

SPECIAL ISSUE ARTICLE

Ontological security, myth, and existentialism

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Abstract

This paper contributes to this special issue by examining the existentialist themes re-emerging in Ontological Security Studies (OSS) and does so by proposing an under-explored and overlapping terrain regarding the function of myths and ontological security. What Blumenberg calls the ‘absolutism of reality’ becomes something to avoid through the process of telling, retelling, and adapting myths to suit our existential needs. The paper distinguishes our existentialist intervention into OSS from recent ones within that research community and then draws examples of the work on and of myth from the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Speaking to the need for OSS to develop an ethical-political perspective to not only explain but also change the world, the account we develop here also provides a pathway for an alternative politics based in counter-myth. It discloses, therefore, a promising and, in the face of rising authoritarianism and anti-democratic forces, necessary moral ethos regarding prescriptive ideas about what to do and how to confront and counter the mounting challenges of global politics in the 2020s and beyond.

Keywords: anxiety; existentialism; myth; ontological security

This article contributes to this special issue on Existentialism and International Relations by introducing work on ‘myth’ and its functions for ontological security. Existentialist insights were always present in ontological security’s history as a concept,¹ and deliberations in the past decade of Ontological Security Studies (OSS) have increasingly returned to existentialist themes.² This follows on from the long-standing interest in anxiety as a central concept in the ontological security story,³ and how it has been managed (or not).⁴ Drawing on Hans Blumenberg, Chiara Bottici,

¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Oakland: University of California Press, 1984); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Redwood City, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991).

² As we discuss in more detail below, this has been an especially pronounced feature of Bahar Rumelili’s work within OSS in particular. See Bahar Rumelili, ‘Ontological (in)security and peace anxieties’, in Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security* (New York: Routledge, 2015), pp. 10–26; ‘[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of international relations’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1020–36. ‘Integrating anxiety into International Relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 257–72; See also Brent J. Steele, ‘The politics and limits of the self: Kierkegaard, neoconservatism and international political theory’, *Journal of International Political Theory*, 9:2 (2013), pp. 158–77; Nina Krickel-Choi, ‘The concept of anxiety in ontological security studies’, *International Studies Review*, 24:3 (2022), pp. 1–21; Karl Gustafson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, ‘Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature’, *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 875–95.

³ Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 240–56.

⁴ Christopher Browning, ‘“Je suis en terrasse”: Political violence, civilizational politics, and the everyday courage to be’, *Political Psychology*, 39:2 (2018), pp. 243–61.

and Xander Kirke's treatment of 'myth', and especially political myth,⁵ this article proposes an under-explored and overlapping terrain regarding the function of myths and ontological security. Since political myths address anxieties, provide certainty, and function as a 'lens' through which we interpret our political world,⁶ it is somewhat surprising that this trend has not, to our knowledge, been analysed in any great detail prior to these works. This is a missed opportunity, not least because of the rich literature on political myth⁷ and the evolution of existentialist approaches to political myth.⁸

Our contribution to this special issue, and the work in OSS, then, is threefold. First, in the following section we provide an introduction to the work on myth and the related challenges of what that literature titles 'the absolutism of reality' and the 'need for significance'. This reveals how the 'absolutism of reality' – which is indifferent to our own existence – becomes something to avoid through the process of telling, retelling, and adapting myths to suit our existential needs. Blumenberg's concept of the 'absolutism of reality'⁹ provides another angle into the problem of anxiety that ontological security scholars in International Relations have been grappling with for almost two decades. Thus, second, existentialist approaches to myth allow scholars to relate the role of political myths in the narrative dimension of ontological security and provide a unique set of distinctions between the account of myth that we develop here, and that of a prominent stream of OSS that builds upon the work of Jacques Lacan.

The context for this article is also important, as we write it during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic. The pandemic, in its disruptions of those practices that attend to anxiety, cast into stark relief the deep well of meaning that individuals attach to those practices (routines and narratives), and the attempts to reinstate new routines to confront the anxiety that resulted from Covid. As Kirke explained in an essay published early in the pandemic, existentialist insights help articulate the 'threat that [Covid] poses to the fundamental lived experience of "being"'.¹⁰ In their introduction to a key special issue of *International Theory* focused on anxiety and ontological security, Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen observed: 'Existential anxiety per se is not a potent political force, but its behavioral resolutions may well be. Consider catastrophic or traumatic events like 9/11, the financial and migration crises, or more recently Covid-19, which disrupt both the sense that tomorrow will be like today and the confidence that existing political and social institutions can protect us.'¹¹ Steele, in a contribution to a recent symposium, noted: 'Because the depth and breadth at which 2020 has been dislocating is truly other-worldly, it has called into question humanity's meaningful existence. Existentialism provides a necessary deepening for understanding ontological insecurity in contemporary life.'¹² And a number of works within OSS on the securitising practices of governments and societies in the wake of the pandemic have focused on the

⁵Hans Blumenberg, *Work on Myth* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); Chiara Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Xander Kirke, *Hans Blumenberg: Myth and Significance in Modern Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

⁶Lance Bennett, 'Myth, ritual and political control', *Journal of Communication*, 30:4 (1980), pp. 166–79.

⁷Anthony D. Smith, *Myths and Memories of the Nation* (London: Oxford University Press, 1999); Vincent Della Sala, 'Europe's Odyssey? Political myth and the European Union', *Nations and Nationalism*, 22:3 (2016), pp. 524–41; Xander Kirke, 'Violence and political myth: Radicalizing believers in the pages of *Inspire* magazine', *International Political Sociology*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 283–98; Joanne Esch, 'Legitimizing the "war on terror": Political myth in official-level rhetoric', *Political Psychology*, 31:3 (2010), pp. 357–91; Chiara Bottici, 'Philosophies of political myth, a comparative look backwards: Cassirer, Sorel and Spinoza', *European Journal of Political Theory*, 8:3 (2009), pp. 365–82.

⁸Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*.

⁹Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*.

¹⁰Xander Kirke, 'Anxiety and COVID-19: The role of ontological security and myth', *E-International Relations* (2020), available at: {<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/05/29/anxiety-and-covid-19-the-role-of-ontological-security-and-myth>}.

¹¹Kinnvall and Mitzen, 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security', p. 246.

¹²Brent J. Steele, 'Nowhere to run to, nowhere to hide: Inescapable dread in the 2020s', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1037–43 (p. 1038).

gendered dimensions and expressions of policies.¹³ Thus, we draw examples from the challenging politics of that pandemic to illustrate the themes and implications for existentialism, and OSS, in our concluding sections.

Doing so we hope provides the third contribution of this article. Owing to the challenges noted in the past decade within Ontological Security Studies regarding the ‘ethics’ or ‘politics’ of OSS, the account we develop here provides a pathway for an alternative politics. This would be based in myth that can seek to disturb, check, and counter such narratives in ways that may prove politically, and ethically, important. In short, the work on myth and the existentialist insights of Blumenberg, Bottici, and others provide an ‘ethics of ontological security’ that reinforces and further develops an approach originally provided by Chris Browning in his 2016 study.¹⁴ Our contribution builds on this both analytically and normatively. First, it expands on the existentialist routes of our needs for ontological security by introducing the so-called work on myth. Second, it provides a starting point for re-approaching how dangerous political myths can be addressed. This means the article can be situated alongside an increasing focus of OSS on speaking to the productive possibilities of anxiety and ‘crises’ that can otherwise ‘be paralyzing’. Anxiety then is also a ‘precondition for creative change,’¹⁵ and the struggle that myth can provide here exists in its capacity for ‘embracing anxiety as a starting point for living a more authentic and morally fulfilling life.’¹⁶ In the third section, and in our conclusion, we detail the broader challenges of our contemporary times and how to confront these in ways that are explicitly political but also moral. This, too, has historically been a too-infrequent feature of OSS, an approach that has been accused of ‘enclosing critique’ by focusing only on analysing the world ‘out there’ rather than, or falling short of, a set of prescriptions for how to confront and change it.¹⁷ Thus, this final purpose is carried out with a firm conviction that existentialism and the work on myth provide not only a philosophical grounding regarding life’s meanings. They also disclose a promising and, in the face of rising authoritarianism and anti-democratic forces, necessary moral ethos regarding prescriptive ideas about what to do and how to confront and counter the mounting challenges of global politics in the 2020s and beyond. In short, our existentialist intervention is a call for understanding the connection between concrete thought and the idea, and practice, of living one’s authentic life.

