


RESEARCH ARTICLE

‘The Conduct of Inquiry’ in ontological security studies: scientific methodologies and their implications*

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(Received 16 February 2024; revised 28 May 2025; accepted 28 May 2025)

Abstract

In recent years, ontological security studies (OSS) have developed an impressive breadth of empirical applications and depth of theoretical advancements. However, despite increasing disciplinary diversity, methodological differences in OSS and the resulting implications have not yet been discussed. Drawing on Jackson’s taxonomy of scientific methodologies, this article outlines that OSS is characterized by considerable methodological diversity cutting across existing distinctions in the field. Greater focus on this diversity is important, as (tacit) underlying methodological assumptions have significant implications concerning the types of knowledge claims that can be advanced. Providing the first systematic discussion of methodological questions in OSS, this article outlines the contours of grounding OSS in neopositivist, critical realist, reflexivist, and analyticist methodologies and provides examples thereof. It then discusses the implications emerging from different methodologies in terms of (1) the production and evaluation of valid knowledge claims about ontological (in)security, (2) the perception of and dealing with ontological and epistemological challenges in the concept of ontological (in)security, and (3) the critical potential of OSS. While highlighting the potential of OSS grounded in analyticism, this article ultimately emphasizes the inherent value of methodological pluralism structured around a common vocabulary enabling meaningful conversations – both within OSS and with International Relations more broadly.

Keywords: ontological security; anxiety; methodology; metatheory; critique; analyticism; pragmatism; reflexivity; critical realism

*The paper title is, of course, a reference to Patrick T. Jackson’s *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and Its Implications for the Study of World Politics* (2011).

Introduction

Ontological security studies (OSS) represent a thriving research agenda in current International Relations (IR). Research based on the notion of ‘security as being’ and a ‘stable sense of self’¹ resembles the established pattern of early foundational and programmatic contributions,² followed by a proliferation of empirical applications and theoretical advancements. The latter include debates about the possibility of complete ontological (in)security,³ the relationship between identity and the Self,⁴ the relationship between anxiety and agency,⁵ or the emancipatory potential of anxiety.⁶ These advancements have been accompanied by increasing diversity in the field of OSS and the introduction of a broad number of distinctions,⁷ for example, between approaches based in psychoanalysis,⁸ sociology,⁹ and existentialist philosophy,¹⁰ more ‘mainstream’ or ‘critical’ contributions,¹¹ and strands primarily oriented toward IR’s conventional focus on states and those taking a more ‘vernacular’ perspective on societal groups and individuals.¹²

However, while OSS has been divided and categorized in several ways, ‘none of these are successful at or sufficient or optimal for untangling the web of approaches identified in the literature.’¹³ Existing distinctions in OSS obscure the fact that contributions differ in more fundamental respects, not primarily in terms of their basis in different intellectual traditions or their focus on different levels of analysis. In this paper, I bring into focus another dimension of differentiation within OSS: contributions to the field display considerable diversity in terms of the knowledge claims they produce about ontological (in)security. By this, I do not mean that contributions make different substantive claims about the origins, implications, role, and dynamics of ontological (in)security in world politics, which is, of course, the case. Instead, I argue that a so-far overlooked and more fundamental dimension of difference in OSS concerns the philosophical underpinnings of knowledge claims advanced. I am thus concerned with differences in OSS in terms of scientific methodology as a ‘concern with the logical structure and procedure of scientific inquiry.’¹⁴ These methodological differences are more fundamental than and constitutive of debates about methods as the ‘techniques for gathering and analyzing bits of data.’¹⁵

¹Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017, 4.

²Huysmans 1998; Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008.

³Cash 2020; Arfi 2020; Subotic 2016; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018.

⁴Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Krickel-Choi 2024, 2022b.

⁵Berenskoetter 2020; Flockhart 2016; Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020.

⁶Gustafsson 2021; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020; Krickel-Choi 2022a; Rumelili 2021; Zevnik 2021. While recognizing the differentiation between ‘normal’ anxiety and pathological ontological insecurity (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, Krickel-Choi 2022a; see below for a further discussion of this distinction), I use both terms synonymously to improve readability.

⁷Bolton 2023, 234–5; Rogers 2024, 193.

