ In turn, this approach addresses the concerns raised by some scholars that ontological security might be an inherently conservative political project advocating the maintenance of the status quo.⁶⁰ However, while Lacanian approaches effectively challenge the desirability and achievability of stable, unitary identity narratives that provide clear answers to existential questions, they still accept Giddens' assertion that the subjective experience of such stability and certainty offers a sense of ontological security in the first place. As a result, these approaches remain bound by Giddensian theory.

Most relevant for this article is another strand of literature which has drawn on the psychoanalytic theory of Melanie Klein, specifically her work on the paranoid-schizoid and depressive position, to develop a more nuanced understanding of how subjects manage anxiety. In this literature, there is a divide between the scholarship centred around the state and the scholarship centred around the individual. In the state-centric literature, John Cash argues that states' cultural repertoires allow them to resort to qualitatively different defence mechanisms associated with both the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive position when 'ontological insecurity looms'.⁶¹ Similarly, Gellwitzki and Houde apply the defence mechanisms of the paranoid-schizoid position to government narrative practices to illustrate how they help states avoid falling into ontological insecurity even in circumstances where their self-identity narratives and actions are blatantly incongruent.⁶² In other words, this literature contends that states' ontological security constitutes a spectrum of increasingly regressive defence mechanisms of the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions. Still, ontological insecurity only ever looms but never actually fully materialises. The paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions are treated as a space between security and insecurity.⁶³

In the literature on individuals, Cash suggests that individuals may actually experience ontological insecurity rather than just be threatened by it.⁶⁴ In his work on ideology in Northern Ireland, Cash discusses 'two forms of ontological

⁵⁷Bilgic and Pilcher 2023; Browning 2019; Eberle 2019.

⁵⁸Browning et al. 2021.

⁵⁹Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Eberle 2019; Vieira 2018.

⁶⁰See, for example, Rossdale 2015.

⁶¹Cash 2020, 319, 320.

⁶²Gellwitzki and Houde 2023.

⁶³Ibid.; Houde 2024.

⁶⁴Cash 2017. To be precise, Cash oscillates between formulations that suggest that individuals *are* insecure and others that they are *threatened* by insecurity.

insecurity linked to two distinct responses to the disruptive effects of the emerging, adversary-neighbour culture of recognition and negotiation that has been installed in Northern Ireland' and highlights that 'the shift away from the violence of the past has increased, rather than reduced, the ontological insecurity of its citizens'.⁶⁵ On the one hand, some individuals identify with a friend-enemy ideological formation that is associated with the paranoid-schizoid position and whose ontological security is subverted by the adversary-neighbour ideological formation associated with the depressive position.⁶⁶ On the other hand, others identify with the adversary-neighbour ideological formation and whose ontological security is at least temporarily threatened in those critical moments when 'friend-enemy ideologies may reclaim their prior predominance'.⁶⁷ Simply put, Cash suggests that two dominant ideologies are associated with two different Kleinian positions, and those who identify with one of these ideologies can be ontologically secure, but this security is or can be threatened by those identifying with the other ideological formation. Thus, Cash implies that individuals can be ontologically secure and ontologically insecure in both the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive position.⁶⁸ In contrast, Houde insists in her application of Kleinian theory to individuals whose internalised self-identity narratives are challenged that the paranoid-schizoid position allows individuals to avoid falling into ontological insecurity. She treats it, similarly to the state-centric literature, as a position between ontological security and insecurity, and thus, crucially, *before* ontological insecurity.⁶⁹

All of the literature discussed in this section critiques, extends, and complements Giddens while explicitly or implicitly retaining his conceptualisation of ontological security despite rejecting many, if not most, of Giddens' premises. The next logical step for OSS is to discuss and develop a notion of ontological (in)security that does not rely on a theorist whose work is becoming increasingly redundant in order to create a concept appropriate to the field's contemporary trajectory and to address its lingering (meta) theoretical tensions. To this end, the article develops the nascent Kleinian literature into a distinctively Kleinian approach to ontological (in)security. It develops an in-depth discussion of both Kleinian positions and contextualises them within the broader OSS literature, and recasts ontological insecurity as conterminous with the paranoid-schizoid and ontological security with the depressive position. The latter is essential to the reformulation of ontological security as a position with transformative potential yet it has only been briefly and partially discussed in the context of the OSS.⁷⁰ Moreover, while existing work has incorporated Kleinian theory into highly complex theoretical frameworks, the discussion below will remain closer to Klein to make her psychoanalytic theory more compatible with different theoretical apparatuses and applicable to a variety of empirical cases.

⁶⁵Cash 2017, 389, 388.

⁶⁶Ibid., 389.

⁶⁷Ibid., 389.

⁶⁸Ibid., 389, 407.

⁶⁹Houde 2024.

⁷⁰See Cash 2017, 406; Cash 2020, 312.

Object relational psychoanalysis

Melanie Klein is the founding figure of (British) object relational psychoanalysis. This section will briefly discuss some of the general premises of object relational theory⁷¹ to highlight how it is distinct from existing approaches to ontological security. Kleinian theory suggests that human behaviour is motivated by social relations (also referred to as object relations)⁷² rather than by the libido or other drives as suggested by Freud or Lacan. As Mitchell⁷³ puts it, relational approaches portray human subjects as ‘being shaped by and inevitably embedded within a matrix of relationships with other people, struggling both to maintain our ties to others and to differentiate ourselves from them [...] the basic unit of study is not the individual as a separate entity [...] but an interactional field within which the individual arises and struggles to make contact and to articulate himself [sic]’. Therefore, the subject is only comprehensible within the ‘tapestry of relationships, past and present’ since the subject is ‘always *in* the tapestry and the threads of the tapestry (via identifications and introjections) are always in the [subject]’.⁷⁴ Put differently, how subjects relate to themselves, others, and the world is who they *are*; if these object relations change, the subject changes. There is no pre-social self and a subject’s ideas, knowledge, preferences, ideologies, identifications, self-identity narratives, and cognition are meaningless outside of ever-evolving social relations. Object relations theory’s subject is decidedly decentred, unstable, and not rigidly attached to specific modes of being and relating.⁷⁵ This psychoanalytic conceptualisation of the subject highlights the role of the unconscious. It rejects several Giddensian principles, including the idea of rigid attachments to the status quo and specific identities as the human default disposition, as well as the notion of a pre-social self, conflation of self and identity, and the neglect of the psychological mechanisms underlying ontological security-seeking practices.⁷⁶ Whilst Giddens conceptualises the unconscious as asocial and something that matters only in critical situations, a Kleinian approach suggests that the unconscious *always* underpins social action,⁷⁷ irrespective of whether they find themselves in a position of ontological security or insecurity. This also means that anxiety can be experienced in both positions albeit their unconscious resolution will differ significantly.

For OSS scholars, an important question is how the Kleinian subject differs from the Lacanian subject. Thus, it is noteworthy that Kleinian and Lacanian theories are ‘mirror opposites in their premises about the nature of self, [...] and social relations [...] including how a self is constituted’.⁷⁸ To utilise Rustin’s⁷⁹ terminology, Lacan conceptualises a ‘negative’ model of the subject and human nature, whereas Klein posits a ‘positive’ one. The Lacanian is ‘negative’ because it is based on a lack, which results in an incompleteness that can never be resolved or repaired; the subject is

⁷¹For the sake of parsimony, I will use Kleinian and object relational theory interchangeably.

