

Ontological Security Seeking in International Relations: Bringing in Insights from Interactionist Role Theory

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Abstract

This paper argues that interactionist role theory (IRT) holds much potential for complementing the ontological security literature (OSL) in the field of International Relations. Concretely, the paper argues that an IRT perspective promises to supplement the OSL in at least two significant respects. First, it allows for a better understanding of how an international actor's emergent sense of ontological (in)security is tied to its ability to realize its self in society through the making and playing of roles (and the subsequent casting of others). Second, it emphasizes an international actor's ability to respond to ontological security challenges constructively through the use of its reflexive intelligence, which endows it with a measure of ontological resilience. An IRT perspective, the paper suggests in this regard, offers valuable insights into the drivers and means of ontological security seeking, as well as into the link between ontological security seeking and processes of change and continuity in international relations. To illustrate this perspective, the paper provides a case study which explores how the European Union's ontological security is strengthened, challenged and restored in its interaction with its Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood.

Introduction

In recent years, interactionist role theory (IRT) and the ontological security literature (OSL) have fuelled a socio-psychological turn in the discipline of International Relations (see, for instance, Browning and Joenniemi, 2017; Harnisch, 2011b; 2012; Kinnvall, 2004; Kinnvall, Manners and Mitzen, 2018; Kinnvall and Mitzen, 2017; McCourt, 2011; 2012; 2014; Steele, 2008; Wehner, 2015; Wehner and Thies, 2015; Zarakol, 2010). While closely related, and largely complementary, the two literatures remain, however, surprisingly disconnected. This disconnect, this paper argues, is regrettable, not least as IRT's focus on the constitutive function of roles – and its emphasis on the creative and reflexive capacities of international actors – promise to provide relevant insights into the dynamics of ontological security seeking in international relations.

Drawing on IRT, this paper suggests that international actors grow ontologically secure as they realize themselves in society through the roles they play in interaction with others. The making and playing of roles, it suggests, enables international actors to express and validate their self-image (their identity) in society. Role-making and role-playing, the paper stresses are thus critical for an international actor's experience of – and ability to strengthen its – ontological security (a stable and comfortable sense of self), which provides its conduct in society with meaning and orientation.

By the same token, the paper argues that an international actor's ontological security is challenged by the experience of (looming) disconnects between their self-image and their societal role-play. If experienced at a high magnitude, such disconnects can generate considerable uncertainties, which undermine an actor's self-confidence and self-esteem. Role-self disconnects, the paper suggests, may thus generate identity crises, which threaten to strip an international actor's conduct of its meaning. Roles, the paper stresses in this light, not only enable an international actor to stabilize and strengthen its sense of self but also constitute a source of ontological insecurity (a sense of uncertainty and discomfort about who one is as an actor in society).

Apart from clarifying the significance of roles for the experience of ontological (in)security, IRT, the paper argues, moreover enables a better understanding of how international actors cope with disconnects and preserve or strengthen their ontological security (in critical situations). The paper, in this regard, stresses that IRT – with its emphasis on the creative and reflexive problem-solving capacity of international actors – can provide an important supplement to the OSL, which has mostly focused on how international actors who lack such capacities cope with ontological security challenges.

Building on IRT, the paper suggests that international actors can strengthen and preserve their ontological security by drawing on their capacity to act reflexively and creatively. This

capacity, the paper argues, enables international actors to respond to ontological security challenges with the (re)constitution of their self-image and societal roles, and thus allows them to view ontological security challenges as opportunities for strengthening their sense of self. Creativity and reflexivity, the paper argues in this regard, provide international actors with a measure of ontological resilience (defined in this paper as the ability to constructively engage with – and to recover from – ontological security challenges).

To illustrate these insights, this paper provides a case study which analyses the European Union's role-making and role-playing in its Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood. The case study argues that its neighbourhood role enables the EU to stabilize its self as an international actor, while also providing for a context in which that sense of self is challenged. The latter is illustrated in light of the EU's experience of recent neighbourhood crises, which have generated (the prospect of) severe role-self disconnects. Analysing the EU's responses to these crises, the case study stresses that the EU has shown an ability to cope with (looming) disconnects through the creative adjustment of both its regional role-play and self-image as an international actor – suggesting a (perhaps surprisingly high) degree of ontological resilience.

To develop the argument in detail, this paper will proceed in three stages. In a first stage, the paper will outline the core tenets of IRT and the OSL, and discuss the potential for a productive dialogue between the two strands. In a second stage, the paper seeks to illustrate that potential by applying insights from both literatures in a case study, which analyses the EU's experience of its relations with its Southern and Eastern Neighbourhood. Finally, the paper will conclude by discussing the usefulness of combining insights from IRT and the OSL while suggesting avenues for future research.

Connecting the Dots: Interactionist Role Theory and the Ontological Security Literature

In recent years, IRT and the OSL have fuelled a socio-psychological turn in the study of international relations. While closely related, and largely complementary, the two literatures have remained, however, surprisingly disconnected. This disconnect, this section argues, is regrettable as the insights from both literatures, if productively integrated, may provide for a better understanding of ontological security seeking in international relations. To substantiate this argument, this section will, in a first part, outline the core tenets of both strands, whereafter it will emphasize IRT's potential to complement the OSL in its theorization of ontological (in)security in international affairs.