Existentialism, myth, and the absolutism of reality

While a full interrogation of the entire existentialist canon is unfeasible within this article, we can nonetheless identify common themes. What unites many existentialist philosophical approaches are questions about how we exist and behave within a world not of our choosing, but which requires us to make choices. For existentialists, ‘estrangement’ is a crucial feature of our existence. This generates a sense of ambiguity. On the one hand, we are regular creatures within the world, but on the other hand we also have critical features that distinguish us from other beings. As David E. Cooper puts it, our feeling of estrangement is rooted in the fact that, while we are ‘embodied occupants of the world’, our ‘powers of reflection, self-interpretation, evaluation, and choice distinguishes us

¹³Christine Agius, Annika Bergmund Rosamond, and Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Populism, ontological insecurity and gendered nationalism: Masculinity, climate denial and Covid-19’, *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 21:4 (2020), pp. 432–50; Katherine A. M. Wright, Toni Haastrup, and Roberta Guerrina, ‘Equalities in freefall? Ontological insecurity and the long-term impact of COVID-19 in the academy’, *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28 (2021), pp. 163–7; Kandida Purnell, ‘Bodies coming apart and bodies becoming parts: Widening, deepening, and embodying ontological (in)security in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:4 (2021), pp. 1–9.

¹⁴Christopher Browning, ‘Ethics and ontological security’, in Jonna Nyman and Anthony Burke (eds), *Ethical Security Studies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), pp. 160–73 (p. 160).

¹⁵Kinnvall and Mitzen, ‘Anxiety, fear and ontological security’, p. 247.

¹⁶Browning, ‘Ethics and ontological security’, p. 160.

¹⁷Chris Rossdale, ‘Enclosing critique: The limits of ontological security’, *International Political Sociology*, 9:4 (2015), pp. 369–86.

from all other occupants of the world'.¹⁸ Any philosophical reflection about human beings in the world 'reveals that neither is thinkable without the other', because 'the world of things cannot be understood except by reference to the significance that these things have in relation to human purposes and practices'.¹⁹ We cannot divorce ourselves from the world since our being is so intimately tied to it. Moreover, all 'things' within the world are only understood by us with reference to our own purposes and practices.

In many respects, this is the main reason for the importance of anxiety²⁰ to our existence. Much of the existentialist literature demonstrates a pessimistic understanding of our nature, or the 'facticity' of what we are. Martin Heidegger saw anxiety as a breakdown of our assumptions about our reality, or our 'being-in-the-world', into which we have been 'thrown' (*geworfen*).²¹ Although this can again have the productive capacity of allowing us to reassess our existence and confront different possibilities. Jean-Paul Sartre was more optimistic about our capacity for radical freedom that is produced by anxiety, despite some limitations that our social and perhaps biological circumstances may provide.²² While all existentialists acknowledge these issues, Simone de Beauvoir's approach differs slightly insofar as she saw the negatives of anxiety as being more commonly associated with adulthood. By contrast, children, while still encountering anxiety, are less burdened by it for reasons including the role of parenting in restricting the capacity for choice, alongside the way in which children see the world as it appears to be, and themselves as fixed and in a narrower sense.²³

The absolutism of reality

A traditionally neglected, but now increasingly discussed,²⁴ existentialist philosopher, or philosophical anthropologist, is Hans Blumenberg. For Blumenberg, our experiences of life occur within innumerable events and possibilities, almost all of which are indifferent to our existence. While this is not a unique position in existentialist thought, the way he characterises it and the consequences that follow are to some degree. Blumenberg argues that human beings exist within the 'absolutism of reality'.²⁵ The absolutism of reality as a state emerges from our perceived poor adaptive instincts. We are continuously overwhelmed by the scale of the world and our experiences of a multitude of events happening simultaneously. Blumenberg's claims are heavily influenced by Arnold Gehlen's understanding of humans as an unfinished animal, or a 'deficient' or 'defective' being (*Mängelwesen*).²⁶ First, Gehlen claimed that human beings, unlike other animals, have unprecedented versatility because we can adapt to multiple environments. Gehlen here draws from the concept of 'world-openness' (*Weltoffenheit*) – discussed previously by his intellectual forebears, including Johann Gottfried Herder.²⁷

Being open to the world would at first seem to be a positive thing. Yet for Gehlen,²⁸ it was ultimately burdensome. Being open to the world means that we are exposed to an enormity of

¹⁸David E. Cooper, 'Existentialism as a philosophical movement', in S. Crowell (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Existentialism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 27–49 (p. 29).

¹⁹Cooper, 'Existentialism', p. 29.

²⁰The original language works usually use the word *Angst*, which is commonly translated as anxiety, despair, or anguish. In the Ontological Security Studies literature, and most existentialist works, the term anxiety is the chosen translation. Therefore, we continue with the word anxiety throughout.

²¹Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1962).

²²Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 65–7, pp. 69–70.

²³Simone de Beauvoir, *Ethics of Ambiguity* (Seacaucus, New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1976). It is important to note that de Beauvoir's views of the existential condition of children did evolve. For more on this, see Lior Levy, 'Thinking with Beauvoir on the freedom of the child', *Hypatia*, 31:1 (2016), pp. 140–55.

²⁴See especially Angus Nicholls, *Myth and the Human Sciences: Hans Blumenberg's Theory of Myth* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

²⁵Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, p. 3.

²⁶Arnold Gehlen, *Man, His Nature and His Place in the World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988).

²⁷John Gottfried Herder, *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* (Berlin, Germany: Dearbooks Verlag, 2016).

²⁸Gehlen, *Man, His Nature and His Place in the World*.

stimuli from which we constantly seek relief (*Entlastung*). Yet we also have an abundance of needs that we are not adequately equipped to meet. For this, we require social institutions to provide us with the *Entlastung* that enables us to placate our undirected drives. We create symbols, concepts, metaphors, and ideas that allow us to ‘filter’ and magnify more concrete, determined objects that we can focus on. Once familiarised, such objects form the social institutions that are the background of our social functionality. Habits and rituals are critical here because they reduce the effort needed for motivation and control in our daily lives. While this operates in the background, the foreground still provides the space for more deliberate activity. Without such categorisations, the experience of ‘being’ would be chaotic, unstable, perhaps groundless. This is ‘nomadic’ and continuously underpins our experiences, as humanity has changed through the ages.²⁹

The need for (ontological) significance

This open and nomadic nature that subjects perpetually struggle against makes them vulnerable to existential crises. It is here that subjects need to find some form of significance within the world. Erich Rothacker remarked that a major difference between humans and other animals is that humans are able to take up a position of ‘distance towards things’ and transform these things into mental objects with different levels of ‘significance’ (*Bedeutsamkeit*). This is critical, as it allows us to categorise the world into ‘separated forms’ and then select which of them are most meaningful for our purposes. As Rothacker explains:

Only that which concerns me, that which ‘is something’ to me, that which means something, that which awakens my interest, that touches upon my being, that appears to me as noteworthy, then as memorable, and finally as worthy of the further steps of linguistic and conceptual acquisition ... only that will find an entry point into my world over this first and most elementary threshold.³⁰

This is what became known as Rothacker’s ‘principle of significance’, which became crucial to Blumenberg’s theory of myth. The need for significance is part of our own finitude, especially in terms of our limited perception. We are unable to give equal treatment to all aspects of the world and so must focus on a narrower array of things that awaken our interests, regardless of their subject matter. Crucially, for Blumenberg, part of the process of finding significance begins with creating names and metaphors. In many respects, names are one of the first mediators of the absolutism of reality. As he puts it:

What has become identifiable by means of a name is raised out of its unfamiliarity by means of metaphor and is made accessible in terms of its significance by telling stories. Panic and paralysis, as the two extremes of anxiety behavior, are dissolved by the appearance of calculable magnitudes to deal with and regulated way of dealing with them.³¹

An under-emphasised observation is that Blumenberg sees significance as enhanced by repetition and repeatability. Again, this is linked closely to the process of naming:

Every name that becomes accepted, every network of names as a result of which their accidental character seems to be suspended, and every story that presents the bearers of these names as endowed with characteristics enriches definiteness over and against the background of indefiniteness.³²

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Rothacker, cited in Frank Tremmel, *‘Menschheitswissenschaft’ als Erfahrung des Ortes: Erich Rothacker und die deutsche Kulturanthropologie* (Munich: Herbert Ulz Verlag, 2009), p. 40.

³¹ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, pp. 5–6.

³² Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, pp. 7–8.