⁸Laing 1960; Cash 2020.

⁹Giddens 1991; Rosher 2022.

¹⁰Rumelili 2020; Kirke and Steele 2023.

¹¹Rossdale 2015.

¹²Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017, 13.

¹³von Essen and Danielson 2023, 3.

¹⁴Jackson 2011, 25.

¹⁵Ibid., 25.

Drawing on fundamental philosophical wagers concerning the relationship between knower and known as well as between knowledge and observation, Patrick T. Jackson provides a taxonomy of four scientific methodologies: neopositivism, critical realism, reflexivity, and analyticism.¹⁶ An overview of contributions to OSS over the past years reveals that within the field, knowledge claims grounded in all of these methodologies have been advanced. Neopositivist research seeks to produce knowledge about ontological (in)security by identifying covariations between causes of ontological (in)security, indicators of anxiety, and actions regarded as effects thereof. For example, Secen investigated correlations between the living conditions of refugees in different host countries and their strategies of ontological security seeking.¹⁷ Critical realist contributions analyzed both ontological security seeking as an underlying causal mechanism accounting for observable outcomes, as well as the mechanisms through which ontological (in)security is generated and spread, for example, in the context of foreign policy decisions causing anxiety among citizens.¹⁸ Reflexivist research on ontological (in)security used the concept as a tool or object of critique, as evident in Catarina Kinnvall's analysis of the production of gendered ontological insecurities.¹⁹ Finally, grounded in an analyticist methodology, ontological (in)security has also been used as an analytical ideal type that is deployed to produce insights into specific empirical situations. As an example, Tal Dingot Alkopher used different ideal-typified processes related to ontological security to analyze divergent reactions to migration in the European Union (EU).²⁰

At this stage, OSS is characterized by broad diversity in terms of the philosophical underpinnings of knowledge claims and the structures and procedures of scientific inquiry.²¹ While I regard methodological diversity as one of the greatest strengths of OSS,²² capitalizing on this strength requires greater clarity concerning the – often tacit – underlying ‘commitments and presuppositions’²³ from which research on ontological (in)security operates and in which it grounds its knowledge claims. Even though OSS has no shortage of extremely relevant theoretical debates, these questions have not yet been reflected upon. In this paper, I provide the first systematic discussion of scientific methodologies and especially of methodological diversity in the study of ontological (in)security. This is important for three reasons.

First, methodological assumptions determine the standards for the production and evaluation of valid knowledge claims. These are especially relevant for research on ontological (in)security, which often regards anxiety and ontological security seeking as a transhistorical constitutive element of the human condition,²⁴ or even as the constructivist equivalent of utility maximization in rational choice theory.²⁵ However, if everyone is always anxious and driven by ontological security seeking,

¹⁶Ibid., 39.

¹⁷Secen 2024.

¹⁸Sofuoğlu, Sharani, and Ermihan 2024.

¹⁹Kinnvall 2017.

²⁰Dingott Alkopher 2018.

²¹Jackson 2011, 25.

²²Krickel-Choi 2022a, 5.

²³Jackson 2025, 136.

²⁴See e.g., Giddens 1991; Zarakol 2017; Eberle 2019; Berenskoetter 2020; Vulović and Ejduš 2024.

²⁵Flockhart 2016.

for the concept to retain its utility, there must be clear standards for the evaluation of knowledge claims. While existing contributions proposed to address this issue by distinguishing between normal and extraordinary anxiety,²⁶ the ‘problem of code-termination’²⁷ requires a focus on the evaluation of knowledge claims – and thus on the methodological underpinnings of arguments.²⁸ Given the diversity of methodological positions in contributions to OSS, there exist considerable differences concerning the epistemological basis of knowledge claims advanced. Only a focus on scientific methodology and ‘the epistemic warrants to which it gives rise, can help us to determine the proper standards for evaluating ... empirical claims’ by connecting philosophical foundations for the production of knowledge with substantive conclusions.²⁹ In effect, evaluating the validity of knowledge claims about ontological (in)security requires understanding the methodological position of a particular piece of research and the respective philosophical underpinnings of the knowledge claims it advances.