The OSL and IRT in International Relations

An OSL perspective, which draws primarily on the works of Robert D. Laing (1969) and Anthony Giddens (1991), suggests that international actors are driven by a need to experience a stable and comfortable sense of self (i.e. ontological security). International actors, following the OSL, are prepared to go to great lengths, and even adopt self-harming measures, in order to have such ontological security needs fulfilled (Mitzen, 2006a, 2006b; Steele, 2008). From an OSL perspective, the pursuit of ontological security, thus, may go a long way to explain international behaviour that appears irrational from the perspective of classical utilitarianism and traditional accounts of security (Steele, 2008; Flockhart, 2016).

From an OSL perspective, international actors find their ontological security at risk when their routines and basic trust, which maintain ontological security in every-day life, are challenged by external or internal stimuli (Steele, 2008: 51; see also Ejodus, 2018). It is in such moments, the OSL argues, that ontological security concerns, which are otherwise monitored non-consciously (at the level of practical consciousness) are 'brought to mind' (the level of discursive consciousness) (Mitzen, 2006a: 346). At this level, international actors experience the challenge of having to make sense of their self (and by extension their action in society) before they can meaningfully re-focus on the 'tasks at hand' (Mitzen, 2006a: 346). External or internal stimuli, following the OSL, can thus constitute critical situations (identity crises) in which an international actor comes to experience a degree of ontological insecurity (a sense of uncertainty and discomfort about who it is as an actor in society) (Ejodus, 2018; Mitzen, 2006a: 345; Steele, 2008: 51).

Following the OSL, international actors are prepared to go to great lengths to avoid and overcome such experiences. To maintain a measure of certainty, as argued by Jennifer Mitzen (2006a), international actors may, for instance, cling to harmful routines. Conflictual relations, including security dilemmas, Mitzen (2006a: 212) suggests in this regard, may persist in part because they satisfy ontological security needs, and because 'breaking free can generate ontological insecurity, which states seek to avoid'. In a similar vein, Ayse Zarakol (2010) noted that states such as Turkey or Japan follow costly policies of denying past war crimes so as to maintain a stable sense of self. To preserve a measure of ontological security, as stressed by Amir Lupovici (2012: 818), international actors moreover seek to avoid potentially securitizing processes of self-evaluation, for instance by creating ambiguities around their societal practices, or by manipulating their (access to) information.

Ontological security needs, as these perspectives suggest, often lead international actors to preserve the status quo. As argued by Trine Flockhart (2016), ontological security seeking may indeed provide a constructivist explanation for why change in international relations is rare, and difficult to achieve. Not all OSL scholars, however, equally share the OSL's tendency to emphasize ontological security seeking as a status-quo-preserving dynamic. More recent

contributions, in fact, have stressed that such dynamics tell only a part of the ontological security story. Christopher Browning and Pertti Joenniemi (2017: 35), for instance, have argued that international actors seek ontological security far more reflexively and flexibly than the OSL has generally appreciated. Concretely, following Heidegger, they (ibid: 45) suggest that international actors may, to some extent, even welcome challenges to their ontological security as ‘chances for renewal and the pursuit of a more authentic and (potentially ethically) fulfilling life’. Ontological security seeking, for them, does consequently not just restrict – but also generate – change in (the conduct and identities of international actors in) international affairs.

Inspired by this perspective, the OSL has more recently become increasingly engaged in exploring how ontological security seeking shapes the self-image (the identity) of international actors. OSL scholars, for instance, have stressed in this regard that critical situations provide opportunities for narrative entrepreneurs to restore ontological security through the creative re-telling of an international actor’s biography (Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Subotic, 2016). The OSL, in this light, has given greater emphasis to how reflexive and creative policy-making shapes the dynamics of ontological security seeking in international relations. This trend, this paper argues, has not only widened the scope of the OSL, but also moved its focus closer to that of IRT, another emerging socio-psychological strand in the IR literature, which emphasizes international relations as driven by the reflexive intelligence – and role-playing and role-making ambitions – of interacting units.

IRT, like the OSL, primarily concerns itself with the social constitution of an international actor’s image of self (its identity) in society (Harnisch, 2011b, 2012; McCourt, 2011, 2012, 2014; Wehner and Thies, 2014; Wehner, 2015). With its roots in the works of social psychologist George Herbert Mead (1934), IRT argues that an international actor’s image of its self emerges, in first instance, through the reflective and creative interaction of its constituent units. It is through such interaction, IRT suggests, which may be (more or less directly) shaped by ‘others’, that constituent units negotiate – and attach themselves to – visions for the international actor they embody (McCourt, 2014: 37-8). As a result of this process, following IRT, an international actor comes to realize its identity (an understanding about ‘who it is and what it wants’ as an actor in society), which in turn endows its international conduct with meaning and orientation (Harnisch, 2011b; McCourt, 2011). Following IRT, it is thus the reflexive intelligence of constituent units which constitutes the key driver for the emergence and evolution of an international actor’s sense of self.

IRT further argues that, to stabilize this sense of self, an international actor needs to express and realize its self in the interaction with others. To do so, international actors seek to take up – and to cast others into commensurate – societal roles (Harnisch, 2012: 54-5; McCourt, 2012: 378-81). Roles, IRT suggests in this regard, refer to the interactively realized social structures, comprised of ego and alter expectations, which embed an international actor’s

self in society (McCourt, 2012). Through the making and playing of roles, and the casting of others, international actors therefore anchor their self in society, and society's social practices. Role-making, role-playing and alter-casting thus allow an international actor to express and solidify its self in society, and to build-up a degree of self-confidence and self-esteem (Harnisch, 2012: 54).