⁷²Klein 1975.

⁷³Mitchell 1988, 3, emphasis added.

⁷⁴Ibid., 3, emphasis in original.

⁷⁵Cash 2020.

⁷⁶See Cash 1996, 51–62 for a detailed discussion.

⁷⁷Cash 1996, 2017; see also Craib 1989.

⁷⁸Flax 1991, 89.

⁷⁹Rustin 2002, 226.

'fixed'.⁸⁰ The Kleinian conceptualisation of the subject, in contrast, is 'positive' as it is not constitutive by an unmendable lack that determines its entire being. The Kleinian subject, in other words, is dynamic as Kleinian theory emphasises 'the continuous nature of the production of selfhood'.⁸¹ The subject possesses both the capacity to 'do good' and act ethically and constructively as well as the capacity to become regressive, destructive, and aggressive. The subject, thus, has the capacity to transform, solve its issues or create new ones, and generally oscillates between different modes of relating. This is epitomised by the two positions it can find itself in and in which anxiety management will take vastly different forms. Before elaborating on the notion of position, however, it is important to discuss how the Kleinian conceptualisation of the subject maps onto the levels of analysis debate in OSS and IR.

There have been debates about who or what ought to be the subject of OSS as scholars have applied the concept of ontological security to individuals, groups, and states alike. This feeds into larger debates in IR about the benefits and risks of scaling up individual psychological concepts to often anthropomorphised collective entities. Object relations theory circumvents these debates. Even though Klein's own work has been on individuals, object relations theory more broadly has been applied to both individuals and groups. It thus offers yet another justification for OSS's reluctance to adhere to a singular level of analysis. Object relational psychoanalysts have demonstrated at length how individual and group are intertwined – to use Bion's formulation, humans are 'a group animal', and 'no individual, however isolated in time and space, can be regarded as outside a group'.⁸² Indeed, individuals are always members of numerous groups that are to different degrees organised and (in)voluntary. In the context of IR, relevant groups may be states, nations, ethnic groups, minorities, etc. Groups act both as *containers for individual members' anxieties* and *provider of defence systems against anxiety that manifest in social norms, cultures, institutions, and bureaucracies*.⁸³ Group leaders, for example political elites such as government officials, play a key role in connecting both roles. According to Alford, this is because of two reasons.⁸⁴ First, leaders' capacity to give anxieties 'a compelling external location' and their imagination, that is their 'ability to interpret [...] anxiety via the symbols of the culture'. Second, leaders' double function as an 'empty vessel' that group members can project themselves into and as an enviable figure of high social status that group members want to introject to be(come) like the leader.

Object relations theory is thus compatible with and offers justifications for OSS's different subjects of study as highlighted by existing Kleinian work. The first strand of scholarship looks at *individuals* and how they relate to groups. The work of Cash⁸⁵ and Houde⁸⁶ illustrates how Kleinian theory can be employed to analyse how individuals' experiences of anxiety influence and are influenced by their

⁸⁰Joffe 1999, 132. See also Flax 1991, 110.

⁸¹Burack 2004, 56.

⁸²Bion 1989, 32.

⁸³Alford, 1989.

⁸⁴Ibid., 73.

⁸⁵Cash 1989.

⁸⁶Houde 2024.

relationships with different in-groups and out-groups. The second strand of scholarship suggests that *groups*, including most notably the state as well as International Organisations and political, religious, or ethnic groups, help individuals manage anxiety. Building on this idea, Gellwitzki and Houde have utilised Kleinian theory to demonstrate that the European Union can serve as a provider of ontological security for its member states and their government officials by offering effective defence mechanisms against anxiety.⁸⁷ The third strand of scholarship explores *states'* conduct in international relations – governments are after all nothing but leaders of a particularly large group and, moreover, such groups often develop a life of their own and should be viewed as an entity in their own right.⁸⁸ Along this logic, Cash⁸⁹ as well as Gellwitzki and Houde⁹⁰ draw on Kleinian theory to develop different theoretical conceptualisations of how this manifests in state behaviour and foreign policy practice. Far from anthropomorphising the state by applying individual-level concepts to it, this constitutes an application of psychological concepts to collective entities, as has been done by psychoanalytic practitioners. In general, object relations theory's focus on the relationship between individuals, be they group leaders or regular group members, and different groups is in line with OSS scholarship that has suggested that it is the interaction and relationships between individuals and collectives that (re)produce (in)security and anxiety.⁹¹ Ontological security-seeking practices are always processes across multiple levels of analysis, and Kleinian theory is uniquely situated to analyse the politico-psychological mechanisms underlying these processes.

Unlike other psychologists who conceptualise different 'stages' of early human development, Klein contrived the concept of position to indicate that humans will regress into 'developmental' positions and employ their defence mechanisms against anxiety, also referred to as unconscious phantasies, throughout their lives. Modes of relating and defence mechanisms against anxiety do not vary in form or content between infants and adults, or 'normal' and 'pathological' individuals. Rather, the intensity of these experiences differs, as does subjects' capacity for reality testing. According to Melanie Klein,⁹² all infants initially find themselves in the paranoid-schizoid position from the moment they begin interacting with their primary object (thus the name Object Relations theory), usually their mother. For the infant, the interaction with this primary object is both gratifying and frustrating, resulting in both love and hate for it. When the primary object attends to the infants' needs, for instance by providing sustenance and attention, the infant experiences love, satisfaction, safety, and security. However, when the gratification of these needs is denied, the infant experiences hate, aggression, and destructive impulses towards the primary object combined with extreme persecutory anxiety. To defend the self from this anxiety, infants resort to the psychic defence mechanisms of *splitting*, *introjection*, and *projective identification* (details below). At the age of approximately six months, infants usually move from the paranoid-schizoid to

⁸⁷Gellwitzki and Houde 2023.

⁸⁸Alford 1989, 71.

⁸⁹Cash 2020.

⁹⁰Gellwitzki and Houde 2023.

⁹¹Kinnvall 2004; Innes, 2023.

⁹²Klein 1975.

the depressive position. In this position, infants are able to tolerate ambivalence, their affective experiences become more nuanced, and the form and content of their anxieties and the defence mechanisms against them change. Indeed, in the depressive position, infants experience anxiety relating to their own capacity to do harm to loved objects and develop a desire for reparation (details below). Importantly, the depressive position is never fully worked through as depressive anxieties ‘are always with us’; consequently, subjects oscillate between the depressive and paranoid-schizoid position throughout their lives.⁹³ It is the defence mechanisms against anxiety of the respective position that offer significant analytical value to the study of ontological security in IR.