Second, the methodological frameworks in which contributions to OSS are grounded affect their dealing with two metatheoretical challenges inherent in the study of the concept of ontological (in)security, at least in the ‘traditional Laing–Giddens paradigm’ of ontological (in)security.³⁰ Studying ontological (in)security entails the ontological challenge of dealing with the actor’s Self, which a focus on the ‘security of the Self’ always risks to presuppose and reify as the starting point of its analysis. Epistemologically, OSS faces the challenge that while both the understanding of ontological (in)security as a fundamental condition and the structure of arguments about it incline toward regarding anxiety and ontological security seeking as real in an ontological sense, this requires an epistemological leap of faith. Methodological assumptions thereby structure how contributions to OSS perceive and deal with these metatheoretical challenges.

Third, methodological choices also affect the critical potential of OSS, as philosophical foundations determine the types of knowledge claims that can be made and thus the different forms of critique that can be advanced. Whether and how analysis is geared toward the production of critique depends very much on the assumed relationship between researcher, knowledge, and the world. Focusing on the different methodologies in which contributions to OSS are grounded thus contributes to a clearer understanding of how the concept of ontological (in)security can or cannot unfold its critical potential.

I proceed as follows: In the next section, I draw on Jackson’s taxonomy of scientific methodologies to illustrate the contours of research on ontological (in)security grounded in the respective methodologies and provide examples thereof. Following thereon, I outline the parameters and challenges for the production of valid knowledge claims about ontological (in)security within the different methodologies. Then, I draw on two metatheoretical challenges inherent in the conventional concept of ontological (in)security as focal points to discuss the metatheoretical implications of the respective methodologies. Finally, I review the critical potential of OSS grounded in the different methodologies. Throughout the analysis, I illustrate my arguments by

²⁶Krickel-Choi 2022a; Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020.

²⁷Krickel-Choi 2022a, 11.

²⁸Jackson 2011, 190, 193.

²⁹Ibid., 194, 179.

³⁰Vulović and Ejodus 2024, 122; Steele 2024, 3.

drawing on the much-debated nexus between ontological (in)security and (far-right) populism.³¹ In the concluding section, I highlight how these discussions contribute to more meaningful conversations both within OSS and between OSS and IR more broadly.

In this paper, I advance three main arguments. First, the diversity of the field of OSS in terms of underlying but tacit methodological assumptions has so far not been recognized. Second, a greater focus on this diversity is important since grounding OSS in different methodologies entails considerable implications concerning pivotal questions such as the evaluation of knowledge claims, dealing with metatheoretical challenges inherent in ontological (in)security, and concerning the concept's critical potential. Third, while embracing the value of methodological pluralism in OSS, I highlight the potential of grounding research on ontological (in)security in an analyticist methodology.

The methodological diversity of OSS

Studying ontological (in)security, methodological questions matter. In this section, I provide an overview of the diversity of scientific methodologies in OSS. I thereby draw on the taxonomy of social scientific methodologies proposed by Jackson's *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations* (see Table 1).³² This taxonomy is based on the distinction between two fundamental wagers in philosophical ontology, neither of which can be definitely settled: the relationship between the knower and the known, and the relationship between knowledge and observation.³³

The first wager distinguishes the positions of dualism and monism.³⁴ Mind-world dualism 'maintains a separation between researcher and world such that research has to be directed toward properly crossing that gap.'³⁵ Valid knowledge must thus ensure the 'accurate correspondence between empirical and theoretical propositions ... and the actual character of a mind-independent world.'³⁶ In contrast, mind-world monism represents the idea that, as "world" is endogenous to social practices of knowledge-production ... speaking of "the world" as divorced from the activities of making sense of the world is literally nonsensical.³⁷ The second wager addresses the question of whether knowledge is limited to empirically observable phenomena or if it can transcend toward 'in-principle unobservable objects.'³⁸ The former position is labeled phenomenalism, the latter transfactuality.³⁹ Taken together, the two wagers delineate four scientific methodologies: neopositivism, critical realism, analyticism, and reflexivity.⁴⁰

³¹See, e.g., Agius, Rosamond, and Kinnvall 2020; Browning 2018; Homolar and Scholz 2019; Kinnvall 2018, 2019; Kinnvall and Svensson 2022, 2023; Steele and Homolar 2019, 2023.