Following IRT, role-making, role-playing and alter-casting, apart from anchoring the self in society, moreover serve to anchor society in the self. Concretely, IRT suggests that roles function as transmitters for societal expectations which shape an international actor's process of self-reflection, and (by extension) its identity (Harnisch, 2016: 4). Roles consequently not only solidify an international actor's self but also shape its creative and reflexive (re)constitution (Harnisch, 2016: 9; McCourt, 2011: 1604-8). IRT moreover stresses that roles constitute significant sites of contestation (Harnisch, 2016: 13; see also Cantir and Kaarbo, 2012). Concretely, it argues that roles, which can only be achieved in interaction, provide arenas in which significant others can contest an actor's sense of self, and deny its self-realization. Following IRT, the making and playing of roles, and the casting of others, therefore not only enable international actors to stabilize their self in society, but also constitute sites in which this stability is challenged.

Finally, an IRT perspective suggests that international actors are capable of responding to such contestation, and thus challenges to their sense of self, through creative and reflective problem-solving (Harnisch, 2011b). Specifically, IRT argues that the creative and reflective capacities of their constituent units enable international actors to react to contestation through critical self-evaluation and the creative development of ideas which draw on both experience and impulse (Harnisch, 2011b). Following IRT, these processes, in turn, allow international actors to react to their environment with the (interactively realized) re-imagination of their self-image and societal roles. International actors, consequently, are capable of engaging with external and domestic stimuli, and the challenges these present for their sense of self, constructively. IRT, in this sense, holds that critical situations, which challenge the self-image of international actors, constitute potential catalysers for change in the evolution of international actors, and (the roles these play in) international society.

This IRT perspective, this paper argues, holds much potential for complementing the OSL. In particular, the paper suggests that its emphasis on the functioning of roles – and the creative and reflective capacity of international actors – promise significant insights into how international actors come to experience a sense of ontological (in)security, and how they respond to critical situations. To specify this potential, this section, in the following, will outline in greater detail the value an IRT perspective can add to theorizing ontological security seeking in international relations.

IRT and the Theorization of Ontological Security Seeking in International Relations

This section argues that insights from IRT can be usefully employed to complement the OSL. Concretely, it argues that IRT may add value to this literature in two significant ways: through its emphasis on roles as sources of ontological (in)security, and through its view on creativity and reflexivity as enablers of ontological resilience (the ability to constructively engage with – and to recover from – ontological security threats).

First, an IRT perspective suggests that an international actor's sense of ontological (in)security is intimately tied to its ability (or failure) to take up and perform societal roles. Concretely, it suggests that international actors stabilize their sense of self by solidifying their self in society through the making and playing of roles (and the subsequent casting of others). Role-making, role-playing and alter-casting, following IRT, are therefore critical for the experience of ontological security. Moreover, an IRT perspective suggests that role-playing allows international actors to learn about the perspectives of others, and to establish meaningful routines which strengthen its self-confidence and self-esteem (McCourt, 2014: 26-33; see also Harnisch, 2011b; Herborth, 2004). Following IRT, roles therefore provide the context in which international actors can establish the routines and trust which, as noted in the OSL (see, for instance, Mitzen, 2006a: 347-350; Mitzen, 2006b: 247), sustain ontological security over time.

This is not to argue, however, that international actors cannot experience a sense of ontological security until they perform a particular role. Rather, IRT, like the OSL (see, for instance, Steele, 2008: 62-3), suggests that a sense of ontological security emerges, in first instance, as international actors go (in the words of Erving Goffman) 'backstage', where they can distance their self from their roles and (re)constitute their self in relation to (their own historical) others (Harnisch, 2012: 54). An IRT perspective, however, further stresses that whether or not the self-image produced backstage can provide a sustained feeling of ontological security, depends on whether it can be expressed and solidified in societal role play (McCourt, 2011: 1604-8). Playing, and getting others to play, roles such as friends, rivals or allies, following IRT, is thus critical for the ability of international actors to sustain and strengthen a stable and comfortable sense of self over time (ibid.).

IRT, in this respect, further suggests that where solidification (through the making and playing of roles) is absent, partial or threatened, actors may come to experience ontological insecurity (Klose, 2018). Role-making and role-playing thus not only enable a comfortable and stable sense of self, but also provide a potential source of discomfort and uncertainty. Following IRT, ontological insecurity, in this regard, may emerge when international actors experience a (widening) disconnect between their self-image and role-play in society. Such disconnects, IRT suggests, arise, for instance, when international actors lack the (material or social) capacity to realize self-affirming roles, or when existing contradictions between their role-play and self-image become revealed or problematized (ibid). IRT, in this respect, moreover

stresses that role-self disconnects may be caused by both constituent units and external significant others who may (as they interact with one another) drive wedges between an international actor's role-play and self-image through the contestation of (role- and self-constituting) routines (Harnisch, 2016: 13). Following IRT, emergent disconnects, in turn, may, if experienced by an international actor at a high magnitude, generate considerable uncertainties, which de-stabilize the actor's sense of self.

At the same time, not every role-self disconnects, however, necessarily triggers a full-blown identity crisis. International actors, IRT, like the OSL (see, for instance, Mitzen, 2006b: 274), stresses, have indeed a considerable capacity for tolerating or bracketing disconnects at the level of routines (Harnisch, 2011b; Harnisch, 2012). Routines, both IRT and the OSL suggests in this regard, enable international actors to go through life without being thrown off balance by role-self disconnects, which unavoidably emerge as societal roles – being the result of negotiated expectations – tend to deviate from idealized images of self. At the same time, an IRT perspective, however, further emphasizes that role-self disconnects constitute a constant (if often muted) source of instability, which, once brought to mind, can generate considerable pressure for international actors to re-establish a sense of coherence between their self-image and societal role-play. Role-self disconnects, seen from an IRT perspective, therefore function as ontological thorns in the side of international actors.