This said, the ascription of names is not equivalent to developing a story. We are fundamentally ‘symbolic animals’,³³ constituted by numerous deficiencies that can only be placated by finding significance. Building on Rothacker, Blumenberg describes ‘significance’ as something that ‘makes possible a ‘density’ that excludes empty spaces and empty time’. It also makes possible, as he puts it, an ‘indefiniteness of dating and localization that is the equivalent of ubiquitousness.’³⁴ Chiara Bottici summarises this process clearly by referring to something significant as ‘something that situates itself between the two extremes of a simple meaning and the meaning of life and death.’³⁵ There are caveats here. For instance, the process of finding significance is more of a collective endeavour than a private one.³⁶ Furthermore, significance is an inner-worldly concern that it is necessary to mitigate within estrangement and anxiety. While significance does not answer the totality of our needs, it provides purpose, concretises otherwise ambiguous phenomena, and helps us function within the world. These existentialist concerns also distinguish myths from mere narratives. As Bottici points out, they must be able to answer these existential questions in highly dramatic form with the purpose and function of providing significance. Many, if not all, pure narratives will not meet these criteria.³⁷

The numerous examples that Blumenberg provides reveals that we are in a process of ‘distancing’ ourselves from the absolutism of reality. The ‘absolutism of reality’ is supposedly an awful experience we seek to avoid, yet, oddly, we never experience it concretely. This is because all the concepts, experiences, names, and those representations that are fundamental to our humanity, *always already exist*. Or, as better articulated by Blumenberg, ‘from whichever starting point one chooses, the work on the breaking down (*Arbeit am Abbau*) of the absolutism of reality has already begun.’³⁸ We are embedded within a world of symbols, myths, and other coping mechanisms, precisely as a means to avoid the possibility of the absolutism of reality. The process of coping is not in the ‘construction’ of reality but rather its continuous breaking down.

So far, this article has explored some origins of existentialist thought, while also building upon it with insights from alternative literature. What this now requires is an understanding of how this existentialist context interacts with myth. We can then use this a lens through which we see the intersection between the role of political myth in generating ontological security, in the next section.

Political myth: A process of finding significance

While there is agreement on the role that myth plays in at least some societies, there are considerable differences in how it is defined. Myths have been studied across a multitude of disciplines. Often (as discussed above) traditional research into myth has assumed that we progress from *mythos* to *logos*. Based on this claim, myths are something to be dispelled, usually replaced with scientific or enlightenment-inspired rationality. Indeed, such attitudes were often highly grounded in a colonialist, certainly racist, and patriarchal mindset. Research in the late 19th and early 20th century especially made sharp distinctions between the primitive and the civilised, with likely similar patriarchal assumptions. Bruce Malinowski saw myths as being part of a ‘primitive culture’ and ‘primitive faith.’³⁹ James George Frazer saw myth as underpinned by magic and a ‘primitive’ method for viewing the world.⁴⁰ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl went further and distinguished between ‘primitive’ and ‘western minds’, wherein the former were unable to distinguish the supernatural from reality.⁴¹

³³ Ernst Cassirer, *The Myth of the State* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1946).

³⁴ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, p. 96.

³⁵ Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 178.

³⁶ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, p. 67.

³⁷ Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 123.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

³⁹ Bruce Malinowski, *Myth in Primitive Psychology* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1971), p. 19.

⁴⁰ James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion* (London: Macmillan, 1963).

⁴¹ Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, *How Natives Think*, trans. Lilian A. Clare (Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2015).

By contrast, 'western' minds were logical, and there would inevitably need to be an evolution from the primitive to the standards of the West.

Later research began to focus more on the nature of myths within politics. This literature tends to conceptualise myths as narratives or claim that is true or false. For example, Henry Tudor considered myth to be uniquely political owing its subject matter but focused on political myths as being something that is believed to be true, even if they are false.⁴² Others have understood it as closely connected to, or an expression of, ideology. The most prominent of these are Christopher Flood⁴³ and Bruce Lincoln,⁴⁴ who utilise various case studies to make their arguments. Subsequent to these works, we see existentialist themes emerge in the study of political myth. Indeed, prior to Bottici, Karen Armstrong arguably captures some of these insights in her *A Short History of Myth*, which provides a reading of myth from the Palaeolithic period up to what she refers to as the 'Great Western Transformation'. The key observation here is that myths respond to our tendency to fall into despair, and myths can provide meaning for us, whether ultimate meanings about our place in the universe or not.⁴⁵

What unites all the approaches after Malinowski, Frazer, and Lévy-Bruhl is the claim that we do not live in an environment in which myths have been overcome. There is never a point at which the *logos* embodied in scientific rationality negates our need for myth. Indeed, the deep irony is that scientific rationality may in fact be aided by myth, as Vincent Mosco persuasively explained in his analysis of the scientific 'myth of cyberspace'. This myth promises the creation of a 'new world' through the interconnectedness made possible through digital technology.⁴⁶ The key point is that, while the content of myths may change, they are apathetic to the 'truth' and are not best analysed through the claims they make. Rather, we should focus on the function of myths – what they actually do.⁴⁷

Outside of Chiara Bottici and co-authored pieces with Benoit Challand,⁴⁸ there have been few works that conceive of political myth as addressing existential concerns directly, and at least tangentially the process of finding ontological security, with the exceptions of Vincent Della Sala and Xander Kirke.⁴⁹ Nonetheless, some existential dimensions (at least implicitly) to political myth are found in Murray Edelman.⁵⁰ Edelman argued that members of the public are often reluctant to engage with the intricacies of politics. In an echo of the naked absolutism of reality we avoid within the world, the scale, uncertainties, and pluralities that underline politics have the potential to overwhelm people. While much of the political process can seem disconnected to many, it is also prone to producing ontological insecurity when complexity is combined with political upheaval. Edelman points out that complexity at least necessitates myths and other linguistic devices which provide the illusion of simplicity and coherence.⁵¹ Stories involving heroic leadership, struggle, and sacrifice are often expressed by political and media figures through metaphors that have significance to specific groups.

⁴²Henry Tudor, *Political Myth* (London: Macmillan, 1972).

⁴³Christopher G. Flood, *Political Myth: A Theoretical Introduction* (New York: Garland, 1996).

⁴⁴Bruce Lincoln, *Discourse and the Construction of Society: Comparative Studies of Myth, Ritual and Classification* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁴⁵Karen Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2008).

⁴⁶Vincent Mosco, *The Digital Sublime: Myth, Power, and Cyberspace* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

⁴⁷The notion of removing the idea of myth as 'lie' is also central to an edited volume on myths and narrative in *International Relations*. See B. B. de Guevara (ed.), *Myth and Narrative in International Relations: Interpretive Approaches to the Study of IR* (London: Palgrave, 2016).

⁴⁸Bottici Chiara and Benoit Challand, *Imagining Europe: Myth, Memory and Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Bottici Chiara and Challand Benoit, *The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations* (Oxford: Routledge, 2010).

⁴⁹Xander Kirke, 'Political myth and the need for significance: Finding ontological security during times of terror', PhD thesis, Newcastle University (2017); Vincent Della Sala, 'Homeland security: Territorial myths and ontological security in the European Union', *Journal of European Integration*, 39:5 (2017), pp. 545–58; Kirke, 'Anxiety and COVID-19'.

⁵⁰Murray Edelman, 'Myths, metaphors and political conformity', *Psychiatry*, 30:3 (1967), pp. 217–23; Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985), pp. 225–6.

⁵¹Edelman, 'Myths, metaphors and political conformity', p. 218.

