

Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma

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This article proposes that in addition to physical security, states also seek ontological security, or security of the self. Ontological security is achieved by routinizing relationships with significant others, and actors therefore become attached to those relationships. Like its physical counterpart, the ontological security motive is a constant. But states may adhere to routines rigidly or reflexively, and variation in attachment style has implications for security-seeking. This article conceptualizes the individual-level need for ontological security, scales it up to states, and applies the ontological security-seeking assumption to the security dilemma. Realists argue that states want to escape security dilemmas but uncertainty prevents them. Ontological security-seeking suggests that states may not want to escape dilemmatic conflict. Because even dangerous routines provide ontological security, rational security-seekers could become attached to conflict. Ontological security-seeking sheds new light on seemingly irrational conflict, and suggests lines of research into the stability of other outcomes in world politics.

KEY WORDS ♦ attachment ♦ intractable conflict ♦ ontological security
♦ routines ♦ security dilemma ♦ uncertainty

The security dilemma is the heart of structural realist theory: in anarchy, actions taken for one's own security can threaten the security of others, leading to arms races, conflict and war. The fundamental cause of the security dilemma is uncertainty. As Randall Schweller (1996: 119–20) points out, a world of known greedy states generates no 'dilemma', but insecurity, while a world of known security-seekers generates no 'dilemma', but security (also Glaser, 1997: 191ff.). But states' intentions (or 'type') are hard to know and easily misperceived. Moreover, even accurate perceptions today give little information about intentions in the future, so states always must

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be on guard. Uncertainty thus generates the tragedy of world politics, where a world of security-seekers can be a world at war. Structural realists disagree on the extent to which uncertainty can be mitigated and unnecessary conflict avoided. But all assume states seek security and all recognize a causal link between uncertainty and conflict that looms in every state interaction.

An important premise of security dilemma theory is that the security states seek is physical, the protection of their territory and governance structure from others who can cause material harm. This assumption is plausible and productive — indeed, the security dilemma seems to capture something deep about anarchy — but in my view it also is limiting. Building on the work of Jef Huysmans (1998), Bill McSweeney (1999) and others (e.g. Manners, 2002), who in turn build from Anthony Giddens (1991), in this article I argue that physical security is not the only kind of security that states seek, and show how this changes our thinking about the dilemma states face and the tragedy of world politics.

Specifically, I propose that states also engage in ontological security-seeking. Like the state's need for physical security, the need for ontological security is extrapolated from the individual level. Ontological security refers to the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time — as being rather than constantly changing — in order to realize a sense of agency (Giddens, 1991; Laing, 1969: 41–2). Individuals need to feel secure in who they are, as identities or selves. Some, deep forms of uncertainty threaten this identity security. The reason is that agency requires a stable cognitive environment. Where an actor has no idea what to expect, she cannot systematically relate ends to means, and it becomes unclear how to pursue her ends. Since ends are constitutive of identity, in turn, deep uncertainty renders the actor's identity insecure. Individuals are therefore motivated to create cognitive and behavioral certainty, which they do by establishing routines.

Importantly, for theorists of ontological security individual identity is formed and sustained through relationships. Actors therefore achieve ontological security especially by routinizing their relations with significant others. Then, since continued agency requires the cognitive certainty these routines provide, actors get attached to these social relationships.

Applied to states, ontological security-seeking reveals another, second, dilemma in international politics: ontological security can conflict with physical security. Even a harmful or self-defeating relationship can provide ontological security, which means states can become attached to conflict. That is, states might actually come to prefer their ongoing, certain conflict to the unsettling condition of deep uncertainty as to the other's and one's own identity. The attachment dynamics of ontological security-seeking thus turn the security dilemma's link between uncertainty and conflict on its

head, suggesting that conflict can be caused not by uncertainty but by the certainty such relationships offer their participants.¹

Specifically, the assumption of ontological security-seeking generates insights into two important problems. First, it offers a structural explanation for the apparent irrationality of conflicts among security-seekers that persist for long periods of time — ‘intractable conflicts’ or ‘enduring rivalries’.² Realists tend to look to first and second image causes, drawing on, e.g., psychology (Jervis et al., 1985), national myths (Snyder, 1991; Snyder and Jervis, 1999) and bureaucratic politics (Van Evera, 1999). While many of these explanations are plausible and my argument does not preclude them, all focus on factors inside of states, exogenous to interaction. In contrast, I specify a source of conflict persistence that is located ‘in-between’ states, i.e. at the third image and endogenous to the logic of competition itself. Where conflict persists and comes to fulfill identity needs, breaking free can generate ontological *insecurity*, which states seek to avoid. No realist argument fully captures the identity effects of persistent conflict, because none acknowledges the social construction of state identity.

Second, the assumption of ontological security-seeking helps address the problem of ending such conflicts. The distinct research implication is that inter-state routines must be attended to in attempts to end recurrent conflict. Indeed, practices that appear epiphenomenal — truth commissions, Cold War history panels, etc. — can be seen as essential components of change because they help groups achieve reflexive routinization.

It is important to note that ontological security is a basic need, and as such a constant that cannot explain variation. In this sense it is like the desire for physical security. The purpose of positing basic needs in social science is not to explain behavioral variation, but rather to help uncover processes by which continuity is produced (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). In particular, ontological security sheds light on the stability of social relationships, cooperative or conflictual, and the difficulty of effecting change. That said, while all actors routinize, they vary in what I call their mode of attachment: some actors rigidly repeat routines, while others participate more reflexively. This variation has implications for the potential to transform dilemmatic conflicts.

I develop these ideas in three parts. While the desire for physical security might seem obvious, it may not be clear that ontological security-seeking even exists, much less has consequences for world politics. With this in mind, I first explain and defend the assumption of ontological security-seeking at the individual level. I then scale up this argument, justifying the assumption that not just individuals but also states seek ontological security. In the third part of the article I illustrate the assumption’s theoretical fruitfulness by applying it to the security dilemma. I show that assuming states seek

ontological security provides new theoretical leverage on the phenomenon of persistent conflict among security-seekers. To make the argument concrete, I refer especially to two cases, the Cold War and Israel–Palestine after Oslo, both of which can be described as security dilemmas.³ Importantly, these empirical references are not meant to test the ontological security-seeking assumption.⁴ This article is an exercise in conceptualization, and for that it is necessary to show that ontological security-seeking coheres theoretically, accounts logically for important phenomena, and fits with existing theory. Testing is obviously equally important, but is a separate endeavor that necessarily comes afterward. Without adequate conceptualization theory cannot be properly operationalized, and poor operationalization might lead us to reject concepts prematurely (Goldberg, 1963: 30).

Ontological Security

The need for ontological security is not part of the conceptual repertoire we customarily bring to IR scholarship, and as such some groundwork must be laid before exploring its implications for international politics. In this section I conceptualize the individual's need for ontological security. Several theoretical and empirical traditions capture aspects of this need, including psychoanalysis, object relations theory, anxiety/uncertainty management theory and terror management theory. Using Giddens (1991) as my reference point (cf. Butler, 1997), I have integrated their insights into a single logic.