At the same time, role-self disconnects also push international actors to assert and re-think their self-image in society, and thus to re-consider their social routines (Harnisch, 2011b, 2012; McCourt, 2011). From an IRT perspective, role-self disconnects, in this regard, not only constitute a source of insecurity but also one of inspiration and motivation, which can drive – and provide orientation for – international actors as they engage with others in society. Role-self disconnects, consequently, may function as a motor for change in the evolution of international actors, and (the roles these play in) international society. Following IRT, ontological security seeking, therefore, does not only lead international actors to preserve the status quo, but may in fact constitute a far more dynamic process that can explain change in international affairs. Considering the latter, a second insight can be gained from IRT which promises to strengthen the OSL, namely IRT's emphasis on reflexive intelligence as an enabler of ontological resilience.

From an IRT perspective, reflexive intelligence emanates from the ability of international actors to critically reflect on – and creatively (re)constitute – their self (and roles) in society by drawing on their capacity for reflection (referred to as 'me') and their ability to generate creative impulses (referred to as 'I') (Harnisch, 2011b: 39-44). Together, these capacities, IRT suggests, enable international actors to resolve role-self disconnects in an innovative and pragmatic fashion. Following IRT, reflexive intelligence thus provides an international actor with a measure of ontological resilience in the face of experienced disconnects. This resilience, IRT suggests, may emanate (in part) from the reflexivity and creativity of individual leaders,

their interaction with (and knowledge of) others, as well as (more or less institutionalized) domestic reflexive and creative practices, including democratically organized and scientifically supported processes of (regular) self-evaluation (Harnisch, 2011b: 43). Together, an IRT perspective suggests, these aspects shape an international actor's ability to gain a critical distance from its self, to grasp the perspectives of others, and to creatively re-think its self and societal roles – and thus to restore and strengthen its ontological security – in critical situations.

An international actor who displays a high level of creativity and reflexivity, IRT suggests, will thus find it easier to cope with the experience of (looming) role-self disconnects. This, however, is not to say that for ontologically resilient actors, the restoration of their ontological security is a straightforward process. Rather, IRT stresses that the (re)constitution of ontological security hinges not only on whether an actor can critically reflect on – and re- envision – its self and societal roles, but also on whether it can solidify its vision in the interaction with significant others, and thus its ability to alter-cast. This ability, following IRT, in turn, is not determined by an actor's reflexivity and creativity alone, but also its availability of (social and material) resources as well as the social expectations of significant others (Klose, 2018). IRT moreover emphasizes that the process by which an international actor re-envisions its self and societal roles, is often a messy one in which multiple visions for the actor's self are generated, negotiated and contested by constituent units (and external others). The restoration of ontological security, therefore, often constitutes a process of multiple stages and junctures at which certain visions for an international actor's self and societal roles take hold (or are discarded) (Klose, 2018).

An IRT perspective, in this regard, acknowledges the difficulties international actors face in realizing their visions of self in society while it, at the same time, stresses that their reflexive intelligence provides international actors with the capacity to respond to such difficulties in a creative fashion. Ontologically resilient actors, which are more capable of critical self-reflection and creative self-evaluation, an IRT perspective suggests, will thus find it easier to engage in such potentially unsettling processes, which they may even welcome as an opportunity for self-development. Actors who lack a high degree of reflexivity and creativity, IRT suggests, may, by contrast, shy away from actively re-making their self and societal roles in the interaction with others. To maintain ontological security, as emphasized in the OSL (Lupovici, 2012; Zarakol, 2010), these actors may either try to avoid dealing with – or to deny – ontological security challenges. As a consequence, they may tend to cling to established role-playing routines and self-images, even if these are contradictory and physically or politically harmful (Mitzen, 2006a). Following IRT, this group of actors may thus be considered ontologically vulnerable (i.e. less able to engage constructively with – and thus to recover from – ontological security challenges), which makes them prone to experiencing (looming) role-self disconnects as deeply unsettling.

Filling Gaps in the Literature

An IRT perspective, as this section has sought to suggest, promises to enhance an understanding of ontological security seeking in three important respects. Firstly, it allows for a better understanding of how of an international actor's emergent sense of ontological (in)security is tied to its ability to realize its self in society through the making and playing of roles (and the subsequent casting of others). Secondly, it provides for a more nuanced understanding of an international actor's ability to respond to ontological security challenges constructively through the use of its reflexive intelligence, which endows it with a measure of ontological resilience. Finally, following the first two aspects, it provides important insights into the drivers and means of ontological security seeking, as well as into the link between ontological security seeking and processes of change and continuity in international relations.

An IRT perspective of ontological security seeking, the paper argues in this regard, is well equipped to fill significant gaps in the OSL. On the one hand, it establishes a link between roles and ontological (in)security which in the OSL, despite some author's indications (Lupovici, 2012: 817; Mitzen, 2006a: 357-60), has remained remarkably under-explored. On the other, its emphasis on the significance of reflexive intelligence promises to answer Browning and Joenniemi's call for turning the OSL's attention towards modes of ontological security seeking which are not driven by a low level of basic trust that prevents reflexive and creative problem-solving (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017). Finally, IRT may serve to strengthen the OSL by opening up debates about the link between ontological security seeking and change in international affairs, while also providing a starting point for debate about what it is that makes international actors ontologically more resilient or vulnerable.