³²Jackson 2011.

³³Ibid., 34, 36–7.

³⁴Jackson 2008.

³⁵Jackson 2011, 35.

³⁶Ibid., 35.

³⁷Ibid., 35–6.

³⁸Ibid., 36.

³⁹Ibid., 37.

⁴⁰Ibid., 37.

Table 1. Four scientific methodologies, taken from Jackson (2011, 37)

		Relationship between knowledge and observation	
		Phenomenalism	Transfactualism
Relationship between knower and known	Mind-world dualism	Neopositivism	Critical realism
	Mind-world monism	Analyticism	Reflexivity

For two reasons, I draw on Jackson's taxonomy instead of more conventional differentiations, such as between positivism and non- or post-positivism,⁴¹ positivism and interpretivism,⁴² or explaining and understanding.⁴³ On the one hand, obscuring the differences between contrasting approaches, these distinctions represent a 'less-than-useful classificatory scheme that does not really clarify the issues at stake in the philosophical distinction.'⁴⁴ Categorizing OSS through these conventional lenses thus brushes over fundamental differences in terms of methodology and often reduces them to questions of method.⁴⁵ On the other hand, these distinctions also obscure differences within the respective approaches, as they collapse the two axes of fundamental philosophical differences into a single differentiation. As a result, the positivism versus post-positivism distinction as commonly understood primarily refers to the diagonal axis between neopositivism and reflexivity, thereby leaving aside the other two quadrants. However, while critical realism, reflexivity, and analyticism could technically all be subsumed under the label of post-positivism, they have, in fact, very little in common. Distinctions such as positivism versus post-positivism or positivism versus interpretivism are thus too broad to identify and discuss the relevant underlying methodological differences between contributions to OSS and the implications emerging therefrom. As a result, I draw on Jackson's taxonomy to refocus attention on the philosophical and methodological issues 'at the heart of the distinction properly understood.'⁴⁶

Analyzing methodological implications for the study of ontological (in)security also requires reflecting on the underlying perspective on knowledge production in this paper. First, Jackson's fundamental wagers represent 'questions to which particular scholars give answers that depend, in the final analysis, on a measure of *faith*.'⁴⁷ As these methodologies cannot be adjudicated from an external point of view, none of them is better or worse than another.⁴⁸ Therefore, in line with Jackson, I subscribe to a commitment to pluralism and epistemic tolerance as research should be evaluated for its '*internal validity*': whether, given our assumptions, our conclusions follow rigorously from the evidence and logical argumentation that we provide.⁴⁹ Therefore, I refuse to judge between different methodologies and do *not* make a case against any of them.

⁴¹Lapid 1989.

⁴²Bevir and Hall 2020.

⁴³Hollis and Smith 1990; Wendt 1998.

⁴⁴Jackson 2011, 36.

⁴⁵Ibid., 36; Jackson 2025, 98–9.

⁴⁶Jackson 2011, 36.

⁴⁷Ibid., 34, emphasis in the original.

⁴⁸Ibid., 31–2.

⁴⁹Ibid., 22, emphasis in the original; Jackson 2025, 133.

Second, while every empirical issue can in principle be studied based on every methodology, scientific methodologies influence the questions that can reasonably be asked, the kind of knowledge that can possibly be produced, and the methods required, thus setting 'the stage for the kinds of empirical and theoretical puzzles and challenges that a scholar takes to be meaningful and important.'⁵⁰ Thus, while I do not judge between different methodologies, I outline the implications of OSS based on different methodologies in terms of the knowledge claims that can be made, their metatheoretical implications, and their critical potential.