Identity, Action and Uncertainty

Ontological security is security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice.⁵ To say that individuals need security of this self is to say that their understandings of it must be relatively stable. Needing stability does not mean that self-understandings must be forever unchanging; indeed such changes are essential for learning and personal development. The idea is rather that individuals value their sense of personal continuity because it underwrites their capacity for agency. A crucial requirement of a stable self-understanding is that one's actions can sustain it over time. The consequences of action will always either reproduce or contradict identities, and since identity motivates action its stability over time depends on it being supported in practice. Another way to say this is that identity is a dynamic process from which action flows and in turn sustains identity.

Of course, there are many ways to be agentic, including choosing rationally, matching appropriately, or varying a performative act. The

application of ontological security to these differing conceptions is at this point unclear. However, since my goal is to engage realist IR theory, which treats states as rational actors, I develop the concept of ontological security with respect to rational agency (this also is broadly consistent with Giddens' focus). Rational agents make purposive choices in consequentialist terms, weighing alternatives and directing action toward a set of internally consistent ends. In most IR scholarship this capacity is taken-for-granted. The concept of ontological security allows us to see rational agency instead as an effect of practices.

Specifically, the claim that ontological security is a basic need begins with the proposition that actors fear deep uncertainty as an identity threat. Such uncertainty can make it difficult to act, which frustrates the action–identity dynamic and makes it difficult to sustain a self-conception. Ontological *insecurity* refers to the deep, incapacitating state of not knowing which dangers to confront and which to ignore, i.e. how to get by in the world. When there is ontological insecurity, the individual's energy is consumed meeting immediate needs. She cannot relate ends systematically to means in the present, much less plan ahead. In short, she cannot realize a sense of agency. Ontological *security*, in contrast, is the condition that obtains when an individual has confident expectations, even if probabilistic, about the means–ends relationships that govern her social life. Armed with ontological security, the individual will know how to act and therefore how to be herself.

Normally, we do not consider uncertainty as posing a problem for action, much less identity. From a rationalist perspective, faced with uncertainty actors will assign probabilities and maximize their expected utility. They then update probabilities in a Bayesian fashion, i.e. by adjusting their initial beliefs about the relative plausibility of an event in light of new evidence, making optimal use of all available information available (Morrow, 1994: Ch. 6). This model has the demanding preconditions that actors must know, at least probabilistically, the alternative courses of action, the causal relationship between action and outcomes, and the consequences of possible outcomes (March, 1999: 14–15; Morrow, 1994). Most rationalist theory assumes that this knowledge is either relatively easy to come by or that actors can compensate for its absence rather unproblematically. Decision-makers might have different understandings of causal relationships or states of the world, which means they could have different probability distributions over likely outcomes (for example, reasonable people in the US disagree about the threat posed by China). But despite subjective differences the theory assumes that actors always have sufficient knowledge to assign probabilities and act rationally.

However, this assumes that the actor has confidence in the fundamental cognitive stability of her environment, and such confidence is not automatic.

Everyday life is so full of potential dangers that individuals cannot possibly process them all. Threats are both physical — your neighbor might attack, a tornado might strike — and social — you might be fired, your spouse might leave you. Moreover, novel or infrequent events are simply impossible to know in advance. Some theorists call these latter cases, situations where assigning probabilities is impossible, ‘hard’ or ‘fundamental’ uncertainty (Knight, 1971(1921); Ellsberg, 1961).⁶ Hard uncertainty reduces — objectively — the confidence actors can have in probability assignments. Pulling these points together, Giddens (1991: 36) argues that all social actors intrinsically know that behind the routines of daily life, ‘chaos lurks’. Constant awareness of such chaos would generate tremendous anxiety, making it extremely difficult to reconcile competing threats and take any action at all. Even if an actor could imagine every possible contingency, the attempt to hold all threats at bay would be exhausting. Knowing she cannot possibly imagine the universe of contingencies only compounds the anxiety, paralyzing any remaining capacity to act.

In order to be themselves and to act, therefore, individuals need to bring uncertainty within tolerable limits, to feel confident that their environment will be predictably reproduced. Importantly, this confidence is independent of the objective level of uncertainty, which might remain high. It is an internal, subjective property.

Routines and Basic Trust

Ontological security-seeking is the drive to minimize hard uncertainty by imposing cognitive order on the environment. Actors do this by developing a cognitive ‘cocoon’ that ‘bracket(s) on the level of practice [knowledge of the] possible events which could threaten the bodily or psychological integrity of the agent’ (Giddens, 1991: 39, 40). Because this cocoon enables actors to trust that their cognitive world will be reproduced, following Giddens I call it an actor’s *basic trust system*.⁷ Because actors cannot respond to all dangers at once, the capacity for agency depends on this system, which takes most questions off the table. Importantly, this happens outside the level of conscious choice. On a day-to-day basis identity is not ‘held in mind’; actors concentrate on the ‘task at hand’ and the need to stabilize one’s ends is cognitively set aside (Giddens, 1991: 36). That is, self-integration is maintained at the level of ‘practical’ consciousness while purposive choice occurs at the level of ‘discursive’ consciousness.

The mechanism generating basic trust is routinization, which regularizes social life, making it, and the self, knowable. Routines are internally programmed cognitive and behavioral responses to information or stimuli. Some are strictly personal,⁸ but social relationships are an important source

of routinization. Whether personal or social, by definition routinized responses are unthinking or habitual — options are not weighed; information is not updated. Unlike rational action, in short, which implies a conscious decision to do A but not B, routines are not *chosen* in any meaningful sense, but taken-for-granted; reflection is suppressed (March, 1999: Ch. 5). In fact, this suppression is the source of their security-generating power. By giving actors automatic responses to stimuli, routines pacify the cognitive environment, bounding the arena of deliberative choice. Routines thus serve the cognitive function of providing individuals with ways of knowing the world and how to act, giving them a felt certainty that enables purposive choice. They also serve the important emotional function of ‘inoculating’ individuals against the paralytic, deep fear of chaos.

Attachment and Recognition

Because routines sustain identity, actors become attached to them. Individuals like to feel they have agency and become attached to practices that make them feel agentic. Letting go of routines would amount to sacrificing that sense of agency, which is hard to do.

Importantly, attachment can develop to dangerous as well as safe routines — ontological security is perfectly compatible with physical insecurity. Think of the battered wife who resists efforts by social workers to make her leave her husband. One possible explanation for her reluctance is that powerful ontological forces induce her to stay. The identity of ‘wife’ means that at least she knows who she is and how to be herself through the couple’s routines. To break from those would cause great anxiety. Because routinized social relations stabilize our identities, individuals become attached to the self-conceptions their routines support, regardless of their content.