A Kleinian approach to ontological security

This section will develop the notion of ontological (in)security as Kleinian positions and outline the theoretical and analytical value of this move. It departs from the existing Kleinian literature in OSS⁹⁴ by conceptualising ontological insecurity as conterminous with the paranoid-schizoid position and ontological security with the depressive position, rather than viewing these positions as spaces in-between ontological security and insecurity. Ontological (in)security, thus, is conceptualised as a matter of how subjects manage anxiety instead of the Giddensian logic that reduces insecurity to the question of whether subjects experience a ‘highly pathological and debilitating’ condition⁹⁵ or face the collapse of ‘time, space, continuity and identity’.⁹⁶ This is not to say that these are not forms of ontological insecurity, but rather that they represent the extreme end of the spectrum of ontological insecurity, rather than the only form it can take. In other words, while Cash⁹⁷ suggests that subjects may revert to the paranoid-schizoid position to defend themselves against (Giddensian) ontological insecurity, I contend that this regression itself constitutes ontological insecurity – a position in which the self is so insecure that it resorts to regressive defence mechanisms against anxiety to eliminate complexity, ambivalence, and uncertainty, and instead reconstructs the self, others, and the world in binary terms of good and bad. Similarly, while Cash⁹⁸ suggests that subjects may resort to the depressive position to defend against (Giddensian) ontological insecurity, I argue that this is indicative of a position of ontological security – a position in which the self is secure enough in its being to endure ambivalence and complexity, critically self-reflect, experience guilt and shame, and feel a desire for reparation. This move is important for clarifying the relationship between Kleinian positions and ontological (in)security, as well as for ensuring that the concept retains its analytical significance. The assertion that subjects are *never* ontologically insecure negates the necessity and analytical utility of the concept just as much as the Lacanian claim that they are *never* ontologically secure.

⁹³Segal 1988, 80.

⁹⁴Cash 2017, 2020; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023; Houde 2024.

⁹⁵Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 876–77.

⁹⁶Giddens cited in Cash 2020, 310.

⁹⁷See, for example, Cash 2020, 312.

⁹⁸Ibid.

More generally, there are three further reasons for this typology that address the questions raised in the introduction. Analytically, this move allows for the distinguishing between security and insecurity based on defence mechanisms against anxiety as well as providing a toolbox to study these mechanisms and their socio-political implications. Theoretically, it contends that subjects, be they individual or collective, experience the whole spectrum of ontological (in)security and that ontological insecurity is, unlike the OSS literature suggests, not debilitating but enabling action which in turn allows a reformulation of ontological security as analytically useful category. Normatively, it reframes the ontological security framework by highlighting ontological security's positive and transformative potential and acknowledging ontological insecurity as an adaptive but potentially problematic mode of relating (see below for details). Besides, this conceptualisation is an important move to dismiss criticism that ontological security might be an inherently conservative and problematic concept⁹⁹ while also shifting the analytical focus of OSS beyond crises towards ethical and reparative action, an agenda long championed by John Cash¹⁰⁰ and other Kleinian theorists¹⁰¹ outside of OSS. Additionally, the framework developed here is deliberately formulated to be applicable to all political subjects engaged in anxiety management, without being restricted to individual, group, or state levels.

The position of ontological insecurity

This section will elucidate the (paranoid-schizoid) position of ontological insecurity. Subjects find themselves in the paranoid-schizoid position when their world seems to be out of control, in crisis, or in conflict.¹⁰² Kleinian theory suggests that it is the paranoid-schizoid position that enables subjects to 'go on' and act decisively, even under the most difficult conditions and circumstances, albeit in a significantly modified manner.¹⁰³ Indeed, in the paranoid-schizoid position, subjects resort to an array of unconscious phantasies that enable them to navigate situations that they would otherwise be unable to cope with, including those relevant to the IR literature such as existential uncertainty, threats, war, ethnic conflict, and so on. The remainder of this section is organised into two parts: the first examines the defence mechanisms associated with anxiety in the paranoid-schizoid position, while the second explores how this conceptualisation of ontological insecurity addresses key issues within the literature.

Defence mechanisms against persecutory anxiety

In the paranoid-schizoid position of ontological insecurity, subjects' thinking and mode of relating is dominated by the defence mechanisms of splitting through

⁹⁹Rossdale 2015.

¹⁰⁰See, for example, Cash 1989, 1996, 1998, 2009.

¹⁰¹See, for example, Burack 2004; Chernobrov 2014; Joffe 1999.

¹⁰²Burack 2004; Cash 1996; Joffe 1999.

¹⁰³Cash 1996. In extreme circumstances, subjects may of course nonetheless fall into 'chaos', but this rarely applies to actors in political contexts who usually do not simply stop functioning altogether. See Cash 1996 for a detailed discussion.

which 'self and other are split into wholly good and thoroughly bad', and as a result '[c]omplexity disappears' since the constructed world is populated by part-objects that are either 'idealised' or 'denigrated, feared and despised'.¹⁰⁴ Object relations, so to speak, become part-object relations. Thereby, subjects' capacity to deal with ambivalence and complexity is significantly reduced, the world is entirely divided into 'goodies' and 'baddies'¹⁰⁵ and 'emotions cluster around the two poles of the hated and the loved – the other and the self'.¹⁰⁶ Affective experiences are thus intense and oscillate between two extreme poles. Put differently, good part-objects become idealised, and their positive properties are exaggerated whilst the negative characteristics are denied; at the same time, bad part-objects become vilified.¹⁰⁷ In extreme cases, splitting can also lead to the omnipotent annihilation of the bad part-object, the situation they emerge in, as well as the attendant negative feelings which then coincide with the experience of hallucinatory gratification, an exhilarated and euphoric state.¹⁰⁸

As Cash¹⁰⁹ notes, in political contexts, splitting leads to a restructuring of social relationships in the form of a friend-enemy distinction in which subjects are dehumanised as one-dimensional part-objects belonging to either an all-good ingroup or an all-bad outgroup. In cases of the former, subjects are good beyond human complexity; in cases of the latter, they are perceived as animal-like or thing-like. Members of the in-group are then experienced as 'sublime, and thus beyond criticism for so long as they do not frustrate the wishes of the subject'.¹¹⁰ In contrast, members of the outgroup are perceived as 'persecutory, and thus they become the object of sadistic aggression'.¹¹¹ Splitting self and other can also occur at the state level. Governments can, for example, construct an autobiographical narrative that splits off parts of their countries' past as a temporal other¹¹² or narrate an international institution in a way that splits the institution itself from its member states.¹¹³

In the paranoid-schizoid position, the boundaries between self and others become particularly porous and blurry as good part-objects are internalised and bad part-objects externalised. These processes are referred to as introjection and projective identification. Splitting allows the introjection, that is the 'operation of taking something in, making it part of oneself',¹¹⁴ of (idealised) good-part objects into the self as a means to defend against anxiety.¹¹⁵ Subjects subsequently build their identity around these internalised good objects.¹¹⁶ Importantly, this is not simply a form of regular identification; introjection is a 'phantastic' form of

¹⁰⁴Cash 2009, 95–96.

¹⁰⁵Joffe 1996, 205.

¹⁰⁶Cash 2017, 395.

¹⁰⁷Klein 1975, 5–11.

¹⁰⁸Ibid., 6.

¹⁰⁹Cash 1989, 1996, 2009.

¹¹⁰Cash 1996, 81.

¹¹¹Ibid.

¹¹²Bachleitner 2021; Rumelili 2018.

¹¹³Gellwitzki and Houde 2023.

¹¹⁴Craib 1989, 146.

¹¹⁵Klein 1975.