Third, while methodologies are the result of faith-based 'wagers,' it is my belief that these wagers can be deployed in a functional and even opportunistic way. Scientific methodologies are 'sweaters, not skins.'⁵¹ It is thus possible to purposefully choose between these wagers and place different bets at different points in time, and 'there is no reason why a single published work cannot contain multiple independent arguments ... drawn from different methodologies.'⁵² In effect, accepting that as researchers we all resemble blind people trying to figure out the shape of the elephant 'ontological (in)security,'⁵³ I regard accepting that there is no single best methodological approach to doing so as the most promising pathway for knowledge production.⁵⁴

In the following, I outline the basic parameters of research on ontological (in) security grounded in the different methodologies and provide examples thereof. This requires two caveats. On the one hand, I refer to contributions that I regard as typical examples and do not provide a conclusive or even exhaustive list of contributions to OSS associated with the respective methodology, which would go well beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, the purpose is to illustrate what grounding OSS in a specific methodology looks like. On the other hand, given the lack of explicit considerations about methodological questions, the allocation of contributions to the different methodologies is necessarily based on my exegetic reading of them. Thus, while some scholars might disagree with their categorization, I argue that the contributions display at least characteristics of the different methodologies.

Combining mind-world dualism and phenomenism, neopositivism seeks to generate generalizable knowledge through the systematic testing and falsification of hypotheses based on the identification of empirical regularities or covariations and their subsumption under covering laws.⁵⁵ As neopositivist research reduces causality to covariation, explanations consist of 'bringing prior observations of empirical regularities together with specific information about a particular situation and demonstrating that the outcome was to be expected.'⁵⁶ As valid claims 'correspond to the (mind-independent) world,' hypothesis testing is the 'key neopositivist procedure' to evaluate whether the conceptions in our minds in fact correspond with the world 'out there.'⁵⁷

⁵⁰Jackson 2011, 34.

⁵¹I hereby disagree with Furlong and Marsh's (2010) claim that metatheoretical positions are 'a skin, not a sweater.'

⁵²Jackson 2011, 207.

⁵³Puchala 1971.

⁵⁴Jackson 2025, 91.

⁵⁵Jackson 2011, 38, 64–5; 2025, 76.

⁵⁶Jackson 2011, 65.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, 44, emphasis in the original.

Within OSS, contributions grounded in neopositivism seek to establish empirical regularities concerning factors correlating with the occurrence of ontological (in) security, both as causes and effects. One example is Ofek Riemer,⁵⁸ who draws on a survey experiment in the context of Israeli foreign policy shifts to test hypotheses concerning the influence of states' foreign policies on citizens' sense of ontological (in)security. A similar research design is employed by Nimrod Rosler and Galia Press-Barnathan's⁵⁹ assessment of whether international boycotts of cultural mega events cause ontological insecurity among citizens of the host state. Remaining at the individual level, Tianyang Liu et al.⁶⁰ analyze how measures of ontological (in) security in public surveys in different states correlate with threat perceptions of China. Similarly, Sefa Secen investigates covariations between the living conditions of Syrian refugees in Germany and Turkey and different strategies of ontological security seeking, as well as correlations between indicators of physical and ontological insecurity.⁶¹

Critical realism, combining the wagers of mind-world dualism and transfactualism, presumes an independently existing world, while also claiming the existence of 'real but unobservable' entities, as the 'mind-independent world is *deeper* than our perceptual experiences.'⁶² This implies a stratified understanding of reality as only partly accessible⁶³: 'Underneath what we can perceive and detect lies a realm of real-but-undetected "structures, powers, and tendencies" that give rise to the ordinary empirical sphere.'⁶⁴ In effect, our knowledge can go beyond experience and 'grasp the deeper generative causal properties that give rise to those experiences.'⁶⁵ Critical realism thus differs from neopositivism's focus on observable covariation and instead theorizes the existence of real but undetectable causal mechanisms, which have important effects in the perceivable part of the world.⁶⁶ Explanations thus leave behind deductive hypothesis testing and instead focus on abduction as the generation of plausible conjectures concerning underlying principles and factors from the observed phenomena.⁶⁷

Within OSS, several contributions display characteristics of a critical realist methodology. On the one hand, researchers abducted the unobservable causal mechanism of ontological security seeking as the best possible explanation behind empirically observable phenomena, such as the existence of materially non-beneficial regional integration efforts in the post-Soviet space⁶⁸ or the counterproductive pursuit of spheres of influence by self-perceived great powers.⁶⁹ Similarly, explaining the proliferation of private security companies in Europe despite increased safety, Elke Krahmann proposes ontological security provision through the identification,

⁵⁸Riemer 2023.