Equally important, routines depend on others responding predictably, which of course individuals cannot always control. Powerful external actors and hostile environments help determine how an individual’s intentional actions are received. This suggests that the self-conceptions that motivate intentional action cannot always be reinforced. When this happens, an individual may well develop a basic trust system that supports a less desired self. In other words, ontological security is compatible with achieving ‘second best’ identities, or compromising one’s goals. Think of the aspiring actor who waits tables. He may see himself as an actor, and take classes, audition and talk constantly about theater. But until he gets the breakthrough role, in an important sense he cannot ‘be’ an actor. There is simply no way for us to know him as such; to society he is a waiter. Moreover, if his acting attempts are poorly received, over time he may become attached to

the waiter identity, because that is the identity his daily routines actually sustain. He did not intend to be a waiter, but once ontological security needs are met through the relationships that sustain it, it becomes difficult to let go. Ten years on that breakthrough role looks less essential, and the effort of continually trying out for roles hardly seems justified. The old self-understanding, the aspiring actor, withers away or becomes mere fantasy.

The need for ontological security is so deep, and our attachment to routines so profound, that we rarely see ontological insecurity in daily life. At the individual level it only emerges when we cannot help it, when our cognitive-affective organization of the environment is ruptured, as in cases of trauma. A rape victim might ask herself how this could happen to me — which becomes who am I, what kind of person am I that this could happen? A survivor of 9/11 might ask why he survived and not his partner, which becomes who am I without her? In such cases, questioning and insecurity can be associated with an almost catatonic state or, conversely, an acting out, both of which indicate an inability to ‘go on’ or ‘be’ one’s normal self. Returning to routines is therefore a crucial step toward recovery. Of course, trauma is by definition exceptional and most of the time we do not obsess over potential identity threats. But that is precisely the point — our routines keep ontological fears out of discursive consciousness. By exposing ontological insecurity, trauma is the exception that proves the rule of how deeply individuals rely on routines.

In one sense, society solves its members’ ontological security problem for them, since society is a shared cognitive ordering of the environment (Giddens, 1991). When trauma happens, the individual’s fall is cushioned by the social order, which reproduces a general ontological security until she can pick herself up again. But society is no more than the social practices its members engage in, which means that its continuation depends on the constant reproduction of those practices. Individual-level routines thus constitute society, which in turn stabilizes each individual’s sense of self.

Empirical Support

Empirical research in various areas of social psychology confirms that uncertainty generates identity insecurity, which is resolved through routines. The basic insight of anxiety/uncertainty management theory (AUM) for example, supported by experimental work, is that uncertainty is both a cognitive and affective problem (Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Gudykunst and Nishida, 2001). Humans need to ‘make sense of their world’, and when there is insufficient information or meanings are unsettled, individuals suffer

anxiety. The first response to uncertainty is thus not necessarily ‘information search’, but to reduce psychological stress.

Another line of support comes from Harold Garfinkel’s (1967) ethno-methodological work on ‘breaches’ of the social order. Garfinkel placed graduate students in a variety of situations — a subway morning commute, a family dinner — and instructed them to violate social conventions. He found that ‘(w)hen “normal” expectations are not met . . . reactions are anomic and demonstrate confusion’. People first try to normalize discrepancies and preserve predictability, by ignoring or trying to change the disruption; but if they cannot they experience increasing negative affect, and social interaction comes to a halt (1967: 236).

Terror management theory (TMT) provides a third convergent set of findings (Solomon et al., 1991). TMT breaks down the security motive into two components, fear of physical harm and fear of mortality, where the latter is understood as the fear of not being, which is as much an identity loss as a physical one. TMT argues that humans use society to buffer the anxiety associated with awareness of mortality. Because society is non-corporeal, it survives personal death; therefore attachment to the symbols and practices that constitute a social order defends us psychologically against mortality. TMT experiments have found that when mortality is made salient, individuals become more attached to group identity, and exhibit increases in stereotypic thinking and nationalistic bias (Nelson et al., 1997; Schimel et al., 1999). Importantly, these empirical findings specifically distinguish between fear of physical harm and fear of death; only the latter taps into identity needs (Arndt et al., 2001).

Finally, the empirical work particularly of TMT can be seen as supporting a developmental story, rooted in psychoanalysis and self-psychology, which stresses the centrality of interpersonal relations for the development of the self.⁹ That story begins by noting that the infant at first does not even know herself as distinct from the surrounding world, experiencing others instead as extensions of the self. Over time, however, others show themselves to be not part of the self, which causes disappointment or trauma and forces the infant to differentiate from them. A primary way the infant copes with this differentiation is by routinizing relations with significant others. She becomes attached to these relations because they enable feelings of autonomy without trauma.

Taken together, these diverse streams of scholarship support the claim that individuals fear uncertainty as an identity threat and suppress that fear through routines to which they become attached. Attachment to routines and the social order they implicate is thus connected to, indeed a precondition for, identity and therefore the capacity for rational action.

Varieties of Basic Trust

All individuals are attached to their routines, but not all basic trust systems are equally functional. Broadly speaking there are two modes of attachment, flexible and rigid, which give rise to differing capacities for agency.¹⁰

With healthy basic trust the individual's attitude toward routines is reflexive, in the sense that she can take a critical distance toward them (Willmott, 1986: 113–14). When uncertainty arises, the individual compensates through various decision rules; when needs go unmet or routines are disrupted, these lacks are perceived as temporary. Disruption certainly generates uncertainty, potentially tapping into the domain of ontological insecurity. But an actor with healthy basic trust can tolerate the uncertainty of small disruptions because she trusts routines will be re-established, or that the need eventually will be met through new routines. In other words, the individual does not treat routines as ends in themselves or consciously direct her action toward maintaining them. Instead she takes for granted — trusts — the stability of the environment as she pursues other goals.

This enables her to do two things. First, she can learn. James Rosenau (1986) points out that learning itself is a habituated response. My argument is that insofar as this habit (learning) requires a capacity to accept some uncertainty, it rests on healthy basic trust. If, for example, a friend breaks a promise, or a rival acts generously, actors with healthy basic trust can respond to the new information flexibly, even if it means restructuring the relationship. Healthy basic trust is thus necessary for Bayesian updating. Second, the actor with healthy basic trust can more readily go beyond physical security-seeking and pursue 'higher' needs such as sociation, development and self-esteem.¹¹ This is why Giddens (1991: 38) says that hope, courage and the capacity for creativity all derive from how an actor's ontological security is organized.

In contrast, the individual with rigid or maladaptive basic trust is unable to maintain distance from her routines. She treats routines as ends in themselves rather than as a means toward realizing her goals. When an individual becomes too heavily invested in routines as such rather than the self-conception they protect, then even temporary disruptions feel highly threatening and the response is to cling to routines. This is true even if the routines reproduce physical threat (Willmott, 1986: 118). The problem is that the actor identifies with routines to such an extent that disruption threatens the cognitive-affective boundaries of the self; and she knows extreme uncertainty lurks just beyond those boundaries. Compounding the problem, the more aware the actor is of her need for the routines, the more anxiety she feels, and the more compulsively she clings to routines.