Next to filling gaps in the OSL, the above-presented perspective also promises to complement the literature of IRT which has, despite allusions to the significance of ontological (in)security (Harnisch, 2016: 9-12; McCourt, 2011: 1604, 2014: 9), not yet systematically addressed how a sense of ontological security emerges, and how that emergence is shaped by IRT concepts such as role-making, role-playing or alter-casting. Connecting IRT's conceptual framework with that of the OSL, this paper suggests, consequently promises to fill important gaps in either literature, which in turn may help to build a bridge between them, and thus to generate a productive conversation between two fast-emerging socio-psychological strands in the IR literature.

To further substantiate the usefulness of an IRT perspective on ontological security, the following section will illustrate how such a perspective can be employed for analysing social dynamics in international relations. Concretely, by drawing on the IRT perspective outlined above, this section will analyse how the EU's role in its (Southern and Eastern) neighbourhood,

shapes its sense of ontological (in)security, and by extension its evolution as an international actor.

The Emergence of a Principled Pragmatist: Role-Self Disconnects and the EU's Restoration of Ontological Security

This section, which seeks to illustrate the arguments presented above through an analysis of the EU's relations with its neighbourhood, will be organized around three parts. In its first, part, this section seeks to illustrate how the EU's ontological security is tied to its role-making and role-playing in its (Eastern and Southern) neighbourhood. It argues that the EU's neighbourhood role has enabled the Union to strengthen its sense of ontological security insofar as it has allowed it to express and solidify a particular vision of its 'self' (and its external environment) in the interaction with its neighbouring others. In its second part, this section seeks to show how recent trends and events in its neighbourhood have unsettled this vision, and generated role-self disconnects, which have challenged the EU's ontological security and generated attempts at re-asserting the EU's self in the region. Finally, in its third part, this section suggests that the EU's experience of role-self disconnects has generated a process of creative self-reflection, expressed in the revision of strategic documents, which may be, to some extent, indicative of the EU's ontological resilience: its ability to constructively engage with – and recover from – ontological security challenges.

All three parts of this analysis draw on close-readings of primary sources, including the official documents released by EU institutions and statements by EU representatives, as well as the vast and rapidly expanding literature on the EU's relations with its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood.

The EU's Role-making in its Neighbourhood: Expressing and Solidifying a Vision of 'Self'

Driven by (the expectations of) its constituents (such as EU institutions and member states), the European Union has, over the past decades, developed the aspiration to perform as a (particular kind of) international actor. This aspiration draws on an EU self-image, which derives from (the reconciliation of) two visions that otherwise share a tense relationship: a vision of the EU as an international actor capable of proactively guarding its economic prosperity and physical security, and a vision of the EU as a promoter of liberal (economic and political) norms, which include norms related to multilateralism, human rights and liberal democracy (see, for instance, Parker and Rosamond, 2013; Rogers, 2009; Wagner, 2017; Youngs, 2004).

To express and solidify this self-image in society, this section suggests, the EU has engaged in the development and performance of societal roles that tie its 'self' to – and shape – international social structures. Notably, in this regard, the EU has sought to realize its 'self' through the development of a role in its neighbourhood, which has become institutionalized with the EU's establishment of its European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) in 2004. The ENP enabled the EU to carve out an international role for its 'self' by casting others into members of a European neighbourhood, a regional structure constituted in the process (Browning, 2018). The successful casting of others into commensurate roles, this section argues, has thus allowed the EU to express and solidify its 'self' (and vision for society), which in turn has become tied to the (more or less routinized) social practices that structure its relations with 'neighbouring' states.

The EU's alter-casting in the region, the section stresses in this regard, has been reflective of its complex self-image as an international actor. On the one hand, to realize its 'self' as an effective guardian of its economic prosperity and physical security, the EU has sought to cast its neighbours into close and stable partners, who it can effectively cooperate with in areas such as counter-terrorism, migration control and energy security (Dandashly, 2014; Schumacher, 2015). The EU, towards this end, has not shied away from strengthening ties with authoritarian leaders, whom it has offered financial support and international legitimacy in return for enhanced security cooperation (Roccu and Voltolini, 2018). On the other hand, to realize its 'self' as a promoter of liberal norms, the EU has sought to cast its neighbours into liberalizing (and eventually) democratizing states. To this end, the EU has offered neighbouring states greater access to its market – as well as foreign aid and technical assistance – in return for a demonstrated commitment to market economy principles, the rule of law or human rights (Noutcheva, 2018). Together, it is through these alter-casting practices that the EU has been able to express and solidify its complex image of self (and the visions that underpin it) in a specific social structure of international society. The EU's neighbourhood role, in this sense, has been conducive to stabilizing and strengthening the EU's sense of self as an international actor, and thus its ontological security.

At the same time, this role's ontological security-enhancing quality, however, has, ever since the inception of the European Neighbourhood Policy in 2004, been compromised by role contestation as well as internal contradictions. On the one hand, authoritarian governments in the EU's neighbourhood have oftentimes openly contested – or only selectively supported – the EU's liberal agenda, and thus weakened the EU's ability to realize its 'self' in its neighbourhood as a credible promoter of liberal norms (Dandashly, 2014; Del Sarto, 2016). On the other hand, the EU has itself undermined this ability through its close cooperation with – and stabilization of – authoritarian neighbours. As many scholars have noted in this regard, the EU has generally prioritized security cooperation with its neighbours over the promotion of liberal norms, especially those related to human rights and democratic governance (Browning and Joenniemi, 2008; Dandashly, 2014; Pace, 2014). The EU's alter-

casting ambitions, in this sense, have displayed significant contradictions and tensions, which have challenged not only the consistency and legitimacy of its neighbourhood role, but also the EU's overall image of its 'self' as an actor in international affairs. The EU's neighbourhood role, this suggests, has not only served the EU in expressing and stabilizing its image of 'self' in society, but has also provided a social context within which that image has been challenged. It, in other words, not only serves to strengthen – but also holds the potential to unsettle – the EU's sense of ontological security.