¹¹⁶Spillius 2011.

vicarious identification¹¹⁷ with other objects' or subjects' qualities and properties as if they were the subject's own. If the internalised part-object is threatened it is as if the subject itself is under attack. At the same time, the positive qualities of the good part-object are experienced as if they were pertaining to the subject. This internalisation, of course, is an unconscious phantasy, but it can nonetheless guide subjects' actions as it constitutes a form of 'security-as-becoming an idealised, desirable, and recognised subject by absorbing idealized part-object(s) into their own self-identity narrative'.¹¹⁸

Introjection usually goes hand in hand with projection, 'the psychic operation of putting something outside of oneself, into someone or something else'.¹¹⁹ The Kleinian twist to projection is the notion that it always entails identification. According to Klein, the bad parts of the self that subjects split off are projected into¹²⁰ someone or something else. The bad and hated parts of the self are thereby projected into an already thoroughly bad part-object. This 'bad other' is then perceived to 'be possessed by, controlled by, and identified with the projected parts'.¹²¹ This defence mechanism has several repercussions. It allows subjects to externalise all negative experiences, feelings, and characteristics and thereby 'purify' its own self or group. This furthers the aforementioned friend-enemy distinction that dominates social relationships in the paranoid-schizoid position.¹²² The emerging bad other, however, is not only a canvas for subjects' own 'badness', anxieties, and insecurities but experienced as utterly possessed by them. This turns the bad other into a source of threat and aggression, rendering it a (part-)object of fear.¹²³

Ontological insecurity as a position in OSS

The defence mechanisms above are relevant to the OSS literature. Whilst not an exhaustive list, they are especially pertinent to three key debates. The first concerns the relationship between anxiety and ontological insecurity. The second concerns how scholars can identify whether a subject is in a position of ontological insecurity or not. The third concerns the relationship between ontological insecurity and (in)action.

Regarding the first point, it is important to revisit recent scholarship that suggests differentiating between 'normal' and 'existential'/'neurotic' anxiety yet has struggled to offer a way to distinguish between the two other than the behavioural outcome (i.e., action or debilitation) and the temporal dimension (short-term experience or long-term condition).¹²⁴ In the former logic, prolonged conflicts, security dilemmas, or even war would not be associated with existential anxiety or ontological insecurity because subjects are able to 'go on' with their lives. In the latter logic, temporary moments of rupture that elicit extreme political reactions

¹¹⁷See, for example, Browning et al. 2021.

¹¹⁸Gellwitzki and Houde 2023, 439.

¹¹⁹Craib 1989, 146.

¹²⁰Klein insists that they are projected *into* rather than onto someone/something.

¹²¹Joffe 1996, 206, 209.

¹²²Cash 1996

¹²³Joffe 1996; Klein 1975; Moses 1988.

¹²⁴Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020; Krickel-Choi 2022.

would not be associated with existential anxiety. A Kleinian approach suggests that these attempts to differentiate between the two forms of anxiety are, in principle, correct; however, they distinguish along the wrong lines. Indeed, Klein¹²⁵ posits that ‘anxiety originates in fear of annihilation’, and since ‘struggle between the life and death instincts persist throughout life, this anxiety is never eliminated and enters as a perpetual factor into all anxiety-situations’. In OSS terms, for Klein, *anxiety is always existential*, albeit to different degrees and forms. In the paranoid-schizoid position, all anxieties are *persecutory* and threaten to annihilate the self; in the depressive position (see below for details) they are depressive and associated with a threat of annihilation of a loved object. Therefore, the experience of *existential persecutory anxiety* is synonymous with a subject being in the position of ontological insecurity which is consistent with the approaches above. The crucial difference between Kleinian paranoid-schizoid anxiety and the ‘neurotic’ anxiety described by existentialist scholars is that the former is a rather common experience whereas the latter is a ‘highly pathological and debilitating condition’ and extremely rare in political contexts.¹²⁶ To use an empirical example, rather than looking at whether the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 generated neurotic/existential or normal anxieties in Ukraine by asking whether these anxieties have been debilitating or experienced for a sustained amount of time, the Kleinian approach encourages us to explore how exactly these anxieties are being managed (in a split way or a non-split way) and with what socio-political implications.¹²⁷

Concerning the second point of differentiating between security and insecurity, Kleinian theory suggests that the difference between the positions of ontological (in)security lies in how subjects manage anxiety rather than anxieties’ behavioural outcome or their temporal dimension. Looking at discourses, it is possible to empirically trace the unconscious phantasies of splitting, the adjacent idealisation, denial, denigration, vilification, and dehumanisation, as well as introjection and projective identification.¹²⁸ If these processes are present in subjects’ discourses about themselves, others, and the world, we can talk of subjects being in a position of ontological insecurity. There are plenty of examples of this in the literature. OSS scholarship has explored how the splitting of the self and others occurs in group discourses in violent conflict¹²⁹ and can be ingrained in autobiographical state narratives.¹³⁰ Scholars have also traced governmental practices of introjection, also referred to as vicarious identification,¹³¹ and projective identification¹³² in times of crisis. Other scholarship has illustrated that, at the micro-level, individuals resort

¹²⁵Klein 1975, 29.

¹²⁶Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 876–7. Paranoid-schizoid anxiety can, of course, also become debilitating but as pointed out by Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi that is very rarely the case both for individuals and collectives.

¹²⁷These implications might, of course, also involve behavioural outcomes as unconscious phantasies underlying social action and are therefore linked rather than neatly separated.

¹²⁸Cash 2017; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023, Houde 2024.

¹²⁹Cash 2017.

¹³⁰Deacon 2023; Innes 2023.

¹³¹Browning and Haigh 2022; Browning et al. 2021.

¹³²Gellwitzki and Houde 2023.

to defence mechanisms such as denial and idealisation in their everyday lives to manage anxieties elicited by international politics.¹³³ Identifying the position of ontological insecurity through its defence mechanisms against anxiety, in other words, offers a framework to find empirical answers to a question that the field has struggled with for the last two decades.

To return to the example of Ukraine, Giddensian frameworks struggle to describe the situation comprehensively. On the one hand, Ukraine can be argued to be ontologically secure due to its firm sense of self and other. At the same time, the Ukrainian state and its population's sense of self and national identity, as entities separate from the Russian self and national identity, are threatened and denied by the Russian state, which implies ontological insecurity.¹³⁴ In the existential framework proposed by Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, the fact that anxiety is not debilitating would indicate 'normal' anxiety and, by extension, Ukraine remains ontologically secure. Yet, for the framework proposed by Krickel-Choi, the prolonged experience of anxiety would indicate its existential nature and, thus, ontological insecurity. From a Kleinian perspective, we may speak of a position of ontological insecurity based on the extreme (split) way that existential anxieties are being managed.