When basic trust systems are dysfunctional in this way, action still is

possible, but it is internally constrained. This actor cannot respond flexibly to dissonant information; indeed, dissonant information causes anxiety and a retreat into routines. Cognitive distance is necessary for both the deliberation we associate with rational choice and the processing of new information we associate with learning. Rigid basic trust inhibits these. Rigid basic trust, in short, can drive decision-makers to act in irrational ways, i.e. to display what Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow and Janice Stein (1985) call motivated bias.

Of course, by definition, learning and human development require disrupting routines, and disruption always generates some anxiety (Johnson, 1990: 111). But importantly, disruption alone does not make one ontologically insecure. Only if routines are rigidly held does disruption open up the person to deep insecurity. With healthy ontological security, actors can ‘encounter all the hazards of life from a centrally firm sense of their own and other people’s reality and identity’ (Willmott, 1986: 113). In short, basic trust systems condition our ability to tolerate change. If we want to understand why some individuals seem invested in dysfunctional relationships while others are able to grow out of them, one place to look is the individual’s mode of attachment to routines.

States and Ontological Security

Thus far I have argued that human beings need ontological security and achieve it through cognitive and behavioral routinization. But states are not human beings and their behavior might be subject to different logics. To make the concept of ontological security relevant to world politics, therefore, the argument that states seek ontological security requires justification. I offer three defenses.

First, IR scholars routinely assume that states seek physical security, which upon close inspection is no less problematic than ontological security. Physical security-seeking assumes that states have something like ‘bodies’ that can die. What exactly is the state’s body? Territory? True, like the body, the state’s territory gives it a spatial boundary; but certain body parts are essential to human functioning — brain, heart, etc. — whereas it is not obvious that any particular piece of the state is similarly essential. Another possibility is that the state’s body is the aggregate of its individual members’ bodies. But then we could ask what percentage of the population must die in order to conclude that the state is dead — $\frac{1}{2}$? $\frac{3}{5}$? What about a case like East Germany, which died even though not a single member died? East Germany simply lost sovereignty. Is sovereignty the state’s body, then? Perhaps, but that is hardly a physical criterion. Of course, my point is not to challenge the assumption that states seek physical security, but to point out

that it raises many questions — as many, in my view, as the assumption that states seek ontological security. Thus, the real issue here is not physical versus ontological security, but state personhood more generally. Any theorist who wants to attribute anthropomorphic qualities to states must grapple with that (Wendt, 2004). In my view, the ‘state as person’ has heuristic value insofar as it indexes real aspects of the ways in which states operate in world politics. As such, assuming ontological and physical security-seeking alike can be theoretically productive.

The fact that everyone else treats states as people, however, does not in itself justify my doing so. Thus, a second rationale for assuming that states seek ontological security points to the ontological security needs of their members. I have argued that society must be cognitively stable in order to secure the identities of individuals, and as such individuals will become attached to these stable group identities. A key part of society is its identity and distinctiveness vis-a-vis other societies (e.g. Brewer, 1999; Mercer, 1995). One important way that groups maintain distinctiveness is by routinizing their relationships to other groups. Such inter-societal (in our case inter-state) routines help maintain identity coherence for each group, which in turn provides individuals with a measure of ontological security. From here it is only a short step to argue that the states themselves act at least ‘as if’ they are ontological security-seekers. Because losing a sense of state distinctiveness would threaten the ontological security of its members, states can be seen as motivated to preserve the national group identity and not simply the national ‘body’. Grounding group needs for ontological security in individual needs in this way suggests that state institutions are not just an aggregate of leaders’ decisions, and also that states project self-images to which their members will be attached in complicated ways.¹²

A final reason to assume that states seek ontological security is that this micro-foundational assumption helps us explain certain macro-level patterns, organizing anomalies in current theory into an overarching analytical framework. Consider, for example, Jervis’ argument (1976; Jervis et al., 1985) that misperceptions and motivated biases frequently impede rational state action, or Deborah Larson’s (1997) argument that cognitive biases and errors led US and Soviet leaders repeatedly to misperceive one another’s actions and miss opportunities for cooperation, even when preferences overlapped. John Foster Dulles, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan had very different personalities and were separated by generations, and yet, as Larson points out, they reacted to Soviet actions in similarly distrustful, irrational ways. Although Jervis and Larson are both talking about individuals and not states, the fact that such impediments to rationality persist across decision-makers and give rise to a consistent macro-level outcome — distrustful state behavior — suggests that something about

the nature of states as corporate actors could be reproducing that mistrust. Assuming that states seek ontological security provides a sociological basis for understanding why we might see different decision-makers acting similarly over time.

Similarly, consider the fact that most states follow international law most of the time, and that they do so unreflexively or routinely, irrespective of regime type, leader personality, or position in the balance of power. Assuming that states seek ontological security helps explain this macro-level pattern, despite micro-level variation.

Critical theorists and methodological individualists alike might still problematize attributing needs to collectives, even on the ‘as if’ basis I am proposing. However, in my view, taken together, the above arguments show that assuming that states seek ontological security is at least as plausible as other anthropomorphic assumptions made in IR theory. Of course, like any assumption, positing that states need ontological security is only as useful as the knowledge it produces. So let me turn to how this assumption might inform our thinking about world politics.

The Dilemma of Ontological Security

As a fundamental need, ontological security operates in all social contexts, cooperative or conflictual. Here I explore its implications in just one context: the security dilemma.

As we have seen, the core problem animating realist theorizing about the security dilemma is uncertainty. Because states cannot know one another’s present and especially future intentions with certainty, security-seekers can be forced to take measures that threaten other states’ security, and thus lead to war. The crucial variable here is a state’s motive structure or type.¹³ Realists assume that the system is populated by states of two potential types, states with satiable security needs — variously called ‘security-seekers’, ‘status quo’ or ‘conditionally aggressive’ states — and states with insatiable security needs — ‘greedy states’, ‘revisionists’ or ‘aggressors’. Without the possibility that some states want more than security, a state’s own quest for security could not be dilemmatic. These type classifications are not without problems¹⁴ and actually existing states rarely can be identified as purely either type. But the parsimonious assumption is made to facilitate theory-building, and it does seem to capture some real-world dynamics. For example, take the later Cold War, or the Israeli–Palestinian conflict after Oslo, where it can be argued that each side mainly wanted reassurance that the other would not invade or destroy it; both were willing to fight but neither intrinsically valued aggression. These parties saw themselves as only ‘conditionally aggressive’ (Christensen, 2002), and as such knowing the

other's motives with confidence would have mitigated their security dilemma. Yet despite constant interaction over many years, they were unable to learn one another's type.

Security dilemma theory tells us that in an anarchic context, successfully communicating intentions is difficult, since efforts at self-protection often threaten others. But for many realists, the problem of communicating intentions can in principle be overcome. The process tends to be understood as one of Bayesian learning, where one state sends a costly signal of its type, the other interprets and updates, then responds with costly signals of its own, and so on (Glaser, 1994/5; Kydd, 1997). Such learning is not easy, quick or inevitable. But among security-seekers who expect continued interaction, communicating type is possible (cf. Roe, 2000: 389).