Turmoil in the Neighbourhood and the EU's Experience of (and Reaction to) Role-Self Disconnects

In 2011, the Arab Uprisings painfully confronted the EU with the contradictions that underpin its neighbourhood role. Concretely, the toppling of authoritarian leaders in North Africa in the early days of 2011 (all of whom had been staunch partners of the Union), raised serious questions about the EU's role in the region as well as its self-image as an international actor. The EU's Commissioner for the Neighbourhood, Stefan Füle, for instance, expressed his concerns by noting in February 2011 that 'we [the EU] must show humility about the past. Europe was not vocal enough in defending human rights and local democratic forces in the region'. 'Too many of us [he added] fell prey to the assumption that authoritarian regimes were a guarantee of stability in the region' (Füle, 2011).

As the Commissioner's statement suggests, the Arab Uprisings presented the EU with a role-self disconnect that challenged its stable and comfortable sense of self. Not only did the Arab Uprisings (threaten to) end regional stability and long-standing EU partnerships with North African governments, and thus the EU's ability to realize its 'self' as an effective guardian of its economic prosperity and physical security. They also revealed and problematized long-standing contradictions in the EU's role-play and alter-casting strategies, and thereby jeopardized the EU's self-image as a capable promoter of liberal norms. The Arab Uprisings, consequently, simultaneously threatened to undermine both pillars of the EU's role in the region, and by extension the EU's self-image as an international actor, which is rooted in the expectations of its constituent units.

To address this challenge, the EU, driven by some of its member states, notably Britain and Germany, as well as its institutional actors, such as the EEAS and the European Commission, sought to re-affirm its 'self' in the region by offering support to pro-democratic movements and newly-elected leaders (Pace, 2014: 978). Notably, to re-assert itself as a promoter of liberal (democratic) norms, and to establish strong ties with post-revolution leaders, the EU undertook a revision of its ENP, which Commissioner Füle, together with High Representative Ashton, presented in May 2011 as 'a new approach [...] a partnership aimed at promoting and supporting the development of deep democracy and economic prosperity in our

neighbourhood' (European Commission, 2011). Moreover, the Union vowed to support democratic change in the region through macro-financial assistance, support to SME's, an expansion of the European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR), as well as the establishment of a Civil Society Facility and a European Endowment for Democracy (Archick and Mix, 2012).

These (in the eyes of many observers half-hearted) initiatives, which aimed at re-making the EU's role in the region and the casting of neighbouring states into democratizing partners, however, were quickly overshadowed by the region's unfolding events and dynamics (Dandashly, 2014; Pace, 2014). Outside Tunisia – being the only context in which the EU was able to firmly realize its 'self' as promoter of democratic transition – the EU's revised approach to the neighbourhood was met with little enthusiasm (Dandashly, 2014). In Egypt or Libya, post-revolution leaders showed little interest in participating in the EU's 'more for more' scheme, or in taking up the EU's offer to employ electoral observation missions (Roccu and Voltolini, 2018). This lack of interest not only reflected the Egyptian and Libyan leadership's own unwillingness to push ahead with democratic reforms, but also the weakness of domestic pro-democracy coalitions as well as the role of external actors, in particular Qatar and Saudi Arabia, who heavily invested to contest EU (as well as US) role-making efforts while seeking to cast the region's transitioning states into partners of their own (Dandashly, 2014; Hassan, 2015).

EU efforts aimed at re-asserting its 'self' by taking up the role of a promoter of democratic transition, moreover, were soon overshadowed by the restoration of authoritarian rule in Egypt following a coup d'état led by General el-Sisi in July 2013, as well as prolonged civil wars in Libya and Syria, which contributed to a rising number of refugees entering the EU, and a series of terrorist attacks in both the Union and its Neighbourhood. Together, these events not only shattered EU hopes to credibly realize its 'self' as a promoter of liberal-democratic norms (and thus its re-formulated vision for the region), but also further threatened its ability to realize its 'self' as an effective guardian of its own prosperity and security, a challenge that was further amplified by uncertainties about the US' commitment to the region, as well as the growing influence of Russia and the Gulf monarchies whose own role-making further weakened the EU's ability to re-assert its 'self' in its Southern Neighbourhood (Hassan, 2015; Schumacher, 2018). The region's emerging dynamics and events, in this regard, further widened – rather than narrowed – the disconnect between the EU's self-image as an international actor and its role-play in its neighbourhood, and thus presented the Union with an even greater challenge to its ontological security.

This challenge was further compounded by events and dynamics in the EU's Eastern neighbourhood. In particular, in this regional context, the EU has seen its role, and by extension its self-image (as a guardian of its prosperity and security, and as a promoter of liberal norms) contested by Russia. Russia's contestation, in turn, has partly followed

intensifying attempts by the EU to cast former Soviet states into democratizing and liberalizing partners through instruments such as association agreements which offer increased access to the EU's market in return for political reform as well as compliance with EU norms and standards. For Russia, such EU measures constituted a threat not only to its established role in the region but also its self-image as a regional (great) power, and thus its own ontological security (Browning, 2018, see also Gehring, Urbanski and Oberthür, 2017).