Myths must not be understood as essentialised and unchanging objects that are ‘thrown before us’. Here, we must distinguish between two key terms that Blumenberg puts forward, the Work of Myth, and the Work *on* Myth. The Work of Myth refers to a preceding body of myths that always already exist prior to our own existence. The Work *on* Myth is the process of telling, retelling, and reproducing myths to adapt to the needs for significance within different contexts. The work on myth happens in ways both mundane and monumental, circulating through the social fabric of society. Thus, myths must adapt to the needs of the present. As Blumenberg puts it, myths are ‘stories that are distinguished by a high degree of constancy in their narrative core and an equally pronounced capacity for marginal variation.’⁵² This balance between constancy and variation is crucial for the function and indeed the survival of a myth. Without this, one might say they cease to be myths, let alone political myths, if adaptability to the present is not maintained. Myths are therefore a powerful element of what Hom titles ‘social timing practices’ of the present.⁵³

This then raises the question of how myths are generally invoked. Christopher Flood points out that myths told in the public sphere do not need to be recounted in their entirety to be part of political discourse. Indeed, doing so might inadvertently add a layer of complexity. Slogans such as ‘workers of the world, unite’, along with ‘metonymic allusions’ like ‘the Vietnam syndrome’, can be invoked in verbal and non-verbal forms.⁵⁴ This is closely linked to Bennett’s view that myths provide ‘associative mechanisms that link private experience, ongoing reality, and public history’ that develop into ‘powerful frameworks of understanding.’⁵⁵ Consequently, they become ‘lenses’ through which we make sense of contemporary political events and experiences. Bottici and Challand point out that by means of synecdoche, certain symbols, images, slogans, and phrases can ‘recall the whole work on myth’ that underpins them.⁵⁶

To recap, existentialism underpins different ways in which we approach politics, but especially the mythical aspects of it. By drawing on a framework which understands myth as a continuous process of ‘working’ on a dramatic and figurative narrative that provides significance ‘within-the-world’ for us, we provide a useful backdrop through which to re-approach ontological security.

Existentialism and Ontological Security Studies in International Relations

The study of ontological security, defined by Giddens as a ‘sense of continuity and order in events,’⁵⁷ relies quite directly on answers to questions explored by existentialism. Before we discuss existentialism as treated in what has become known as ‘Ontological Security Studies’ (OSS), we provide up front in this section a brief background to OSS work as it has developed in International Relations. Much of this development has been sourced from the works of Anthony Giddens and R. D. Laing. For Giddens, ontological security follows from a ‘person’s fundamental sense of safety in the world and includes a basic trust of other people’, and obtaining this trust is ‘necessary for a person to maintain a sense of psychological well-being and avoid existential anxiety.’⁵⁸

For R. D. Laing (to whom the origin of the concept is widely attributed), ontologically secure people are confident of their presence in the world and experience both themselves and others as ‘real, alive, whole, and continuous.’⁵⁹ As such, ontologically secure people can encounter all ‘hazards of life’ from a centrally first sense of their own and other people’s realities and identities.⁶⁰

⁵²Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, p. 34.

⁵³Andrew R. Hom, *International Relations and the Problem of Time* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

⁵⁴Flood, *Political Myth*, p. 78.

⁵⁵Bennett, ‘Myth, ritual and political control’.

⁵⁶Bottici and Challand, *Imagining Europe*.

⁵⁷Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 243.

⁵⁸Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 37.

⁵⁹R. D. Laing, *Self and Others* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), p. 39.

⁶⁰Laing, *Self and Others*.

By contrast, ontologically insecure people are ‘precariously differentiated from the rest of the world’ and less able to face the hazards of life.⁶¹

In the mid-2000s, a series of works imported ontological security into International Relations,⁶² expanding throughout the 2010s and into this decade. The literature on ontological security is now vast.⁶³ As a research community, it has grown increasingly prominent as an approach towards understanding identity politics, widely construed, in International Relations, from the local,⁶⁴ to the national,⁶⁵ to the global.⁶⁶

At least three mechanisms or features of late modernity serve to attend to ontological security: routines, expertisation, and narratives.⁶⁷ Routines are a practice through which agents confront anxiety and make it ‘manageable’, making the otherwise chaotic world of late modernity predictable and even reassuring. Experts and expertisation are assumed to assist and counsel individuals and groups in the construction of ‘healthy’ forms of those routines.⁶⁸ Narratives also structure the self and groups of individuals.⁶⁹ Giddens’s articulation of ontological security focused on biographical narratives, the stories individuals and groups tell about themselves to make sense of their past in the context of the present and future. Narratives augment the social production of definite objects of fear (as distinguished from anxiety), construct unambiguous moral standards, and create systems of meaning that clearly differentiate friends from enemies.

Each of these mechanisms, however, can also become disrupted or even sources of anxiety-generation in their own right. For instance, in an increasingly fast-paced world, an individual’s carefully constructed routines become even more intertwined with the events of others, and thus vulnerable to disruption, as illustrated in a series of OSS works. Steele’s study on US militarism and ontological insecurity explored certain routines, such as those of children of returning soldiers, that generate insecurity.⁷⁰ Subotić and Steele discussed a related concept of ethical anxiety, ‘whereby agents may maintain stable routines but feel increasingly anxious about their moral underpinnings.’⁷¹ Bahar Rumelili has recently gone further, asserting that anxiety is a constitutive condition of global politics itself, exerting unseen and ever-flowing pressure on all units of global politics, from states, to groups, to individuals.⁷² Within that context of ever-present anxiety, individuals

⁶¹ Laing, *Self and Others*, p. 42.

⁶² Laing, *Self and Others*, p. 39.

⁶³ Two relatively recent, and comprehensive, overviews of ontological security studies are Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen, ‘Ontological security and conflict: The dynamics of crisis and the constitution of community’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 825–35 and Jennifer Mitzen and Kyle Larson, ‘Ontological security and foreign policy’, in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁶⁴ Alexandria J. Innes, ‘Everyday ontological security: Emotion and migration in British soaps’, *International Political Sociology*, 11:4 (2017), pp. 380–97.

⁶⁵ Bahar Rumelili and Ayşe Betül Çelik, ‘Ontological insecurity in asymmetric conflicts: Reflections on agonistic peace in Turkey’s Kurdish issue’, *Security Dialogue*, 48:4 (2017), pp. 279–96; Orit Gazit, ‘What it means to (mis)trust: Forced migration, ontological (in)security and the unrecognized political psychology of the Israeli–Lebanese conflict’, *Political Psychology*, 42:3 (2021), pp. 389–406.

⁶⁶ Catarina Kinnvall, *Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security* (London/New York: Routledge, 2007); Andrew R. Hom and Brent J. Steele, ‘Anxiety, time, and ontological security’s third-image potential’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 322–36.

⁶⁷ These features are discussed in the introduction to a recent special issue on ontological insecurity and populism in the *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*: Brent J. Steele and Alexandra Homolar, ‘Ontological insecurities and the politics of contemporary populism’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 214–21.

⁶⁸ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 31; Filip Ejdus, ‘Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 883–908.

⁶⁹ Catarina Kinnvall, ‘Globalization and religious nationalism’; Jelena Subotić, ‘Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change’, *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27.

⁷⁰ Brent J. Steele, ‘Welcome home! Routines, ontological insecurity and the politics of US military reunion videos’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 322–43.

⁷¹ Jelena Subotić and Brent J. Steele, ‘Moral injury in international relations’, *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 3:4 (2018), pp. 387–401.

⁷² Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety’.

reinforce their routines, even if they continue to generate anxiety. Expert advice, seemingly delivering less and less stability and continuity, may develop into a general resistance to not only experts but expertise itself.⁷³

Narratives seem robust and provide order and meaning to actions. Yet they also put the three timings of the past,⁷⁴ present, and future together.⁷⁵ Ontologically secure agents, for Giddens, must maintain a continuous narrative, or sense of self, which can be found in the self's ability to 'keep the narrative going'.⁷⁶ But here, the politics of ontological security arises. Narratives can create ontological security for one group, while at the same time enabling ontological, and even physical, insecurity for others.⁷⁷ Further, as they bring together these three 'timings', they remain precarious, in danger of being overwhelmed or challenged.

To theorise this conundrum of late modernity more deeply, OSS has included works moving past Giddens to psychoanalytical resources and texts. The most pronounced of these utilise Lacanian concepts such as fantasy, lack, and desire. This move centralises the fastening of not security but insecurity as the default assumption for subjects in late modernity. This is most vivid in the work via psychoanalysis found throughout Catarina Kinnvall's contributions to OSS,⁷⁸ as well as in studies by Cash,⁷⁹ Eberle,⁸⁰ Solomon,⁸¹ Browning,⁸² and Vieira,⁸³ among others. As Skonieczny asserts, Lacanian OSS sees 'the subject as decentered and longing for a stable sense of self. This perpetual but always unsatisfied desire for wholeness produces affect, as subjects long to be made whole even if it is an unobtainable goal'.⁸⁴ In Lacanian accounts, fantasy narratives that are deployed, with abstract signifiers, motivate by mobilising desire. The twist is that 'the closer the subject feels to the object associated with wholeness, the quicker desire fades'.⁸⁵ So the subject must feel a sense of getting closer to wholeness, without completing it. This perpetual 'lack' is what makes desire so powerful. Further, it is the perception that others (individual, group, community) take enjoyment in our lack of fulfilment – 'steal' our enjoyment⁸⁶ – that drives desire even more.