As for the third point about the relationship between insecurity and (in)action, Giddensian approaches to OSS have predominantly centred around the study of 'critical situations', which are radical ruptures in subjects' everyday practices. These situations engender moments of ontological insecurity during which subjects struggle to regain a sense of certainty and re-establish routines, habits, and practices that contain anxieties and enable them to 'go on' with their lives¹³⁵. This attachment to routines and practices can even lead to emotional investment in conflicts as they constitute a stable cognitive environment that provides subjects with a sense of certainty that allows them to act.¹³⁶ In this Giddensian logic, conflict can lead to a sense of ontological security by securitising subjectivities and memories which can lead to a firm and stable sense of self.¹³⁷ Desecuritisation processes, in turn, generate a sense of uncertainty, conjure anxieties, and make it difficult, if not impossible, for subjects to act due to the contingencies of their cognitive environment.¹³⁸ In other words, ontological security is equated with stability and the capacity for agency and ontological insecurity is associated with rupture, discontinuity, and the inability to act.

A Kleinian approach suggests that the key concepts of anxiety, ontological security, and action tendencies are slightly differently organised. During and after 'critical situations' or prolonged conflicts, subjects will find themselves in the paranoid-schizoid position of ontological insecurity. Subjects' capacity to act in and despite these circumstances is not a result of ontological security. Instead, it is contingent on the position of ontological insecurity in which subjects resort

¹³³Houde 2023.

¹³⁴See Poberezhna et al. 2024 for a detailed elaboration of this issue and an analysis of Ukrainian ontological security-seeking practices during the early months of the war.

¹³⁵Ejdus 2018.

¹³⁶Mitzen 2006.

¹³⁷Bachleitner 2021; Kinnvall 2004; Mälksoo 2015.

¹³⁸Rumelili 2015a.

to regressive modes of relating that re-structure social relations along a friend-enemy distinction and radically simplify social reality. In other words, subjects will resort to defence mechanisms against anxiety to re-create a stable cognitive environment even in the most extreme conditions. Maintaining or re-creating a sense of certainty, stability, and continuity amidst political crisis, upheaval, conflict, or even war is, thus, the result of and contingent on regressive modes of relating that consequently allow subjects to act. In ethnic conflict or during war, for example, it is not only the stable cognitive environment, but the dehumanisation of enemies, their splitting into bad part-objects, that enables subjects to commit acts of violence against them.¹³⁹

Subjects' action tendencies in the position of ontological insecurity are usually conservative as they are all directed by the motivational goal of survival and defence against persecutory bad part-objects. However, in exceptional situations and circumstances, extreme forms of (omnipotent) denial and (hallucinatory) gratification may allow subjects to act decisively even in the most unstable cognitive environments whilst also experiencing elevated affective states.¹⁴⁰ During the Arab Spring, for example, subjects were able to omnipotently deny the life-threatening situation they were in and instead concentrate on the exhilarating possibility of becoming otherwise in intense affective atmospheres.¹⁴¹ Having discussed the different defence mechanisms against anxiety of the paranoid-schizoid position and situating them in the OSS literature, the following section will proceed discussing the depressive position of ontological security.

The position of ontological security

Somewhat surprisingly, the notion of ontological security has received relatively little empirical attention from scholars of ontological security in IR, who are predominantly preoccupied with matters of ontological insecurity.¹⁴² This is, of course, related to IR scholars' empirical interest in conflict, crises, and critical situations that always entail ontological insecurities, or at least the risk thereof.¹⁴³ This, in turn, implies that ontological security is ultimately politically inconsequential and empirically 'uninteresting' as it is associated with stability and continuity. A Kleinian perspective very much contests this logic. Indeed, it is this position of ontological security that becomes particularly insightful as it is less regressive and can guide subjects' ontological security-seeking practices in constructive, creative, and reparative ways. Thus, rather than dismissing the possibility of ontologically secure subjects altogether as suggested by Lacanians, a Kleinian approach emphasises the positive change that can arise from a position of ontological security. In other words, paying attention to how subjects manage anxiety in a position of ontological security can significantly enhance the explanatory power and reach of OSS. Therefore, this section develops the notion of the (depressive) position of

¹³⁹Cash 1996.

¹⁴⁰See, for example, Bolton 2023; Gellwitski 2022; Solomon 2018.

¹⁴¹Solomon 2018.

¹⁴²Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 878.

¹⁴³Ejdus 2018.

ontological security and its defence mechanisms against anxiety before contextualising it in broader OSS debates.

Defence mechanisms against depressive anxiety

In the depressive position, subjects have the capacity to tolerate ambivalence, which is crucial to comprehend and appreciate the complexity of the world and manage anxiety in a non-split way.¹⁴⁴ Within this position, the subjects construct a complex world of multi-faceted ‘whole objects’ that contain both positive and negative aspects;¹⁴⁵ the same object can be experienced as both satisfying and frustrating. The affects of love and hate are no longer experienced as entirely separated because part-objects are integrated into whole objects. As a result, the affective experiences in the depressive position are much more complex and nuanced than in the paranoid-schizoid position, and subjects’ affective experiences of the world are less extreme and polarised ways.

The capacity to ‘dwell in ambivalence’ is a central aspect of the depressive position.¹⁴⁶ The integration of good and bad part-objects, however, leads to the loss of the idealised good (part-)object. Thus, in the process of integrating, feelings of ‘mourning and pining for the good object felt as lost and destroyed’ arise, as well as *guilt* stemming ‘from the sense that [the subject] has lost the good object through his own destructiveness’.¹⁴⁷ As Klein¹⁴⁸ puts it, the ‘feeling that the harm done to the loved object is caused by the subject’s aggressive impulses [is] [...] the essence of guilt’; this guilt results in the *desire* for reparation, that is the ‘urge to undo or repair this harm’. The anticipation of losing a loved object, which is existentially threatened, in turn, ‘leads to a stronger identification with the injured object’, which then further reinforces the desire for reparation.¹⁴⁹ Klein notes that in the depressive position, anxiety, guilt, and the desire for reparation or preservation are often experienced simultaneously. Anxiety is experienced because subjects feel attached to and dependent on the object which is threatened; at the same time, subjects feel guilty and responsible for the potential damage to the object. The principle affects, in other words, are ‘feelings of dependence on the object, of anxiety regarding loss of the object, and feelings of guilt and of responsibility for the object’.¹⁵⁰

In the depressive position, subjects’ reality construction is dominated by unconscious phantasies primarily directed towards the management of *depressive* anxiety. Rather than simply being about the survival of the self as is the case in the persecutory anxiety of the paranoid-schizoid position, this anxiety is about the self’s capacity to harm others; depressive anxiety is thus not only about the self but also centred around the welfare and survival of the other.¹⁵¹ When transposed into

¹⁴⁴Klein 1975.

¹⁴⁵Ibid., 35.

¹⁴⁶Cash 2016, 2020.

¹⁴⁷Segal 1988, 70.

¹⁴⁸Klein 1975, 36.

¹⁴⁹Ibid., 73.

¹⁵⁰Cash 1989, 721.