⁵⁹Rosler and Press-Barnathan 2023.

⁶⁰Liu, Guan, and Yang 2024.

⁶¹Secen 2024.

⁶²Jackson 2011, 38, 104, emphasis in the original; see also Patomäki and Wight 2000.

⁶³Jackson 2011, 93.

⁶⁴Ibid., 104.

⁶⁵Ibid., 74, 73.

⁶⁶Ibid., 74, 77.

⁶⁷Ibid., 74, 76, 79, 82–3; Kurki 2006.

⁶⁸Russo and Stoddard 2018.

⁶⁹Lundström 2024.

profiling, and management of risks as the underlying and unobservable causal mechanisms.⁷⁰ On the other hand, research focused on the unobservable processes underlying spatial and temporal dynamics of ontological (in)security. Drawing on the empirical case of securitization of migration in Serbia, Filip Ejduš and Tijana Rečević abduct that emergent processes generated through feedback loops and non-linear horizontal interactions at the micro level represent the conjecture providing the best explanation for the transformation of individual- into collective-level ontological (in)security.⁷¹ Further, analyzing ontological insecurity in the Irish border region in the context of Brexit, Ben Roshier argues that ‘memories of the historically securitized and militarized border,’ projected ‘onto and vicariously through the next generation,’ represent the best possible explanation for the observable outcome of ‘intergenerational ontological insecurity.’⁷² Similarly, Kathrin Bachleitner abducts temporal security seeking based on collective memories as the best way to ‘specify the precise details of how ontological security may work out as a process in states.’⁷³

Reflexivity denotes the combination of the wagers of mind-world monism and transfactualism.⁷⁴ As mind-world monism grounds knowledge production in the ‘concrete practical involvements’ of researchers, practices of knowledge production represent the ‘only feasible objects of transfactual knowledge.’⁷⁵ As a result, reflexivist research entails reflection and self-awareness toward ‘research practices and the broader context in which they are embedded’ through the application of the ‘tools of knowledge-production’ to the situations and practices of knowledge-production themselves.⁷⁶ This entails an understanding of knowledge as ‘both inseparable from and not in any simple sense reducible to the social position and organizational practices of the scientific researcher.’⁷⁷ However, the social relations in which the researcher is embedded are always and thoroughly imbued with power relations, which scientific knowledge, always being ‘for someone and for some purpose,’⁷⁸ either reproduces or destabilizes.⁷⁹ This is not an accidental byproduct but inextricably ‘wrapped up with the very production of knowledge in the first place.’⁸⁰ Reflexivity thus inclines researchers toward a ‘systematic effort to analyze their own role as knowledge-producers and to locate themselves with reference to their broader social contexts’ to produce knowledge about these social arrangements.⁸¹

Reflexivist contributions, drawing – among others – on postcolonial,⁸² gender,⁸³ or queer⁸⁴ perspectives, are prominent within OSS. On the one hand, these contributions

⁷⁰Krahmann 2018.

⁷¹Ejduš and Rečević 2021.

⁷²Roshier 2022, 35.

⁷³Bachleitner 2023, 30.

⁷⁴Jackson 2011, 157.

⁷⁵Ibid., 157.

⁷⁶Ibid., 157, 167.

⁷⁷Ibid., 158.

⁷⁸Cox 1981, 128, emphases in the original.

⁷⁹Jackson 2011, 159, 165.

⁸⁰Ibid., 159.

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Cash and Kinnvall 2017; Cash 2017; Untalan 2019.

⁸³Deleahanty and Steele 2009.