Existentialism in Ontological Security Studies and the contributions of political myth

Our nature within-the-world, our estrangement, our need for some form of grounding, are all central to Ontological Security Studies – hence its focus in our contribution to this special issue on existentialism. There have been several strands of existentialist themes with different resources or thinkers utilised in OSS, and our intervention adds to these. One, following on from Kierkegaard

⁷³Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why It Matters* (London: Oxford University Press, 2017).

⁷⁴Maria Mälksoo, 'Memory must be defended': Beyond the politics of mnemonical security', *Security Dialogue*, 46:3 (2015), pp. 221–37.

⁷⁵Hom and Steele, 'Anxiety, time'.

⁷⁶Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, p. 57.

⁷⁷This is clearly illustrated in Catarina Kinnvall's 2019 study, 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva: Modi and the masculinization of Indian politics', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 283–302.

⁷⁸See Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism'; 'Populism, ontological insecurity and Hindutva'; 'Ontological insecurities and postcolonial imaginaries: The emotional appeal of populism', *Humanity & Society*, 42:4 (2018), pp. 523–43.

⁷⁹John Cash, 'Psychoanalysis, cultures of anarchy and ontological insecurity', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 306–21.

⁸⁰Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22:1 (2019), pp. 243–268.

⁸¹Ty Solomon, *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

⁸²Christopher Browning, 'Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security', *European Security*, 27:3 (2018), pp. 336–55.

⁸³Marcos A. Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64.

⁸⁴Amy Skonieczny, 'Emotions and political narratives: Populism, Trump and trade', *Politics and Governance*, 6:4 (2018), pp. 62–72 (p. 63).

⁸⁵*Ibid.*, p. 64.

⁸⁶Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression'.

and to a lesser extent Heidegger,⁸⁷ has focused on theorising the pervasive nature of anxiety in everyday life. While developed by Giddens to examine late modern practices that help contain the pervasiveness of anxiety, OSS is indebted especially to the work of Bahar Rumelili for developing this understanding of existential anxiety further. In a series of studies,⁸⁸ Rumelili has pointed to the ‘ambivalence and positive potential in anxiety’,⁸⁹ which was always present in Kierkegaard’s work especially, as it was tied into freedom and meaning. Rumelili’s work focused on how peace generates, in this sense, anxiety, whereas conflicts while ‘threaten[ing] the physical security of the parties involved’, also ‘help settle certain existential questions about basic parameters of life, about being, self in relation to external world and others, and identity.’⁹⁰ Steele similarly drew out via Kierkegaard’s work the two ‘poles of the Self’,⁹¹ the actual, real, or limited Self versus the fantastical, aspirational, and infinite one. Anxiety here is both grounded in the former and transcended via the latter, with a dialectic between these two poles developing throughout an agent’s existence. Following Heidegger, Chris Browning has cultivated the more positive potential of anxiety in a series of studies. Browning observed that for Heidegger, reflection ‘requires asking fundamentally ethically inflected questions about the nature of the virtuous life and who the subject wants to be. Such questions actively invite anxiety in because they require self-interrogation as to whether one is on the right path.’⁹² Managing anxiety, Browning notes in another study, can involve the creative focus on an aspirational self, as illustrated by how Parisians responded to the terror attacks of the 2010s.⁹³

A second intervention into this area is Gustafson and Krickel-Choi’s dynamic study, which utilised existentialist insights to recover the ‘theoretical origins of ontological security’, resurrecting, in some ways, the deep existentialist renderings that were always present in Laing’s work.⁹⁴ Their contribution focused on the conceptualisation of anxiety as imported to OSS. Whereas Laing’s original focus on anxiety drew heavily on its existentialist insights, Gustafson and Krickel-Choi argued that ontological security as developed by Giddens, and then implemented by IR scholars in the 2000s, had utilised anxiety as a rather general and all-encompassing concept. Gustafson and Krickel-Choi instead propose, going back to Laing, the distinction between ‘normal and neurotic anxiety’ to add ‘greater conceptual clarity’ to the concept. The former ‘can be managed constructively’, whereas the latter ‘refuses to accept this lack of control and to surrender security’. The effect is that the security one attains becomes akin to a prison.⁹⁵

Gustafson and Krickel-Choi argue that this distinction is crucial for understanding how actors can be anxious but ontologically secure (‘normal’ anxiety), or be anxious and experience ‘true’ ontological insecurity (‘neurotic’ anxiety). Yet such a distinction, while reflective of the contexts where Laing’s work was applied, is not without some issues. The context of Covid, which we discuss further below, indicates that the line between ‘normal’ and ‘neurotic’ anxiety blurs, if not vanishes. And ethically, separating normal versus neurotic anxiety hews dangerously close to an ableist discourse that at the same time depoliticises those who confront anxiety into problematic categories.

The links we have discussed above with ontological security indicate that imbuing politics with myth is but one way of answering the existentialist concerns underpinning ontological security, and thus our third intervention into this intersection between existentialism and ontological security. Here, however, Giddens’s account of late modernity departs from the work on myth. While both Giddens and those working on myth agree that late modernity is complex and characterised by increased speed and potential chaos, Giddens argued that this complexity was managed (as noted

⁸⁷ Felix Berenskoetter, ‘Anxiety, time, and agency’, *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 273–90.

⁸⁸ Rumelili, ‘Ontological (in)security and peace anxieties’; Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety’.

⁸⁹ Rumelili, ‘Ontological (in)security and peace anxieties’, p. 11.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 2–3.

⁹¹ Steele, ‘The politics and limits of the self’.

⁹² Browning, ‘Ethics and ontological security’, p. 171.

⁹³ Browning, ‘Je suis en terrasse’.

⁹⁴ Gustafson and Krickel-Choi, ‘Returning to the roots of ontological security’.

⁹⁵ Gustafson and Krickel-Choi, ‘Returning to the roots of ontological security’, pp. 886–7.

above) by routines, experts, and 'abstract systems'.⁹⁶ Chiara Bottici posits, on the contrary, that the complexity of (late) modernity may bring a greater need for myth:

The complexity of modern societies, the rapid change that they have undergone by transcending the individual's space for experience, has rendered more acute the need for a symbolic mediation of political experience. Complex and vast political phenomena that transcend the individual's horizon of experience need to be imagined even more in order to be experienced. The concept of political myth points to the fact that this imaginary mediation can also take the form of a narrative that coagulates and reproduces significance, that is, the form of a myth.⁹⁷

Here arise at least two crucial intersections between myth and ontological security. First, myths almost always involve some form of 'drama' which may have themes of tragedy, joy, memories, and promises of future glories. Myths normally contain some form of heroism and villainy, albeit emphasised to different extents based upon the myth portrayed.⁹⁸ If these construct their own 'realities', then they are best understood as a highly simplified realities with a narrative core that is adaptable to a multiplicity of circumstances. They are, in effect, a filtering mechanism (as discussed regarding Edelman above) that serves to address our own human deficiencies and interpret what would otherwise be the complexities and ambiguities of politics. Here, we find an overlap between the dramatic function of myths and the more performatively centred work emerging in OSS, an overlap indebted to the broader works in IR utilising the dramaturgical accounts of Goffman.⁹⁹

Second, myths inspire political action and, crucially, this is not contrary to the process of finding ontological security. To explain this, it is first important to analyse this mobilising aspect of myth. Georges Sorel saw myths not simply as 'descriptions of things', but rather 'expressions of a determination to act'¹⁰⁰ that were crucial to political change. The human mind, for Sorel, cannot be content with merely observing facts and therefore cannot function simply with rationality alone.¹⁰¹ Indeed, Sorel argued that if we rely solely on rationality, then we could not undertake great social changes, because such changes were always created through imaginative means. Sorel believed and normatively endorsed the idea that myths operate against reason. They enable us to capture the sentiments and passions of the masses who rally into decisive struggles against enemies. As a revolutionary socialist (at the time), Sorel believed this would be essential to inspiring the proletariat to revolt. Sorel was also scathingly critical of the philosopher Ernst Renan throughout his work. The critique of Renan was based on a perceived tension between two strands of his thought that seemed to be separate: the scientific and the aesthetic. Sorel held a preference for the latter and noted that the former contained usages of 'syllogisms' that could never account for the passion of movements with religious or mythic qualities.¹⁰² By contrast, so powerful is myth that Sorel believed those 'living in the world of myths' become 'secure from all refutation'.¹⁰³ Holding on to this promise of victory is core to this mobilising force. Ernst Cassirer made similar analytical observations to Sorel. According to Cassirer, myths turn the passive state of deep internal emotions into an active process which is open display, and particularly in a moment of great upheaval,

⁹⁶ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

⁹⁷ Bottici, *A Philosophy of Political Myth*, p. 132. This also refutes the claims of Malinowski and Levy-Bruhl that myth is the product of primitive societies.