However, in many instances, parties who might think of themselves as security-seekers seem to act as if they want conflict: rejecting overtures, missing opportunities, exploiting the other, and so on. From a realist perspective, such persistent competitive behavior is pathological not rational, and realists tend to locate the pathologies at the first or second images, inside individual states. I propose instead that one cause of such dysfunctional behaviors is 'in between' states, in the inter-state routines that satisfy each state's need for ontological security. Ontological security tells us that rational agency relies on a platform of routines, which suppresses uncertainty and make the world knowable. Because routines that perpetuate physical insecurity can provide ontological security, states can become attached to physically dangerous relationships and be unable, or unwilling, to learn their way out.

Understanding attachment to dilemmatic conflict requires two steps. The first is to show that state identities or types are constituted and sustained by social relationships rather than being intrinsic properties of the states themselves. Socializing type is important for my argument because if types did not depend on social relationships, then states could not become attached to those relationships and ontological security would not give purchase on the security dilemma. I show that as realists themselves use the term, type is a role identity, which means that in trying to secure their types states will secure the relationships that make those roles meaningful. The second step is an internalization story, where I unpack how interaction over time transforms state identity and generates attachment. Even realists who acknowledge that repeated interaction can reinforce conflict among security-seekers do not fully develop the identity aspects of this process, namely that states become attached to their conflict because its routines sustain identity. Once this happens, transforming dilemmatic conflict will be harder than even realists recognize.

Socializing Type

Realists assume that type is self-organized — in game-theoretic terms ‘given by Nature’ — rather than constituted by relationships. This means that a state’s type does not depend on other states but is internally generated and upheld. Type identity, which is subjective, does not require a system of shared meanings among states to sustain it. In this sense, realists treat type like other intrinsic aspects of the state such as whether it is mountainous or has representative institutions. No realists call into question this basic atomism. For example, Snyder and Jervis (1999) argue that group identity can include perceptions of the other and that salient negative perceptions intensify security dilemmas. But here, (mis)perceptions are subjectively held states, wholly independent of interaction with, much less recognition by, the other. Assuming that type is self-organized has two implications.

First, type identity has no associated behavioral requirement, which means nothing about a state’s identity is at stake in interaction.¹⁵ Interaction is driven by physical security needs, and is not linked to identity. Realists usually express this as a caution: behavior is not a reliable indicator of intentions so states must be cautious. But it is also a conceptual point. Many different behaviors can be consistent with a single type, and there are few clear separating behaviors between types. In Jervis’ (2001: 37–8) words, ‘the same hostile actions can flow from the hope for gain or the fear of loss, from offensive drives or defensive responses’. A security-seeker might take aggressive actions, while a greedy state might lie low and even appease its neighbors. This ambiguity is what makes the search for security tragic, making states prone to behaviors that reinforce the tendency toward conflict (Jervis, 1976: Ch. 3).

The second implication of atomism is that states know their own types with certainty, even if they cannot act on them in the way they would like. For realists type is an *aspiration*, a cognitive conception of what the state would like to be if conditions were right, in short, a ‘possible self’ (Cinnirella, 1998; Markus and Nurius, 1986). These aspirations are important because they set an actor’s goals and make possible certain futures that otherwise would not be attainable. As internally held aspirations, possible selves are known to the actor, even if they often must be suppressed in daily behavior and may never be realized in practice. Thus, for realists, to be a security-seeker means that *if* conditions are right, the state would not invade or otherwise threaten others’ core values. Indeed, if conditions are right it would be able to reveal its true identity. But conditions might not be right, and then the state might have to act *as if* it is aggressive, even though it really wants nothing more than security.

While I agree that type is distinct from behavior, I think realists take this too far. My intuition is the following. If a state feels compelled by the logic of the security dilemma continually to defect from cooperation even while defining itself as a security-seeker, then in what sense is the state actually 'seeking' security? If others cannot relate to the state as one that holds benign intentions, then for all intents and purposes, within the system states share, the state 'is' the type of state others are interacting with.

For example, in the later Cold War the US and USSR both might have seen themselves as security-seekers. On this view, the US would have liked to act as a security-seeker, but was not certain whether the Soviet Union was greedy. Given such uncertainty, the US could not afford to express its true identity and was forced repeatedly to take actions that could be seen as aggressive (and indeed were aggressive). On this realist account, the US conception of itself, not the character of its interactions, defined its type. And since the Soviet Union could not relate to the US as a security-seeker, the two states found themselves in arms races, disputes over missiles in Cuba, and proxy wars in Afghanistan and elsewhere. In Jervis' words, 'US efforts to exploit opportunities that arose were indistinguishable in their effect from expansionism' (2001: 53). Similarly, in the Oslo process Israel and the Palestinians both saw themselves as security-seekers. Both would have liked to act on that identity, but neither was sure that the other was satiable. Thus the actions of both were indistinguishable from actions of greedy states, with Israel exploiting loopholes in the agreement to build settlements and the Palestinians insufficiently curbing terrorism. In Emanuel Adler's (2005) evocative image, their sense of themselves as security-seekers remained in a 'bubble' closed off from interaction. This is not to say the actors in either example were greedy, but to suggest the limits of a purely subjective account.

These limits raise two questions. First, how do we know a type when we see it? On one hand, states (and social scientists) face a revealed preference problem if they infer type directly from behavior. If a state's behavior simply revealed its preferences the theory would be tautological. Good states can do bad things. But on the other hand severing type from behavior altogether is equally problematic. If a good state keeps doing bad things, at what point can we say it just isn't good anymore?

This widely recognized epistemic difficulty is rooted in an underappreciated ontological one: What *is* a type? In fact, on a closer look the assumption that type is wholly self-organized is difficult to sustain.¹⁶ While the basic need to survive might be self-organized, successfully meeting that need in a given social system requires defining the need as a goal in terms of the meanings and practices of that system. An island society unaware of other human life on earth, for example, would not need to define itself as

security-seeker relative to an other, since no other beyond itself would exist. Its survival would be wholly self-organized, reproduced through internal processes. Contemporary states, on the other hand, can only survive as members of the states system; as such their survival motive is intrinsically relational and can only be expressed as a positioning of the self vis-a-vis other states. Greedy states covet things from others, like territory; status quo states do not. In other words, the translation from a basic need into a motive structure, much less to specific preferences that can guide action, is an intrinsically socializing move (Wendt, 1999: Ch. 4).

This suggests that as realists use the term, type is actually a role identity, not an intrinsic one.¹⁷ Like intrinsic identities, role identities are subjective; they are in the actor's mind and motivate behavior. But unlike intrinsic identities, role identities get their meaning from role positions in the social order and therefore are not understandable in terms of qualities individuals have alone. Roles locate and define the individual with respect to a social context; they are clusters of practices that constitute actors as objects of social experience (the 'Me'). For example, Paul Schroeder (1984) highlights the role of 'intermediary states' in inhibiting great power war in 19th-century Europe's balance of power. Role *identities*, in turn, are internalized roles, aspects of an actor's sense of self that reflect the appropriation of roles and motivate behavior (the 'I'). Lisbeth Aggestam (2004) explores how role identities such as leader and civilized power guided foreign policy preferences of British, French and German leaders in the 1990s. In my view, the aspect of state identity that drives realist security dilemma logic must be a role identity because it refers to the state's internalized attitude toward others in anarchy, and anarchy is a social environment. Role identities are formed and sustained relationally; they depend on others to be realized.