To re-affirm its 'self', and to strengthen its ontological security, Russia, in response to such EU measures, engaged not only in contesting the EU's alter-casting but also in asserting its own vision for (its role in) the region. Concretely, Russia took measures to prevent its neighbours from integrating further into the EU by offering them loans, preferential oil and gas prices, and membership in its newly-created Eurasian Economic Union (Casier, 2018). Where these measures failed, as they did in Ukraine, Russia moreover turned to forceful measures to assert its 'self' as a regional power, and to contest the EU, such as through the annexation of Crimea and the de-stabilization of Eastern Ukraine (ibid.). Moreover, to assert its 'self' – and to contest the EU's role-play (and self-image) in the region, Russia re-envisioned its 'self' as a (Christian) value-conserving power which would constitute an alternative to a morally repugnant EU – a vision it has sought to diffuse, in part, through purposeful disinformation (Haukkala, 2017; Noutcheva, 2018; Romanova, 2016). Russian self-assertion, in this sense, has aimed at undermining the EU's role-play in its neighbourhood as well as the Union's self-image, and thus its ontological security, as an international actor.

Russian contestation, in this regard, has presented an additional challenge to the EU's ability to realize its 'self' as a guardian of its security and prosperity, and an effective promoter of liberal norms, which, in turn, has threatened to further reinforce the role-self disconnect that has challenged the EU's ontological security in the context of its neighbourhood. In order to address this challenge of Russian role contestation, the EU, for many unexpectedly (considering diverse member state interests), united around imposing sanctions against Russia for its intervention in Ukraine, in the context of which the EU portrayed its 'self' as a guardian of territorial integrity and promoter of liberal norms, while painting Russia as a revisionist power stuck in the 20th century (European Commission, 2014; Sjurssen and Rosen, 2017). At the same time, the EU sought to contest Russian role-making in its neighbourhood by adopting a more determined approach to casting its Eastern neighbours into EU-oriented international actors.

This approach built on a second revision of the EU's ENP, published in November 2015, which re-focused the EU's role in its neighbourhood on the promotion of open markets and economic development, cooperation in security sector reform, conflict prevention, counter-terrorism and anti-radicalization, as well as the effective promotion of 'democratic, accountable and good governance [...] *where there is a shared commitment to the rule of law, and fundamental rights*' (European Commission, 2015, emphasis added). In line with this

revision of its neighbourhood role, the EU pushed for the speedy signing of agreements with its Eastern neighbours – including Armenia, Azerbaijan, the Ukraine and Georgia – to tie those states more firmly to the EU's economic and political structures, while putting aside concerns over the countries' human rights situation and political system.

Likewise, in both its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood, the EU pressed for agreements that allowed it to strengthen its regional role in the area of counter-terrorism and migration control. To this end, the EU generated a number of initiatives, including the launch of a naval mission in the Mediterranean Sea, financial assistance programmes to refugees and host communities in countries like Jordan, Lebanon or Egypt, border management trainings in states like Tunisia, Morocco and the Eastern Partnership countries, as well as enhanced cooperation with NATO in areas such as the countering of hybrid threats (Henökl and Stemberger, 2016). Finally, following initiatives by Germany and Italy, the EU moreover engaged in casting Turkey and Libya into close partners on migration control through the negotiation of agreements that offered substantial EU financial assistance (amongst other things) in return for governmental support to the prevention of migration into the EU (European Council, 2016; European External Action Service, 2018).

Altogether, these responses to the insecurity challenges emanating from events and dynamics in its neighbourhood have (if partially) enabled the EU to re-assert its 'self' as a guardian of its security and prosperity and a promoter of liberal economic norms. At the same time, however, they have also come at a cost. Most notably, the EU's measures have further undermined – rather than strengthened – the EU's self-image as a promoter of human rights, democracy and the rule of law in the region (Pomorska and Noutcheva, 2017). Competition with Russia, for instance, has led the EU to fast-track the signing of agreements with Eastern neighbours without much consideration for democratic standards (ibid: 169). Deals with Turkey and Libya, moreover, have contributed to a very reluctant EU response to quickly deteriorating human rights and democracy standards in both countries (ibid: 170). The EU's measures to address challenges to its ontological security, in this sense, did not fully close the gap between its self-image and neighbourhood role-play, and even further widened the gap between its role play and self-image as a promoter of democracy and human rights.

Strengthening the EU's Ontological Security (and Resilience): The European Global Strategy

To deal with such a persistent gap, the EU, led by High Representative Federica Mogherini, in 2014, began to engage in a reflective and creative review of its 'self'-image as an international actor (Tocci, 2017). Following consultations with EU constituents, including members states, as well as the EU's international partners, this review, in June 2016, resulted in the publication of an EU Global Strategy (EUGS) (European External Action Service, 2016). This strategy re-envisioned the Union's self as a 'principled pragmatists' focused on guarding its citizen's

security and prosperity pragmatically, and where possible through the promotion of liberal norms and principles (ibid:16). Building on this vision, the EUGS re-imagined the EU in its neighbourhood as a stabilizing actor whose focus is on strengthening its neighbours' resilience, defined as 'the ability of states and societies to reform, [and thus to withstand and recover] from internal and external crises' (European External Action Service, 2016: 23; Reiterer, 2017). To realize this neighbourhood role, the EUGS further stressed the need for a differentiated (i.e. pragmatic) EU engagement, which recognizes the varying willingness of its neighbours to deepen ties with the Union under present conditions (European External Action Service, 2016: 25).