¹⁵¹Klein 1975; Segal 1988; Spillius et al. 2011.

fear, persecutory anxiety transforms into fear for the self, whereas depressive anxiety turns into fear for others.¹⁵² Thus, despite being dominated by negative feelings, the depressive position also entails the capacity for sympathy, feelings of dependence on, and responsibility and concerns for others. Crucially, whilst in the paranoid-schizoid position, love for the good part-object is dependent on this part-object's utility for the self, in the depressive position, it matures into a 'true concern for the object, that is, for the object's own sake'.¹⁵³

The primary defences against anxiety of the depressive position can be divided into a positive and a negative pole.¹⁵⁴ The formers take the form of reparation, gratitude, and ambivalence, the latter of 'manic defences'.¹⁵⁵ Regarding the more 'positive' defence mechanisms, it is important to note that they uphold ambivalence, ambiguity, and complexity. Therefore, subjects assess the world as complex and multifaceted; they do not dehumanise others or reduce them to specific identity markers or group memberships, and they can acknowledge that they themselves and others are capable of both good and bad deeds. Anxiety is thus managed in a non-split way. Moreover, subjects can manage anxiety by channelling it into a desire for reparation rather than destructive impulses. For Klein, this desire for reparation is guided by feelings of guilt and "consists of the phantasy of putting right the effects of the aggressive components" of the self¹⁵⁶ and includes the 'variety of processes by which the [subject] feels it undoes harm done in phantasy, restores, preserves and revives objects'.¹⁵⁷ 'Real' reparation, thus, involves processes of attending to the damage done to the object. This enables subjects to engage anxiety inducing situations constructively by allowing their social relationships not to be determined by the friend-enemy distinction.

Rather than engaging in a reparation process, however, subjects often resort to the position's negative pole or what Klein¹⁵⁸ refers to as 'manic defences' that act as a defence mechanism to protect subjects from anxiety over their own guilt and aggression. These negative defence mechanisms are the same as in the paranoid-schizoid position but arise in a 'modified form and to a lesser degree'.¹⁵⁹ Thus, rather than dominating subjects' entire being-in-the-world, they are directed against specific objects associated with subjects' anxiety and guilt; consequently, guilt can be projectively identified into an Other and/or utterly denied. As such, the 'relation to objects is characterized by a triad of feelings – control, triumph and contempt', which are different forms of *denial* that are 'defensive against depressive feelings of valuing the object and depending on it, and fear of loss and guilt'.¹⁶⁰ Defence mechanisms of the negative pole, thus, 'deny that the object has value'.¹⁶¹ Feelings of control deny dependence on an object; feelings of triumph

¹⁵²Hinshelwood 2021, 34.

¹⁵³Spillius et al. 2011, 87.

¹⁵⁴Cash 1989, 1996.

¹⁵⁵Klein 1975; Segal 1988.

¹⁵⁶Hinshelwood cited in Burack 2004, 39.

¹⁵⁷Klein 1975, 133.

¹⁵⁸Ibid.

¹⁵⁹Ibid., 15.

¹⁶⁰Segal 1988, 83.

¹⁶¹Cash 1989, 711.

conjure up phantasies of omnipotence and suppress feelings of valuing and caring for the object; contempt is a denial of caring about an object as an ‘object of contempt is not worthy of guilt’.¹⁶² Another negative defence against anxiety are forms of mock¹⁶³ reparation that direct “reparative” actions, including [ph]antasies and discourse, towards unrelated objects’; all these mechanisms have in common that they defend subjects against the depressive knowledge of ‘oneself as capable of harm-doing and destructiveness’.¹⁶⁴

Overall, the notion of guilt is essential to understand how subjects deal with anxiety in the depressive position. Feelings of guilt can be both conscious and unconscious, denied or acknowledged, and lead to despair or concern and hope,¹⁶⁵ but in either case it will guide subjects’ anxiety management. Guilt guides how subjects’ desire for reparation translates into concrete actions that alleviate anxiety. Moreover, if guilt is *publicly* admitted and declared, it can be expressed through the emotion of shame which in itself can be a form of reparation.¹⁶⁶ Yet even if guilt is (un)consciously denied, it guides subjects’ ontological security-seeking practices as it will be projectively identified into others who might subsequently be constructed as shameful or even fearsome and direct (mock) reparations to manage anxiety. Having discussed the depressive position’s key defence mechanisms against anxiety, the following section will situate them within broader debates in the OSS literature.

Ontological security as a position in OSS

Conceptualising ontological security as a position rather than a state of being has far-reaching implications. Subjects in a position of ontological security are just as able to ‘go on’ with their lives as subjects in a position of ontological insecurity. However, the manner in which they manage anxieties differs drastically as their modes of relating change. Thus, rather than relying on Giddensian theory that delegates the unconscious role to situations of ontological insecurity,¹⁶⁷ a Kleinian approach to ontological security suggests that unconscious phantasies always motivate and guide social action. Acknowledging this allows a Kleinian approach to effectively address three particularly noteworthy limitations of OSS. First, the question of what it means for subjects to be ontologically secure. Second, status quo bias and the question of when and how exactly anxiety’s creative potential is unlocked. Third, the (im)possibility for ethical anxiety-management within the ontological security framework.

For Giddens, an ontologically secure subject is capable of bracketing existential questions, which is essential for the capacity to ‘go on’ with their everyday life.¹⁶⁸ Some scholars have translated this into the OSS literature by reducing ontological

¹⁶²Segal 1988, 83.

¹⁶³Klein uses the term ‘manic reparations’; I prefer Burack’s term ‘mock reparation’ as it is more apt in political contexts.

¹⁶⁴Burack 2004, 40.

¹⁶⁵Spillius et al. 2011, 92.

¹⁶⁶See Ahmed 2014.

¹⁶⁷Cash 1996, 51–62.

¹⁶⁸Giddens 1991, 36.

security to the stability and security of particular identity claims and narratives.¹⁶⁹ Others have suggested that ontological security is the idea of a whole identity and fulfilled life, which is impossible to achieve yet strived towards by subjects in a continuous process of becoming.¹⁷⁰ Either way, ontological security is understood as an attempt to secure a particular state of being, a totalising principle that organises social relations, habits, routines, and practices. The result is a much-criticised conservative status quo bias, questionable ethical implications of justifying violent or othering practices as a matter of security and possibly closing down the politics of subjectivity altogether.¹⁷¹ Conceptualising ontological security as a position circumvents many of these issues. Simply put, the position of ontological security is not a particular state of being or way of becoming; it is a psychological mode of relating that denotes how subjects manage anxieties. These modes of relating underlie the social action and practices explored in the OSS literature, such as narratives, rituals, routines, and perception, as well as amicable, adversarial, and inimical relationships.¹⁷² In other words, the position a subject finds itself in influences how cognition is put into action in anxiety-inducing situations. In John Cash's words, when performing one's identity, there always co-exists 'competing and qualitatively different ways of being, thinking, feeling and relating to others'.¹⁷³ The position of ontological security is integral for progressive politics as only in situations where subjects do not feel existentially threatened are they able to endure ambivalence, uncertainty, and contingencies of the social world. In the position of ontological security, subjects are thus able to 'do good' by engaging in constructive, reparative, and progressive practices and working on themselves to become who they want to be(come) rather than securing particular modes of being and essentialising themselves and others.

Consequently, subjects in a position of ontological security are unlikely to engage in status quo-reinforcing fear-induced securitisation dynamics which are the focus of much of the literature¹⁷⁴ and instead manage anxiety more constructively and even creatively. Especially existential approaches to ontological security have increasingly recognised the creative potential of anxiety.¹⁷⁵ Creativity, in this context, simply denotes acting outside of established narratives and routines. According to Rollo May, this becomes possible by destroying 'old patterns within oneself' and thereby 'bringing something new into being'.¹⁷⁶ The question remains under what conditions anxiety becomes creative and productive and how this process is guided. The most sustained existentialist answer to this question by Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi suggests, drawing on Rollo May, that 'normal' anxiety can be either be *consciously confronted* and dealt with, enabling creativity in the process, or avoided through behavioural means whereby the former broadly

¹⁶⁹Browning and Joenniemi 2017.