Specifically, the fact that type is a role identity has two implications. First, types are intersubjective at the level of knowledge. States do not have the final say in whether they are security-seekers; other states play a crucial role. There are parameters to the practices that can constitute security-seeking, which are defined at the system level not by the state itself. To be sure, state behavior can be ambiguous and particular actions are open to interpretive dispute (e.g. arms racing). But the ambiguity is not infinite — Hitler may have called Germany a security-seeker but other states (and we) know Nazi Germany was not. While realists might agree that states themselves do not have the final say in whether a given situation is a security dilemma, the realist point is an epistemic one: states might lie about their intentions, so only detached observers with access to memoirs and classified documents can make a determination (e.g. Jervis, 2001; Butterfield, 1952). Here, security-seeking motives are intrinsic properties of states, and the question is how to access that knowledge. In contrast, my point is ontological. Security-

seeking is not a property of the state, like being mountainous or having representative institutions, but a property of the shared social order. Thus, the detached observer must access not only memoirs but the contemporary shared understandings of behaviors other states acknowledge as security-seeking versus greedy. This point is not recognized in extant realist theory.

The second implication is that type is intersubjective at the level of practice, meaning that type identities must be in some sense shared to sustain interaction over time. Whatever a state's private aspirations, the social meaning of its type depends on whether other states represent that state in a similar way. Intrinsic identities can be maintained alone. But no state can be a security-seeker for very long without others recognizing it as such. In interaction, others infer from behavior to the role it constitutes and treat the actor as if she fulfills that role. Thus, for a role to constitute an actor and motivate behavior over time, it must be expressed in behavior *and* that behavior must be recognized by others as fulfilling the role. Note that this argument is constitutive (Wendt, 1999: 77–88), resting on the notion of identity as a social relationship. A state cannot 'be' or sustain its type without its strategic partner acting in a certain way (recognizing it). The other's recognition is a condition of possibility for the self to retain its type.

Some realists might recognize aspects of this point in Jervis' argument (1976: 75ff.) that treating a state as if it is greedy can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, transforming that state's preferences over time. Jervis' argument does have similarities to the internalization story I tell below. But the self-fulfilling prophecy argument is strictly causal: state A affects state B's preferences over time. My argument that type is a role identity highlights that interaction does not only affect others, it also constitutes the self. Both parties' identities are constituted by the relationship. Jervis' argument thus overlooks how both states might depend on their relationship to maintain who they are.

Returning to the Cold War example, realists might interpret its end as a process of type revelation, a series of interactions in which the two states were able to overcome mutual mistrust and progressively reveal their true, security-seeking nature (Kydd, 2000; Larson, 1997). Indeed, in the mid-1980s, the Soviet Union did try to communicate a status quo type through glasnost and costly behavioral signals such as the INF Treaty and withdrawal from Afghanistan. But the US did not need to recognize these efforts as a sign of security-seeking, and indeed at first it saw them as tactics or tricks. Had that interpretation prevailed, Soviet troop withdrawals would not have become a step in a process of type revelation and the conflict would have persisted. What the revelation story overlooks is that US recognition of Soviet actions as a security-seeker is what ultimately constituted the Soviet

Union as a security-seeking state. Neither private aspiration nor public behavior was enough; social recognition was necessary as well.

In sum, the realist variable of type is a role identity; and because role identities depend on the social structure states share, they require recognition. If types only exist as private aspirations they will be socially unstable and hard to sustain. Role identities that remain in a bubble severed from practice are fantasy identities. The potent insight of security dilemma theory, that interaction has dynamics of its own that can compromise physical security, is certainly still true; but these interaction dynamics have unexplored identity effects with implications for the search for security.

Attachment and Recognition in Anarchy

Ideally, internally held role identities and externally recognized roles correspond, but as security dilemmas persist, by definition they will not. Each state sees itself privately in the role identity of a security-seeker, but each is recognized publicly in the role of a potential aggressor. From an ontological security standpoint this mismatch between subjective identity and recognized role is unstable. My argument is that as interaction persists, this mismatch resolves itself in favor of the latter: states get invested in socially recognized identities. That is, recognized roles feed back on role identities at the level of routines, creating a new role, of competitor or rival. The competitor is not a security-seeker, i.e. it is not conditionally aggressive but aggressive all the time. But nor is the competitor greedy or revisionist, i.e. it does not pursue any specific object vis-a-vis other states. Competitive states are simply motivated to compete, whatever the object, and always ready to fight.

To understand how security-seekers become competitors, consider how security dilemmas unfold, which many realists analyze as a Prisoner's Dilemma (see Jervis, 1976; Glaser, 1994/5; cf. Kydd, 1997). The logic begins with two states, each of which sees itself as a security-seeker but is uncertain about the other's type and as such feels compelled to defect. Now, with every subsequent round of interaction, the states gain knowledge. If both continue to defect, then of course they do not gain knowledge about one another's true type. They do, however, gain knowledge about the partner's behavior. With this practical knowledge, each state can more easily make inferences about its partner's future actions, if not its intentions.

After many rounds of this, while these states may be no closer to knowing one another's true types, on a social level many things have been resolved. States have acquired a crucial, behavioral kind of certainty. They 'know' whom they face in the sense of knowing how the other will respond to their actions, which means they know how to act. By repeatedly defecting, each

state knows it will not get suckered. In short, these states have overcome type uncertainty by imposing the behavioral certainty of competitive routines. Even if conflict and war cannot be prevented, they at least can be foreseen, which means the states have some control over situations and can plan. These states may fear and mistrust one another, but the fear is not paralytic. It is focused on the other and linked to particular cognitive and behavioral responses, thus giving these states a degree of cognitive mastery over a complex, hostile environment. While it is hard to say the states are actively seeking security, since neither is acting like a security-seeker would in a world where types were known, this *ersatz* security-seeking behavior is mutually recognized. It continues without disruption, neither calling the other's bluff. In other words, both states begin as security-seekers, but uncertainty causes each to act as if the other is hostile, which, in turn, prompts the other to respond accordingly.¹⁸

Thus far my account parallels Jervis' (1976: 64ff.) argument that states tend to resolve their initial uncertainty with worst-case thinking and then get trapped into conflicts. Even more consonant is Badredine Arfi's argument (1998: 159, 169ff.), which locates the causes of ethnic conflict in the need social groups have to resolve that initial uncertainty. Like me, Arfi stresses that social identities depend on routines and that groups fear the identity effects of disruptions of routines.