⁹⁸ Kirke, 'Violence and political myth'; Kirke, 'Political myth and the need for significance'.

⁹⁹ Steele, 'Welcome home!'; Kristin Haugevik, *Special Relationships in World Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Kristin Haugevik and Cecilie Basberg Neumann, 'Reputation crisis management and the state: Theorising containment as diplomatic mode', *European Journal of International Relations*, 27:3 (2021), pp. 708–29; Rebecca Adler-Nissen, 'Stigma management in international relations: Transgressive identities, norms, and order in international society', *International Organization*, 68:1 (2014), pp. 143–76; Adler-Nissen, 'The social self in international relations: Identity, power and the symbolic interactionist roots of constructivism', *European Review of International Studies*, 3:3 (2016), pp. 27–39.

¹⁰⁰ George Sorel, *Reflections on Violence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 32.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, pp. 22–5.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, pp. 26–35.

wherein rationality can no longer suppress myth. For Cassirer, this was a deeply troubling aspect of humanity and was prevalent during Nazi rule in Germany. In contrast to Sorel, who saw them as essential to enacting a general strike, Cassirer saw myths as fundamentally regressive.¹⁰⁴

This in fact moves away from the view that a state of ontological security is necessarily one of peace, stability, and routine. Conflict may be comforting. And, conversely, there is a paradox of ‘peace as insecurity’ that has been accounted for in ontological security research. As Bahar Rumelili argued in the introduction to her 2015 edited volume *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*:

[Conflicts] sustain the political and social production of definite objects of fear, systems of meaning that clearly differentiate friends from enemies, and unequivocal moral standards premised on the necessity for survival. At the individual, group, and state levels, they become embedded in habits and routinised practices, and enable state actors to maintain stable and consistent self-narratives that inform their actions.¹⁰⁵

Political myths often dramatically construct events as threatening audiences existentially. Yet this very act does something exceptionally important: it concretises what may otherwise be abstract, disconnected, or indifferent to people, so that who ‘we’ and our ‘enemies’ are, and the ‘threat’ they may pose, seem concrete and certain. This makes any overwhelming feeling of anxiety highly unlikely. We may feel fear, anger, or hatred, but these concretised states may be preferable to the aimlessness or directionlessness of anxiety.

Such conflicts allow us to not only function within physical reality but also avoid the overwhelming nature of a reality that is indifferent to us, by filtering it through myth and grounding us with significance. Such a condition generates ontological security, which may, or may not, be one sustained by conflict. However, when it is sustained by conflict, there are dramatic, mobilising, figurative stories designed to suppress the absolutism of reality and grant exceptional purpose to one’s own position within that story.

What political myth as a concept offers, then, is not just a commentary on the process of narrative in ontological security (as important as that is), but an underpinning reason for how certain forms of narrative may generate ontological security. Further, the process of generating significance intersects with an ontological security for some, and an ontological (and even physical) insecurity for others, as the example of Covid-19 discloses.

Normativity and mythologisation: Responding to populist Covid denialism

It has been widely documented that right-wing populists have fuelled Covid scepticism.¹⁰⁶ Rather than creating myths out of nothing, figures such as Donald Trump, Jair Bolsonaro, and Narendra Modi reinterpreted the existing political myth of struggle between an ‘elite’ and ‘the people’ that was already fundamental to populism. These sources of the ‘work on myth’ must be continuously told, retold, and adapted depending on the circumstances. Blumenberg refers to the necessity for myths to have both constancy and variation, in which they maintain a narrative core but become adaptable to changing social landscape.¹⁰⁷ If myths are not adapted to the present, they effectively cease to be myths.

Concretely, and most relevantly for this study, right-wing populists sought to understate the risks of Covid-19. ‘Experts’ who called for taking it seriously often drew the ire of such leaders. Doing so, we argue, allowed right-wing populist figures to construct the dichotomy of heroism

¹⁰⁴ Cassirer, *The Myth of the State*.

¹⁰⁵ Rumelili, ‘Introduction’, pp. 1–9 (p. 2).

¹⁰⁶ Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall, ‘Populism, ontological insecurity and gendered nationalism’; Catarina Kinnvall and Ted Svensson, ‘Exploring the populist “mind”: Anxiety, fantasy, and everyday populism’, *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* forthcoming, 34:3, (2022), pp. 526–542.

¹⁰⁷ Blumenberg, *Work on Myth*, p. 34.

and villainy – a key feature of political myth, especially in Sorelian accounts. In the United States in particular, senior Republicans, including Donald Trump, represented the director of the US National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, Anthony Fauci, as a figure who can be classified as an enemy; one who was responsible for the continued suffering experienced by Americans. Trump publicly threatened to dismiss Fauci if he won re-election, a claim that excited his supporters at a rally, who chanted ‘fire Fauci’.¹⁰⁸ The notion was that Fauci had become a political opponent of Trump and part of an attempt to defeat him. By contrast, Trump himself was confident enough to proclaim that doctors admired his apparent ‘natural ability’ to ‘know so much about this [Covid-19]’.¹⁰⁹ Following his defeat in the 2020 election, Trump and his allies continued to launch attacks on Fauci to the point where he appeared as a ‘cartoon villain’.¹¹⁰ Fauci was referred to as ‘not a great doctor but a great promoter’ who was ‘wrong on almost every issue’,¹¹¹ who had correspondence with China that ‘speaks too loudly to ignore’, and who was the ‘patron saint of Wuhan’.¹¹² The attacks on Fauci continued throughout 2022, with the Trumpian governor of the US state of Florida, Ron DeSantis, declaring in a speech of 25 August 2022 that he wanted to ‘throw’ Fauci ‘across the Potomac [River]’, to loud applause from his audience.¹¹³

In addition to attacks on expertise, these groups resorted to the aforementioned anxiety management practice of narratives, and ones that emphasised that the virus ‘wasn’t that bad’, that it was only the old or immunocompromised who were at risk, and that society needed to simply go on to keep the neoliberal capitalist system afloat. In a statement that illustrated quite clearly how much some on the right were willing to sacrifice (or how much of others’ lives they were willing to sacrifice) for the sake of maintaining the economy, Texas’s lieutenant governor proclaimed in March 2020 that he was ‘willing to take a chance’ on his ‘survival in exchange for keeping the America that all America loves for your children and grandchildren’ and implied that other ‘senior citizens’ would do the same.¹¹⁴ They also participated in narratives that ‘transposed existential anxieties about the unknown into identifiable objects of fear’.¹¹⁵ This was seen most directly in these groups’ calling Covid-19, following President Donald Trump’s lead, the ‘China virus’ or ‘Kung Flu’, which led to a rise in hate crimes against Asian-Americans.¹¹⁶ The groups also protested shelter-in-place orders, including at hospitals and in the presence of health-care workers.¹¹⁷

¹⁰⁸Zeke Miller, ‘Trump threatens to fire Fauci in rift with disease expert’, *Associated Press* 34:3 (2 November 2020), pp. 526–542 available at: {<https://apnews.com/article/trump-threatens-fire-fauci-rift-disease-57c804db048aa7f1c99f227b495f52e6>}.

¹⁰⁹Lisa Friedman and Brad Plumer, ‘Trump’s response to virus reflects a long disregard for science’, *New York Times* (2020), available at: {<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/28/climate/trump-coronavirus-climate-science.html>}.

¹¹⁰Mike Allenand and Sam Baker, ‘Trump’s new Hillary’, *Axios* (2021), available at: {<https://www.axios.com/trump-fauci-wuhan-lab-leak-04913c77-b8bc-47c5-8e05-1b1dbbeb5a30.html>}.

¹¹¹Makini Brice, ‘In rare public outing, Trump denounces Fauci, China; dangles 2024 prospects’, *Reuters* (6 June 2021), available at: {<https://www.reuters.com/world/us/rare-public-outing-trump-denounces-fauci-china-dangles-2024-prospects-2021-06-06/>}.

¹¹²Allenand and Baker, ‘Trump’s new Hillary’.