¹⁷⁰Krickel-Choi 2022.

¹⁷¹Rossdale 2015, 384.

¹⁷²Burack 2004; Cash 1996; Joffe 1999.

¹⁷³Cash 2017, 405.

¹⁷⁴Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020.

¹⁷⁵Berenskötter 2020; Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Gustafsson 2021.

¹⁷⁶Rollo May cited in Gustafsson 2021, 3.

resonates with the depressive position's positive pole and the latter with its negative pole.¹⁷⁷ The crucial difference, however, is that for May this 'normal' anxiety does not involve any 'neurotic' or intrapsychic defence mechanisms, whereas for Klein these mechanisms are always involved, even when consciously confronting anxiety. This Kleinian insight allows for accounting for the directionality and form of creative action that is not simply free-floating but undergirded by psychological mechanisms. In a Kleinian sense, we may speak of creativity as a manifestation of reparation,¹⁷⁸ that is the turning of anxiety into socially productive activities that are guided by feelings of guilt and love for the object, which is only possible in the depressive position.¹⁷⁹ Anxiety management can subsequently take the form of reparative actions directed at the self and the other that change the status quo. Anxiety, then, not only becomes a creative force but can also become the source of ethical political action.¹⁸⁰ What constitutes reparation is, of course, 'embedded in socially constructed value judgements' and subject to political debates.¹⁸¹ Nonetheless, it opens the possibility of ethical, constructive, and creative anxiety management.

More generally, Kleinian theory also suggests that the acknowledgement of guilt and the expression of shame should not be understood as indicators of ontological insecurity. Indeed, only a subject secure enough to be able to manage anxiety in a non-split way can experience, acknowledge, or even express these emotions in the first place. This suggests that denial of guilt and shame should be considered expressions of ontological insecurity rather than forms of security maintenance. As the literature suggests, guilt and shame are also not necessarily debilitating but rather a driver of change and thus incite subjects to engage in transformative or even reparative action.¹⁸² Conceptualising guilt and shame as expressions of security might appear as but a small change, but there are political stakes here relating to the knowledge OSS produces and the social world it (re)constructs. Looking at the Russian invasion of Ukraine and Germany's response to it illustrates this point. Following the invasion, Russia has neither expressed shame nor did it respond to shaming. The opposite may be said about Germany. Initially reluctant to provide arms to Ukraine, it ultimately gave in to domestic and international pressure and shaming, thus recognising its initial position as incorrect and shameful. In a Giddensian framework, Russia would be described as ontologically secure (due to a stable and continuously positive self-identity narrative and the absence of shame), and Germany would be ontologically insecure (due to a changing self-identity narrative and the expression of guilt and shame). As Vulović and Ejodus¹⁸³ have noted, these descriptions can be (mis)interpreted in a way to justify and even advocate extreme nationalist political projects, such as the Russian invasion of Ukraine, as they purportedly bring about ontological security. Yet, their solution to denote

¹⁷⁷Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 886.

¹⁷⁸Spillius et al. 2011, 295.

¹⁷⁹Klein 1975, 258–9; Segal 1988, 75.

¹⁸⁰Gallagher 2009.

¹⁸¹Burack 2004, 41.

¹⁸²Hagström and Gustafsson 2015.

¹⁸³Vulović and Ejodus 2024.

ontological security as Lacanian fantasy does not negate its appeal. If anything, it suggests that the Russian nationalist and neoimperial project must never stop expanding and seeking enemies to fuel the fantasy of ontological security.¹⁸⁴ In other words, to leave behind ontological security's inherent potential for violence it is necessary to truly move beyond Giddens' conceptualisation of it.¹⁸⁵

Paraphrasing Gustafsson,¹⁸⁶ one might ask why ontological security's positive potential seemingly unfolds so rarely in international politics. Kleinian theorist Alford has suggested that it is generally difficult for groups to remain in the depressive position for a variety of reasons, notably because paranoid-schizoid defences are extremely efficient and thus appealing, reality testing is difficult at the collective level, and groups tend not to have a concrete ambivalently loved other inciting them to develop more nuanced modes of relating.¹⁸⁷ Additionally, groups, including the state, are not only a container for individuals' anxieties but also a source of anxiety because it threatens to overwhelm individuals through overstimulation and information overflow as well as to annihilate the self's individuality which somewhat paradoxically binds these individuals closer to their groups.¹⁸⁸ In other words, the existence of groups is, to some extent, dependent on their ability to keep their members sufficiently anxious so that they need the groups' defence systems. The state and other groups, then, draw their legitimacy and appeal from offering efficient (and thus often paranoid-schizoid) defence mechanisms against anxiety through norms, culture, and bureaucracy and from ensuring that these defence mechanisms are needed in the first place.¹⁸⁹ Moreover, subjects, be they individuals, groups, or states, are also affected by others' (and their groups) anxiety management in which they become objects and targets of splitting, introjection, and projection. This way, different subjects' attempts to manage anxiety may generate anxieties in others.¹⁹⁰ Notably, critical security scholars in IR have also identified this dilemma and the co-constitution of (in)security.¹⁹¹ Despite these challenges, there are empirical examples that demonstrate that groups can 'dwell in ambivalence' with far-reaching implications. Highlighting the positive potential of the depressive position, John Cash demonstrates how in Northern Ireland the gradual slide into it allowed former enemies to 'think, feel and relate differently', restructuring social relations from the previous friend-enemy distinction to an adversary-neighbour formation, and ultimately allowing the peace process to unfold.¹⁹² The

¹⁸⁴On the importance of knowledge production, especially in the case of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, see Kurylo 2023; Burlyuk and Musliu 2023; Hendl et al. 2023.

¹⁸⁵To reiterate, that does not mean that Giddens' work on how anxiety is contained and managed should be left behind as well.

¹⁸⁶Gustafsson 2021.

¹⁸⁷Alford 1989, 83–7.

¹⁸⁸Ibid., 74–6.

¹⁸⁹Routinised bureaucratic practices as described by critical security studies scholars such as Bigo and Tsoukala 2008 thus create and institutionalise not only (un)ease but also group defence systems against anxiety.

¹⁹⁰See also Kinnvall 2004.

¹⁹¹See, for example, Bigo and Tsoukala 2008; Gricius 2024.

¹⁹²Cash 2017, 404.

position of ontological security, in other words, is both reachable and desirable for peaceful coexistence, transformation, and reparative action.