This EU strategy, as its promoted narratives suggest, has constituted, at least in part, an attempt by the EU at re-establishing coherence between the EU's self-image and role-play, which, in the context of its neighbourhood, had become increasingly disconnected (Johansson-Nogués, 2018; Mälksoo, 2016). To overcome this disconnect, the EUGS, in particular, offered an opportunity for adjusting the EU's self-expectations and role aspirations to dynamics and events in the EU's domestic and international environment, which had shaped the EU's role-playing capacities as well as domestic and external role expectations. Most notably, in this regard, the narratives promoted by the EUGS, reflect an EU ambition to overcome its role-self disconnect, and thus to strengthen its ontological security, by toning down expectations of its ability to perform as an effective promoter of human rights or democratic principles. Concretely, the EUGS stresses, in line with the 2015 ENP revision, that the EU will instead focus on strengthening its neighbouring countries' resilience – a strategy it will pursue by supporting democratic transition processes as well as alternative paths, depending on a neighbouring country's desire to develop stronger ties with the Union (European External Action Service, 2016: 25).

The EUGS, this section suggests in this regard, constitutes a creative attempt at strengthening the EU's ontological security, and thus at endowing the EU's international conduct with greater meaning and orientation. As such, it may serve to indicate an EU ability to engage with (and adjust) its self-image as an international actor, and thus a measure of ontological resilience: an ability to constructively engage with – and to recover from – ontological security challenges. This ability, as the processes leading up to the EUGS suggests, in turn, has, at least in part, derived from the leading roles of individual leaders, including High Representative Federica Mogherini and Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker, as well as the supporting role of the External Action Service, who have been critical in initiating and driving the EU's process of reflecting on – and re-envisioning – its 'self' as an international actor (Tocci, 2017). Together, these actors, and the EUGS process they initiated, consequently, may not only have re-envisioned the EU as a provider of resilience for others, but also signalled and strengthened the Unions own (ontological) resilience, and thus the EU's capacity to constructively engage with – and recover from – the ontological security challenges it faces in a rapidly changing (international and domestic) environment.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that an IRT perspective on ontological security can complement the OSL in three significant respects. First, the paper has argued that an IRT perspective emphasizes the intimate link between an international actor's sense of ontological (in)security and its societal role-making, role-playing and alter-casting. An IRT perspective, the paper argues, therefore promises to provide a more nuanced understanding of how an international actor comes to experience a sense of ontological (in)security as it interacts in society. As illustrated in the section above, the ontological (in)security of the European Union, for instance, is closely tied to its (in)ability to realize its 'self' through its role-making and role-playing in its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood.

Second, and relatedly, the paper has argued that an IRT perspective emphasizes the significance of role-self disconnects as challenges to an international actor's ontological security. Role-self disconnects, the paper argues in this regard, function as drivers of ontological security seeking behaviour, and by extension of the attempts of international actors to re-establish ontological security through the re-assertion or re-envisioning of their 'self' in society. The European Union, as the above section has illustrated, has, for instance, experienced such role-self disconnects in the context of a transforming environment in its Southern and Eastern neighbourhood, which have challenged its self-image (and attached role aspirations) as an international actor. Experienced disconnects in its neighbourhood, the analysis suggests, moreover, have led the EU to engage in measures directed towards re-establishing its ontological security through adaptations of its role, and the eventual re-envisioning of its 'self' as an actor in society.

Third, and finally, the paper has argued that an IRT perspective emphasizes how an international actor's ontological security seeking is shaped by its reflexive intelligence. Concretely, an IRT perspective suggests in this regard that an international actor's reflexive intelligence (its reflexivity and creativity) strengthens its ontological resilience, an ability to constructively engage with – and recover from – challenges to its ontological security, which in turn allows the generation of far more dynamic, creative and change-oriented ontological security seeking processes than are often described in the OSL. As illustrated in the section above, the EU's ontological security seeking, for instance, has led not only to creative adaptations of its regional role but also the creative re-envisioning of its 'self' as an international actor, which in turn has been driven by the reflexive intelligence of individual leaders. The EU, in this sense, in reaction to experienced role-self disconnects, has displayed a relative degree of ontological resilience, which may surprise considering the Union's complex governance structure.

Altogether, in outlining IRT's potential for complementing the OSL, this paper has sought to provide a useful starting point for greater, and more nuanced, debate about the emergence of ontological (in)security – and the dynamics of ontological security seeking – in international relations. In particular, in this regard, an IRT perspective may be well-positioned to generate debates about the link between ontological security seeking and processes of change and continuity in international affairs. Moreover, the perspective outlined above may provide a starting point for debate about the factors that render international actors ontologically more resilient or vulnerable. Furthermore, it may serve to generate debate about how experiences of ontological (in)security are tied to societal interaction, as well as processes of external and domestic contestation.

Scholars, moreover, may build on the above-presented arguments to further investigate links between (the making and playing of) roles and the experience of ontological security. Concretely, in this regard, future studies may look at how (the failure to perform) certain roles affects an international actor's sense of ontological (in)security. Relatedly, studies may inquire how an international actor's role attachment – or certain types of roles – shape its experience of ontological (in)security. Future studies, in building on the above-presented arguments, may furthermore explore how different international actors with different political systems cope with ontological challenges, and how such systems reinforce an international actor's ontological resilience or vulnerability.

Finally, this paper has sought to contribute towards building bridges between two socio-psychological strands in the IR literature, which, despite being largely complementary, have remained surprisingly disconnected. The paper, in this regard, seeks to provide a starting point for a productive dialogue between IRT and the OSL, as well as other socio-psychological approaches, about the social dynamics that shape the making of – and thus change and continuity in – international relations.

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