But from here, the concept of ontological security isolates something neither Jervis' realist nor Arfi's constructivist argument captures: there is an appropriative moment, where both states take on the identity that is embodied in the competitive routines and therefore become attached to the competition as an end in itself. That is, physical security aspirations cannot be made salient for interaction because they are not recognized by the other; but because actors also need ontological security, as competitive practices are repeatedly recognized and reinforced, the routines supporting the identity of a competitor likely will feed back on the states' self-concepts. At this point, continuing to be a rational actor requires repeating one's own competitive routines. Moreover, because these role identities are co-constituted, the states are profoundly dependent on each other. Each needs the other's competitive routines as much as it needs its own. Maintaining the security dilemma is a joint activity, a social structure sustained by mutual recognition. Indeed, the entrenched security dilemma is a type of collective identity.¹⁹ Of course, since the relationship is premised on competition and physical insecurity, an entrenched security dilemma is a rather dysfunctional collective identity where each feels as if he is acting alone. The sense of being part of a greater whole, i.e. the 'we' dimension of their relationship, remains implicit or submerged, making this type of conflict particularly difficult to overcome.

At this point, what began as a means of security-seeking, cautious competition, has become an end in itself. That is, attachment to the conflict is rigid not reflexive. For each, maintaining the capacity for agency requires constantly reproducing the conflict. Because each needs the competitive routines, neither can make its private aspiration for security salient in interaction. Recognized roles have crowded out private aspirations; and, severed from practice, aspirations for security retreat into fantasy. Importantly, their dependence on routinized competition is at a practical rather than a discursive level, meaning it is not held in mind by either state during interaction. Because these states might not be aware of their dependence, they cannot loosen it. Even if a state wishes it could be a security-seeker, it has become attached to the identity that is reinforced through competition.

From here it becomes impossible to acquire reliable information about the other's putative identity as a security-seeker. That information might exist, but it cannot be processed. Recalling the earlier discussion of the possible self, I am arguing that if the cocoon of routines providing a state with basic trust does not support its possible self, it will develop a basic trust system that supports a less desired self, the competitor rather than the security-seeker. It did not intend to be a competitor, and indeed may maintain security-seeking aspirations in principle, but once ontological security needs are met through relationships that sustain competition, those aspirations are effectively insulated from practice. One generation later potential peace overtures seem threatening, the risk involved not worth the sacrifice in stability. The difficulties of choosing peace are as much ontological as physical, since neither party knows any longer even how to *be* a security-seeker.

In short, where ontological needs are met by routinized competition, it is no longer accurate to say that states face a physical security dilemma. A state in a true dilemma would prefer cooperation to defection but cannot be sure it won't be exploited. States in routinized competition, on the other hand, are quite sure. On a deep level, they prefer conflict to cooperation, because only through conflict do they know who they are.

Theoretical and Empirical Implications

The assumption that states seek ontological security sheds light on the empirical phenomenon of conflict where states have no apparent conflict of interest. Specifically, it yields a critique of the defensive realist argument that security-seeking states can learn their way out of conflicts, and suggests particular, novel strategies that might address ontological security needs.

Defensive realist arguments assume that rational states have the capacity to engage in Bayesian updating in response to new information. But as we have seen, this type of rational agency rests on healthy basic trust, the ability to step back and reflect on routines. Such adaptive actors are unlikely to populate longstanding conflict. These states might very well be rational, but they consistently reason on the basis of worst-case possibilities, responding to every action with a simple decision rule: always defect (Brooks, 1997). The cognitive certainty that anchors rationality is maintained anxiously, by rigidly reproducing conflictual routines. These states cannot acquire or process new information about type, and thus cannot act on their aspirations for security.

In short, this is the offensive realist world as articulated by John Mearsheimer (2001), or the tension-filled post-structuralist world of David Campbell (1998), where states ward off existential uncertainty through boundary-constituting ‘discourses of danger’. This suggests that Bayesian learning arguments for ending security dilemmas are not applicable to longstanding conflict. I would hypothesize that situations in which states have climbed their way out of entrenched conflicts through processes of rational updating are few and far between, because the conditions of rationality require leaving previous, identity-stabilizing relationships behind.

Indeed, the failure of Oslo — a peace process explicitly based on learning through incremental confidence-building measures — is instructive. Israelis and Palestinians did not have the key prerequisite for learning their way out of conflict, healthy basic trust; and the peace process did not address this lack. Michael Barnett (1999) shows that Rabin constructed a discursive space within Israeli politics that legitimated withdrawal as a means of security-seeking. But an inter-group public space was not similarly fostered; no Oslo strategies compelled the actors to reconcile action and identity and support mutual security-seeking (Adler, 2005). Because the relationship between aspirational role identities and recognized roles was not nurtured, security-seeking could not become a salient joint aspiration.

Of course, not all conflicts persist and where they do, attachment may not be the only reason — decision-makers may perpetuate conflict for instrumental reasons as well. But where conflicts persist among security-seekers, even when decision-makers want to end security competition, that desire will remain insulated from practice unless it is explicitly linked to new routines of interaction. This is because even where competitive routines get disrupted, the habit of conflict is easily restored. Leaving old routines behind generates ontological insecurity. Each party previously had known itself through routines of enmity, and it is hard to relate ends and means without those routines as a baseline. Cognitively and affectively, it is easier to act on old,

concrete fears than on new, untested hopes (Bar-Tal, 2001). To break with routines would be fraught with ontological fear.

Attempts to end intractable conflict should therefore focus on breaking down the rigid attachment to routines and creating routines of interaction that permit parties to reveal aspirations and learn from interactions. No state can be a security-seeker alone. The ability of former adversaries to rationally seek security is constituted in the space between them, not just in their individual 'heads'. In other words, since privacy helps cause attachment to dilemmatic conflict, strategies to end such conflict should focus on publicity.

Specifically, ontological security-informed research could examine the role of international society and transnational public spheres in keeping salient security-seeking identities (Risse, 2000). For example, research could investigate the role of routinized public meetings and public commitments for solidifying mutual recognition of security-seeking. Repeatedly articulating commitments, and calling on states to justify publicly their actions against shared aspirations, should foster habits of reflection, which offer the potential to de-rigidify attachment to competition. Indeed, the regular meetings of the Concert of Europe powers and the Security Council can be read this way. Arguably, Europe's ability to overcome its conflictual past and develop an identity which does not depend on 'discourses of danger' is linked to its consultation reflex and other practices through which member states publicly reaffirm and perform their identity as security-seekers to one another (Mitzen, 2006).

One also could inquire whether recognition must come directly from the security partner, or whether other states and transnational non-state actors can grant recognition. In the late 1980s, the US initially rejected the Soviet identity as security-seeker. Only once others began to recognize the USSR's security-seeking identity did the US move toward recognition (Evangelista, 1999).