¹¹³Graeme Massie, ‘Desantis unleashes shocking attack on Fauci’, *Independent* (25 August 2022), available at: {<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/desantis-fauci-attack-elf-potomac-b2152095.html>}.

¹¹⁴Adrianna Rodriguez, ‘Texas’ lieutenant governor suggests grandparents are willing to die for US economy’ (24 March 2020), available at: {<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2020/03/24/covid-19-texas-official-suggests-elderly-willing-die-economy/2905990001/>}.

¹¹⁵Browning, C. S. “Je suis en terrasse”: political violence, civilizational politics, and the everyday courage to be, *Political psychology*, 39:(2) (2018), pp. 243–261.

¹¹⁶Laura Kurtzman, ‘Trump’s ‘Chinese virus’ tweet linked to rise of anti-Asian hashtags on Twitter’ (21 March 2021), available at: {<https://www.ucsf.edu/news/2021/03/420081/trumps-chinese-virus-tweet-linked-rise-anti-asian-hashtags-twitter>}.

¹¹⁷This was captured in one photo that went viral in April 2020, of a protest in Denver, Colorado, on 19 April, in front of the state capitol building. It shows a woman protestor leaning out of the passenger seat window of a truck, screaming at a health-care worker who is standing in a counter-protest fashion in the street. According to the photographer, the woman, who is white, screamed at the health-care worker to ‘go back to China’; Maia Booker, “‘Everyone was screaming at them’”: The story behind those photos of the counter-protesting health care workers’, *Time* (20 April 2020), available at: {<https://time.com/5824465/healthcare-workers-protest/>}.

These populist narratives represented an expert as someone who destabilised the ontological security of individuals, someone constructed as the personified (and simplified) source of their misery, and, eventually, someone against whom violence would be an appropriate measure.¹¹⁸ Distinctions emerge, then, between our existentialist intervention and the other accounts within OSS we previously referenced above. This includes, first, between our Blumenberg/Bottici account of myth and the aforementioned Gustafson and Krickel-Choi existentialist reading.¹¹⁹ In the former, there is simply no systematic way to separate out an anxiety that emerges through the overwhelming features of the absolutism of reality into categories of ‘normal’ versus ‘neurotic’. This is especially the case when we speak about political communities. Individuals within them are defined by group memberships that are shaped precisely by the existential anxiety they share as members of that community.¹²⁰ Thus, the naming function of myth performs the same transfer of anxiety into fear that OSS have described: ‘existential anxieties about the unknown are frequently refracted onto tangible objects of fear that can be prepared for or countered in some way.’¹²¹ But it does more than that: ‘symbolic forms ... altogether contribute to the overall endeavor of *making our existence possible*.’¹²²

Second, the politics of populism illustrates the overlap with but also a distinction from the Lacanian OSS accounts. The overlap is straightforward. On the one hand, myths tap into the powerful affective resources such as desire that fuel ontological insecurity.¹²³ Up to a point, this is fine, as Karen Armstrong describes myths as not opting out of the world, but rather trying to live more ‘intensely within it.’¹²⁴ Yet the Covid-19 pandemic calls attention to the horrific damage that results from ‘populist’ myths that ended up wilfully enabling a virus’s spread and sought to erase the lives lost.

Challenges arise, then, when myth extends into performative moments of drama and villainy, pushing subjects away from the absolutism of reality. Subjects here are attracted to dramatic renderings precisely because they avoid the absolutism of reality. They may even know it is not real and they simply do not care. Covid therefore was not only going to ‘wash away’, but rather never existed to begin with and instead was, and still is, a ‘hoax’. The deaths, the long-term impact, the horror, the misery cannot and will not be acknowledged, so that ‘we’ can go forward with our lives precisely in this mythical, dramatic world. In short, the existentialist anxiety here is ‘resolved’ in a politics that is more troubling and perilous than even Lacanian, let alone Giddensian, ontological security accounts would expect.

This leads to three fundamental consequences regarding existentialist insights following on from our account of political myth. First, change, adaptability, and our world-openness not only mean we never find a full, permanent, unchanging self, but some groups may not even be seeking to do so. Instead, they are hoping to evade the absolutism of reality by embedding themselves within myths that seek to explain the changing conditions around them (and us). This does not necessarily need to be ‘true’; what matters is the function of myth to provide us with a sense of certainty and explanation within particular moments.

Second, if this is the case, then arguments provided with evidence will not persuade those who are the greatest participants in the work on and work of myth. The cognitive, integrative, and mobilising potential of myth provides simple explanations in the chaos of (late) modernity in a world of

¹¹⁸ Fauci and his family experienced death threats throughout the pandemic, especially in 2022, when a West Virginia man was convicted of such threats and sentenced to prison: Veronica Stracqualursi, ‘Man who threatened Anthony Fauci sentenced to over 3 years in federal prison’, *CNN* (5 August 2022), available at: <https://www.cnn.com/2022/08/05/politics/fauci-threatened/index.html>.

¹¹⁹ Gustafson and Krickel-Choi, ‘Returning to the roots of ontological security’.

¹²⁰ Browning, ‘Brexit, existential anxiety and ontological (in)security’.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

¹²² Kirke, *Hans Blumenberg*, p. 75, emphasis added.

¹²³ Solomon, *The Politics of Subjectivity*.

¹²⁴ Armstrong, *A Short History of Myth*.

many possible interpretations.¹²⁵ Politics may be ambiguous, complicated, and ‘messy’, but political myths do not tolerate such ambiguities, and neither does the process of escaping the absolutism of reality through myth more broadly. The success of populist leaders in understating the importance of Covid-19 is one example of this.¹²⁶

Here, again, the ‘work on myth’ connects with the narrative dimensions utilised and explored within OSS, but in ways that disclose how these can be more productively confronted.¹²⁷ What makes political myths powerful is that the process of mythologisation answers existential needs, as a way not necessarily of explaining the world, but of allowing us to function within it. The adaptability of myth to changing circumstances means it is likely to evade critical argumentation, including attempts to ‘debunk’ the falsehoods within a narrative by reference to a hoped for ‘external reality’.

We therefore raise, third, the daunting (but we also think, productive) prospect that myths may need to be themselves challenged by addressing such existential needs through myth.¹²⁸ More specifically, arguments, positions, and morality need to be mythologised to hold affective, social and political appeal. Political myths provide simplistic moral ‘certainty’ and can adapt to the continuous changing conditions. Therefore, such myths need to also speak to the need for significance of a broad array of people. Myths do not therefore need to be exclusionary. Rather, as disclosed through narratives, myths can be inclusive and perceived as a legitimate alternative that may produce positive political changes.

Far from some esoteric philosophical understanding of politics, then, our engagement with existentialism via ontological security is a call to political action. It follows from the works in OSS that see positive and productive possibilities following from anxiety.¹²⁹ It is in line with what Browning and Joenniemi note, that ‘anxiety need not necessarily be something to be assiduously avoided, but may actually be welcomed as offering chances for renewal and the pursuit of a more authentic and (potentially ethically) fulfilling life.’¹³⁰ And it can speak to what an (if not the) ‘Ethics of Ontological Security’ involves.¹³¹

Here, our existentialist intervention is one that acknowledges the importance of a moral purpose that can help organise, and be mobilised towards, a more ‘authentic life’.¹³² Doing so helps advance Chris Rossdale’s aforementioned provocation on the need for an ethico-political rethinking of Ontological Security. This rethinking does not just stop at OSS’s analytical purpose of explaining and understanding the world, but rather calls one to seek to change it. Here, the pursuit of

¹²⁵Kirke, ‘Violence and political myth’.

¹²⁶There has been some work on how myths may interact with one another and where tensions or commonalities may exist, along with how some may be challenged. Badredine Arfi especially identifies argues that myths can increase or decrease intercommunal trust. Decreases could be caused by myths being anchored in salient communal memories which conflict with interpretations across other lines, whether they demonise one another, or become ‘routinised’ to relate to the ‘other’ as untrustworthy. The opposite of these generate trust. In the case of the Covid pandemic and populism, it seems highly unlikely that such reconciliation is possible. See Badredine Arfi, *International Change and the Stability of Multiethnic States: Yugoslavia, Lebanon, and Crises of Governance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), pp. 45–7.