Returning to the example of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, this tenet broadens OSS's analytical focus. Both Ukraine and Russia must grapple with a plethora of anxieties and uncertainties, albeit in starkly different forms. Conventional approaches may inquire how these countries and their populations *seek* ontological security or *defend* against ontological insecurity, whether during the ongoing war or in its eventual aftermath. Security-seeking implies a state of insecurity that one seeks to escape; defending against insecurity suggests a state in-between security and insecurity. In both cases, anxiety is managed in a split manner and through resorting to the defence mechanisms of the paranoid-schizoid position. The answer to how they seek ontological security or defend against ontological insecurity would be found through an analysis of narrative practices and routines aimed at re-establishing a positive sense of self and certainty, which in practice would most likely take the form of the securitisation of subjectivity and the securitisation of the collective memory of the conflict. From a Kleinian perspective, these practices of ontological insecurity are unlikely to help subjects move to a position of ontological security and instead risk institutionalising and reifying official and everyday narratives and practices of insecurity. If we were interested in ontological *security*, it would be more pertinent to interrogate which actors and processes are enabling and promoting, or constraining and subverting, the possibility for subjects to uphold and endure ambivalence, ambiguity, and uncertainty regarding the self, others, and outcomes, and to transform social relations. Put differently, rather than focusing on how subjects seek ontological security or defend against insecurity, we would need to concentrate on *ontological security-promoting practices*. These are practices by subjects in a position of ontological security who promote defence mechanisms against the anxiety of the depressive position that manage anxiety in a non-split way. For instance, we may look at those political elites, media outlets, or civil society organisations that construct the respective other once again in ambivalent terms rather than as enemies. In the case of Russia, we may want to focus on actors who articulate an ambivalent self as well as guilt, possibly shame, and promote debates about reparations (real or mock) to compensate for (some of) the inflicted harm. Indicative of ontological security, then, are not positive or consistent autobiographical narratives but rather those that acknowledge the complexity of self, others, and the world, recognise the self's limitations and flaws, and explore possibilities to address and overcome them where possible and necessary. At the micro-level, we may examine actors, processes, and practices that contribute to the transformation of social relations from what Cash has termed a friend-enemy distinction to an adversary-neighbour distinction. This shift rejects splitting and dehumanisation and will be instrumental in re-establishing peaceful co-existence among different ethnic and language groups in formerly occupied territories. The areas for research are plenty and, of course, not restricted to Ukraine or (post-)conflict societies. The point is that conceiving ontological security as a position encourages us to broaden the analytical scope of the field well beyond cases of crisis, rupture, and upheaval towards cases in which a secure self allows subjects to engage in transformative, reparative, and ethical action.

Table 1. The positions of ontological (in)security

	Position of ontological insecurity	Position of ontological security	
		Negative pole	Positive pole
Defence mechanisms against anxiety	Splitting (part-objects)	Limited ambivalence (whole objects)	Ambivalence (whole objects)
	Idealisation of good (part-objects)	Denial of guilt and responsibility	Acceptance of guilt and/or responsibility
	Dehumanisation and denigration (of bad part-objects)	'Mock' reparations	'Real' reparations
	(Omnipotent) denial	Limited splitting	
	Introjection	Limited introjection	
	Projective Identification	Limited projective identification	
Principal affects guiding modes of relating	Persecutory anxiety, fear for self, love for self and in-group, hate for other and out-group	Depressive anxiety, fear for others, triumph, contempt, control, (unconscious) guilt	Depressive anxiety, fear for others, loss/grief, (conscious) guilt, shame, empathy, dependence, love

Conclusion

This article has made the argument for a Kleinian conceptualisation of ontological (in)security as a question of anxiety management.¹⁹³ More specifically, it argued that subjects in a position of ontological insecurity will manage anxiety in a split manner. In contrast, subjects in a position of ontological security are able to endure ambivalence and manage anxiety in a non-split way (see Table 1 for an overview). To reiterate, the positions of ontological (in)security are qualitatively different modalities with particular affective configurations that help subjects manage anxieties. Anxiety, thus, is not derivative or indicative of insecurity but instead (in)security denotes how the inevitable existential anxieties of being-in-the-world are dealt with and translated into social action. This anxiety management may take the form of claims to stable identities or establishing routines and practices to create a sense of certainty and stability as explored in much of the OSS literature. However, this is by no means the only way that anxiety can be managed. Understanding ontological security as a position does not necessitate the totalisation of social relations according to a logic of security; rather, it emphasises the importance of affectivity in how subjects experience their being-in-the-world and act upon this experience.

¹⁹³This is akin to and compatible with recent existential approaches to OSS (see, e.g., Browning 2018; Rumelili 2020; Krickel-Choi 2022). The compatibility between Kleinian psychoanalysis and existential thought is perhaps best illustrated by the trained psychoanalyst Ronald Laing (1991: 39; emphasis in original), who argued that ontological security is an 'existential position', deliberately invoking a decidedly Kleinian concept.

Crucially, as the broader IR literature on (in)security has established,¹⁹⁴ it is important to reject a strict binary understanding of security/insecurity as distinct states of being. Simply put, there are many ways in which subjects can be (in)secure. A Kleinian approach advocates an understanding of (in)security as positions on continuous, dynamic, and transient spectrums of intensification. The security/insecurity binary falsely suggests that if we were only to extinguish all human insecurities, then we would logically arrive in a position of security. In practice, the opposite is the case. From a Kleinian perspective, ontological security is not the result of extinguished risk, ambivalence, or uncertainty. Instead, and somewhat counterintuitively, embracing these inevitable aspects of being-in-the-world is what allows subjects to dwell in a position of ontological security. To paraphrase Aradau,¹⁹⁵ ‘contesting, subverting, resisting, or undoing’ the position of ontological insecurity does not rely on the reproduction of but the mobilisation against its logs and phantasies. The security/insecurity binary is further destabilised by subjects’ multitude of introjections and projective identifications with individuals and collectives across different levels of analysis. These different object relations simultaneously help subjects manage anxiety, are a cause of anxiety, and elicit anxiety in others. In other words, since subjects are decentred, they are always invested in a variety of ‘intersectional and multiple selves in and across states and the international world’.¹⁹⁶ Anxiety and (in)security are thus always co-constituted through the matrix of social relations within which all subjects are situated, and that cuts across and permeates micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis. The presence of security always implies the possibility of insecurity and vice versa, with decentred subjects often coexisting in both positions simultaneously as they are always invested in numerous individuals and collectives.

Looking forward, the emerging Kleinian approach to ontological security¹⁹⁷ offers an exciting opportunity to move OSS in new directions. It furthers the research agenda of those who have championed a politico-psychological understanding of ontological security.¹⁹⁸ The focus on anxiety furthermore offers an avenue of engagement between OSS and other emerging fields in IR, most notably that of existentialism and emotion research. Additionally, it raises the possibility of empirically exploring ethical and creative ontological security-seeking practices and moving beyond OSS’s parochial preoccupation with crises and critical situations. Continuing to ‘return to the roots’ of ontological security constitutes a way to embrace the eclectic theoretical diversity of the field whose interest intersects with anxiety, not identity (narratives) or routines. Ontological security, thus, is best understood as a *position* that enables subjects to manage anxiety.

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¹⁹⁴See, for example, Aradau 2018; Bigo and Tsoukala 2008; Huysmans 1998.

¹⁹⁵Aradau 2018, 304.

¹⁹⁶Innes 2023, 657.

¹⁹⁷See Cash 2017, 2020; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023; Houde 2023.

¹⁹⁸See, for example, Chernobrov 2016; Gazit 2021; Kinnvall 2004.

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