Note that these implications of state ontological security-seeking do not 'rival' so much as complement or extend existing explanations of why security dilemmas persist and how to overcome them. Realist work treats important dimensions of the problems states face when attempting to overcome entrenched conflict. But this work tends to treat the post-conflict case narrowly, as a problem of physical security only (e.g. Posen, 1993; Walter, 1997). In my view, realizing that security-seeking is a social practice that implicates identity is a crucial step toward getting out of what seem to be externally imposed logics. Thus far, practitioners more than theorists have stressed public sphere oriented strategies for preventing and ending conflict, and no clear theoretical justification has been provided. Ontological security provides that justification, and a framework for further research.

Conclusion

Analytical attention in social science often is drawn to the phenomenon of change, but world politics also is characterized by powerful homeostatic tendencies. Indeed, the phenomenon of inertia we call order is itself produced through social processes; changes are no more than the disruptions that overcome or alter those processes (Wight, 2001). This means that theories of change are improved by better understanding order. To do so, I have proposed a new motivational assumption, that states need ontological security, and have theorized its relationship to physical security-seeking. The argument is only a beginning; much work remains to be done.

Some of this work must obviously be empirical, beginning by operationalizing the modes of routinization in security dilemmas. If states seek ontological security then they should develop routines with other states and be attached to them. If there are two forms of basic trust then routines, and their effects, should vary systematically. Rigid routines should be associated with an inability to learn; we should not see the states searching for ways out of the conflict or engaging in debates about the other's type. Flexible interstate routines that permit reflection, on the other hand, should be associated with learning and transformative change. These states search for ways out of conflict and jointly attempt to reconcile interaction with security-seeking goals. Once operationalized, it also will be important to specify conditions under which each mode might form and which state behaviors tend toward routinization.

There is also theoretical and empirical work to be done on other applications of this general proposition. I have focused on the security dilemma, but the dynamics of ontological security-seeking should be broadly applicable. For example, the assumption could be applied to cooperative outcomes such as security communities (Adler and Barnett, 1998), international society and international institutions. Indeed, while regime theory assumes that states cooperate to pursue mutual gain, ontological security suggests a different starting point — fear of chaos. The fact that cooperation might be rooted in fear-avoidance rather than gain-seeking may lead to counter-hypotheses regarding the durability and shape of institutions. Moreover, like conflict, in principle cooperation could be characterized by either rigid or healthy basic trust. This raises questions — Does cooperation generate attachment? How does the form of basic trust affect the durability of cooperation? — that may have implications for institutional design.

Physical security-seeking has been a powerful, unquestioned assumption in IR theory. Assumptions usefully organize our thinking, but also constrain it — in this case making us unable to see how states might become attached to conflict. With this in mind, in this article I have proposed supplementing

the physical security assumption with attention to ontological security needs, and have shown that these needs can help explain how stubborn conflict can be. Assuming that important aspects of state identity are constituted relationally provides new theoretical leverage on interaction dynamics and can lead to practical implications for important problems in world politics. Of course, treating ontological security needs might not be sufficient to secure stable peace, but it is necessary. If we ignore these needs and focus only on physical fears, we overlook the attachment dynamics that can underwrite cycles of enmity and conflict. International politics need not be tragic. But overcoming conflict requires hard work, and the first step is to acknowledge in theory and practice that conflict may benefit a state's identity even as it threatens its body.

Notes

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1. By drawing attention to an uncertainty deeper than that stressed in extant realist theory, my proposition that states seek ontological security reveals a conflictual logic that realists have overlooked. However, my argument might be made consonant with realism if we adopt Michael Williams' (2005: 25ff.) reinterpretation of the depth of the uncertainty problem in Hobbes' state of nature. Williams argues that not simply physical insecurity but epistemic indeterminacy characterizes the state of nature, and actors feel a need to escape this radical unknown. Even fear of the other, i.e. conflict, can be a remedy for the deeper fear.
2. Of course, not all persistent conflicts are security dilemmas. But realists draw on the security dilemma to understand this phenomenon (e.g. Snyder and Jervis, 1999), while enduring rivalries theorists also acknowledge the relevance of the security dilemma model — e.g. Mor and Maoz (1999) analyze the strategic evolution of rivalry as a game specified similarly to the security dilemma.
3. Whether either conflict is a security dilemma is debated. See Jervis (2001) on the Cold War; Posen (1993), Snyder and Jervis (1999) and Roe (2000) on ethnic conflict.

4. See Steele (2005) and Mitzen (2006) for empirical applications of state ontological security-seeking.
5. Brubaker and Cooper (2000: 17–18) discuss ‘self-understanding’ as a mode of identity talk that is sufficiently precise to be analytically useful. I use ‘identity’ and ‘self-understanding’ interchangeably.
6. For discussion in an IR context see Wendt (2001).
7. Giddens notes that the term ‘basic trust’ comes from Erik Erikson.
8. On stereotyping as routinization, see Schimel et al. (1999). On routinization of cognitive-affective responses to others as motivated bias, see Jervis et al. (1985).
9. This paragraph combines TMT with insights from object relations and self-psychology, e.g. Bacal and Newman (1990); Willmott (1986).
10. Positing this variation distinguishes my ontological security theorization from that of, e.g. Kinnvall (2004) and McSweeney (1999). The existence of two forms of basic trust are supported by experimental work on modes of adaptation to mortality fears, which finds that attachment style matters and varies systematically — only individuals with low self-esteem cling unreflexively to routines (e.g. Mikulincer and Florian, 2000). Research in cognitive psychology confirms that individuals vary in their need for certainty or cognitive closure (e.g. Kruglanski, 1989), although that work does not specify that the self/personality is relationally constituted.
11. The need hierarchy is generally accepted in social theory. See Johnson (1990); Wendt (1999: Ch. 5).
12. TMT and AUM find experimental support of the linkage between uncertainty, identity, and routines at the inter-group level (Ball-Rokeach, 1973; Gudykunst and Nishida, 2001; Solomon et al., 1991). One might reasonably ask why ontological security implies specifically inter-*state* dynamics, since the state might not always be the most salient locus of corporate subjectivity and identification. Indeed, the dynamics I develop might be found at other levels of inter-group relations.
13. Although some realists argue that the offense–defense balance is the crucial cause of security dilemmas, buffering effects of state type. See Jervis (1976: 64); Van Evera (1999); cf. Mearsheimer (2001).
14. For critical discussions of the type terminology, see Jervis (2001: 39ff), Glaser (1997) and Buzan (1991: 298–303).
15. For some realists (e.g. Copeland, 2000: 206) states need not even be aware of one another for a security dilemma to exist. Wendt (1999: Ch. 7) discusses the stakes of interaction in rationalism versus constructivism.
16. This discussion relies on Wendt (1999: Chs 3–4), although Wendt does not analyze security dilemmas as social structures.
17. On the distinction between role and role identity see Wendt (1999: Ch. 6) and Aggestam (2004: 56ff.). For an earlier treatment of roles in IR, see Walker (1987).
18. For support of the tendency among cooperators to behave aggressively when

treated as if aggressors, see Kelley and Stahelski (1970); although they do not consider identity effects.

19. A persistent security dilemma could also be interpreted as a form of collective intentionality. See Searle (1995: 23–6).

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