¹²⁷Jelena Subotić, ‘Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change’, Alexandria J. Innes, ‘When the threatened become the threat: The construction of asylum seekers in British media narratives’, *International Relations*, 24:4 (2010), pp. 456–77; Zeynep Gülsah Çapan and Ayse Zarakol, ‘Turkey’s ambivalent self: Ontological insecurity in “Kemalism” versus “Erdoğanism”’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 263–82; Alexandra Homolar and Rony Scholz ‘The power of Trump-speak: Populist crisis narratives and ontological security’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 344–64; Alexandra Homolar and Georg Löffmann, ‘Populism and the affective politics of humiliation narratives’, *Global Studies Quarterly*, 1:1 (2021), pp. 1–11.

¹²⁸We are not here seeking to reproduce the binary between *mythos* and *logos*, in which the latter overcomes the former. In fact, we are seeking to do the opposite by implying that the *logos* has never overcome *mythos*. They may either function as independent processes, or *logos* can become *dependent* upon *mythos*.

¹²⁹Berenskoetter, ‘Agency, time, and anxiety’; Rumelili, ‘Integrating anxiety’.

¹³⁰Christopher S Browning, and Pertti Joenniemi, ‘Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity’, *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47 (p. 45).

¹³¹Browning, ‘Ethics and ontological security’.

¹³²See Browning, ‘Ethics and ontological security’, p. 161.

that authentic life, can, to paraphrase Rossdale, be a form of ‘resistance’ to right-wing attempts at a ‘violent ordering’ which ‘can enliven political action in various ways.’¹³³

Yet for Rossdale, writing in 2015, order, and ordering, is also a deeper philosophical challenge that must be confronted. For us, such resistance may be enlivening, but that resistance is also born from a recognition that there has been a profound disordering impact of the narratives such as the ones we have recalled in this section. Right-wing populist narratives that sketch a world of drama and villainy are not just dramatic performances for audience consumption or for us to interpret. They very much impact the everyday settings of those who are implicated in such narratives, the families they are part of and the communities they, and we, live in. They make for quite challenging conversations in our classrooms and with our children. From marginalised communities who are upended by the policies enabled by these narratives to individuals who have had to say goodbye to their loved ones over Zoom or FaceTime when a pandemic went spinning out of control because Covid ‘did not exist’, to children ripped from their parents at the southern border of the United States,¹³⁴ to Black parents and other parents of color who have to have ‘the Talk’ with their children to be cautious when they are around police¹³⁵ or worry about late modern vigilantes who might harass them or worse – these are all real outcomes, ones that generate existential anxiety like that we have discussed above, as well as the kind of ethical anxiety mentioned before where even privileged groups who have an ‘orderly’ existence still remain anxious, and even outraged, regarding the immoral ‘underpinnings’ of their political communities. Both kinds of anxiety can be marshalled, we argue, as a form of political solidarity via myths.

Thus, and with a gesture towards the decades-old English School debates between pluralists and solidarists, between ‘order’ and ‘justice,’¹³⁶ while the pursuit of an authentic self may involve ‘justice’, it may and perhaps must also involve attempts at *reordering*. This would not deny the importance of order but ask instead *whose* ‘sense of continuity and order’ has been privileged in political communities? We propose then that a more effective response to the violent populisms of the recent past lies in a radically democratic, and activist, politics that can only itself be sustained through myth. This does not mean rejecting reason altogether but ensuring that such attempts to achieve a better political outcome are supported by the mobilising power of myth – a unifier of otherwise divided communities that enables, if not determines, a more positive political future.

Conclusions

Over the last two decades, ontological security scholars have pioneered the development of alternative approaches to security that directly bridge centuries of philosophical research within modern-day social sciences. These contributions are incredibly valuable and have produced multiple exciting research outputs. The opportunity to re-engage with these philosophical underpinnings can generate new avenues for research. Ours is an approach that has sought to contribute to OSS itself by providing an alternative to the Lacanian account of a perpetually lacking Self and the promise via fantasy of wholeness of that Self. Drawing from Hans Blumenberg and others’

¹³³Rossdale, ‘Enclosing critique.’

¹³⁴Christine Agius’s recent study on this Trump-era policy examines how as a gendered bordering practice that reflects US ontological security drives, the policy also exhibits continuities with the past, and future, trends and ‘threads’ in US bordering practices. Christine Agius, “‘This is not who we are’: Gendered bordering practices, ontological insecurity, and lines of continuity under the Trump presidency”, *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 385–402.

¹³⁵Geeta Gandbhir and Blair Foster, ‘A conversation with my Black son’, *New York Times* (17 March 2015), available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/video/opinion/100000003575589/a-conversation-with-my-black-son.html>}.

¹³⁶A. Claire Cutler, ‘The “Grotian tradition” in International Relations’, *Review of International Studies*, 17:1 (1991), pp. 41–65; Nicholas J. Wheeler, ‘Pluralist or solidarist conceptions of international society: Bull and Vincent on humanitarian intervention’, *Millennium*, 21:3 (1992), pp. 463–87; Molly Cochran, ‘Charting the ethics of the English School: What “good” is there in a middle-ground ethics?’, *International Studies Quarterly*, 53:1 (2009), pp. 203–25.

treatment of ‘myth’ and indeed political myth,¹³⁷ we argued that this is an under-explored yet overlapping feature with regard to the function of myths and ontological security.

We have one thread, introduced at the end of the last section, that can and should be pursued further following on from the second and third intersections developed via myth and villainy, and myth as political action. The former theme is especially pronounced in the work of philosophers Chiara Bottici and Benoit Challand,¹³⁸ who look at the dramatic expressions and reinforcements of the myth of the ‘clash of civilisations’. But it is also prevalent in work on narratives whose resonance and effectiveness depend upon a ‘plot structure [that] keeps the audience in suspense’.¹³⁹

Myths are part of that plot structure but may also be used as an opening for change. Beyond the examples we have provided from Covid-19, the contexts of protest come to mind. As detailed in a recent study in this journal by Bohdana Kurylo, feminist resistance formed the basis of a ‘bodies coming together’ counter-populist ‘performance’ for reproductive rights that challenged an exclusionary understanding of security espoused in counter-right-wing populism in Poland in the early part of this decade.¹⁴⁰ Such performances involved dramatic visual displays, including the ‘symbolic use of metal hangers’. As Kurylo observes, ‘these dramatic visual representations used *simplified and emotionally charged motifs* to elicit immediate reactions from popular audiences’.¹⁴¹

The broader example of massive demonstrations during the Black Lives Matter protests in the summer of 2020 also comes to mind. Fostered by not only routinised but rhythmic features,¹⁴² the BLM protests were multiracial, multigenerational, and transnational, and they exhibited not only a kind of moral purpose for living an authentic life, but also a purpose to transform political communities for the better. Both examples disclose possibilities and purposes that seemed remote, and one might even say mythical. Yet both sets of protests, too, speak directly to the existential insights that outline our adaptability and need for some form of existential grounding within-the-world. Process, routine, and even regeneration of these in dramatic forms require myths with adaptable narrative cores that answer questions and mediate the ambiguities of reality while also providing certainty for social and political action.

Counter-myths will inevitably be imperfect, but without myth generation we are left with the blunt instruments of rationalism that have, so far, failed to protect these everyday contexts from the populist surge. Myths must answer the need for significance, and thereby ontological security, that is increasingly prevalent in global politics. The moment we are in, then, goes to the roots of the need for a myth generation that can not only generate such significance for these groups but also be inclusive and protective of them. It can, hopefully, bring forth a more dynamic and robust democratic politics that must continue to counter such violent forces in the future.

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¹³⁷Kirke, *Hans Blumenberg*.

¹³⁸Bottici and Challand, *The Myth of the Clash of Civilizations*; Bottici and Challand, ‘Rethinking political myth: The clash of civilizations as a self-fulfilling prophecy’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 3:9 (2006), pp. 315–36.

¹³⁹Alexandra Homolar, ‘A call to arms: Hero–villain narratives in US security discourse’, *Security Dialogue*, 53:4 (2022), pp. 324–41.

¹⁴⁰Bohdana Kurylo, ‘Counter-populist performances of (in)security: Feminist resistance in the face of right-wing populism in Poland’, *Review of International Studies*, 48:2 (2022), pp. 262–81.

¹⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 276, emphasis added.

¹⁴²Ty Solomon has explored this in relation to the Arab Spring of 2011, arguing that rhythms are not simply habitual behaviours, but that they ‘intensify collective emotions, generate emergent identities and subjectivities, and (re)construct social meanings of public spaces’. Ty Solomon, ‘Ontological security, circulations of affect, and the Arab Spring’, *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 934–58.

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