⁸⁴Rosdale 2015.

employ ontological (in)security as a critical tool to ‘excavate... the presuppositions that implicitly inform the designation of certain kinds of worldly claims as knowledge.’⁸⁵ For example, they analyze how power structures and systems of oppression, such as neoliberal globalization,⁸⁶ the Western-dominated international order,⁸⁷ or power-infused ‘gendered spaces,’⁸⁸ produce ontological insecurity in the subjects they marginalize. On the other hand, contributions unveiled how ‘previously thought to be unbiased’ conceptions of ontological (in)security ‘have tacit biases,’⁸⁹ thus highlighting the marginalizing effects of dominant actors’ ontological security seeking⁹⁰ as it ‘disciplines or marginalizes modes of subjectivity which resist the closure of ontological security-seeking strategies.’⁹¹ This is evident, for example, in the inherent exclusionary effects of states’ autobiographical narratives, which are gendered masculine and constituted upon the stigmatization of alternative narratives,⁹² as well as in dominant narratives of global governance and transnationalism that maintain ontological security through the othering and securitization of subaltern actors.⁹³

Closely related to pragmatist perspectives in IR,⁹⁴ analyticism places its wagers on mind-world monism and phenomenalism. The mind-world monist rejection of Cartesian dualism locates knowledge neither in the mind nor the world but in the practices which mediate our access to the world.⁹⁵ The phenomenalist wager entails that knowledge cannot transcend experience but is always grounded in the concrete practices of knowledge production of communities of researchers.⁹⁶ This perspective is reflected in pragmatist perspectives embracing non-foundational epistemological and ontological positions.⁹⁷ While, from this perspective, scientific knowledge is always practical knowledge,⁹⁸ the intersubjective character of these experiences distinguishes the analyticist understanding of knowledge from notions of arbitrary subjectivity or crude idealism.⁹⁹ As a result, knowledge is a ‘social product,’¹⁰⁰ and a discipline such as IR represents a scholarly community of practice characterized by a ‘web of justified beliefs’¹⁰¹ based on specific rules determining the (always temporal) acceptability of arguments.¹⁰²

If knowledge as a social product is located not in the world but in experiences organized through social practices, it should not be evaluated by its correspondence with the world but by the contribution that it makes, as experiences can be organized

⁸⁵Jackson 2011, 169.

⁸⁶Shani 2017.

⁸⁷Vieira 2018.

⁸⁸Kinnvall 2017.

⁸⁹Jackson 2011, 181.

⁹⁰Lerner 2023.

⁹¹Rossdale 2015, 369.

⁹²Delehanty and Steele 2009; Innes 2023.

⁹³Kinnvall and Svensson 2017.

⁹⁴Bauer and Brighi 2009; Cochran 2012; Pratt 2016.

⁹⁵Jackson 2011, 114, 116, 122, 125.

⁹⁶*Ibid.*, 140–2.

⁹⁷Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009; Kratochwil 2007; Friedrichs 2009; Zanotti 2015.

⁹⁸Jackson 2011, 135; Hamati-Ataya 2012, 295.

⁹⁹Jackson 2011, 128–35.

¹⁰⁰*Ibid.*, 123.

¹⁰¹Rytövuori-Apunen 2005, 150.

¹⁰²Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009, 712–3; Cochran 2002, 527; Kornprobst 2009.

in more or less useful ways.¹⁰³ In this regard, scientific knowledge is generated by ‘systematically organizing experiences so as to generate useful insights.’¹⁰⁴ Analyticism thus relies on the process of ideal typification as a form of ‘disciplined ordering of the facts of experience.’¹⁰⁵ As ideal types are neither a representation of reality nor solely reducible to the researcher’s perspective,¹⁰⁶ this involves abstracting away from the details of individual experiences to instead create analytical tools through the instrumental oversimplification of value-based commitments into deliberate ‘caricatures’ or ‘conceptual filters.’¹⁰⁷ Since the value of an ideal type depends on its usefulness as ‘an appropriate means to the analytical end’ to make sense of concrete situations, ‘it is quite literally nonsensical to speak of an ideal-type as being “valid” or “invalid,”’ and ideal types can be discarded not ‘for being *false*, but for being *useless*.’¹⁰⁸

An analyticist methodology is evident in a number of contributions to OSS. This is very explicit in Dingott Alkopher’s analysis of reactions to migration in the EU, which ‘builds a typology of three analytical ideal-type socio-psychological lenses’ to understand host societies’ dealing with migration-related uncertainty.¹⁰⁹ More implicit analyticist perspectives are already evident in foundational contributions to OSS in IR. For example, while Mitzen argued to regard states “as if” they are ontological security-seekers,¹¹⁰ Steele conducted ‘an ontological security interpretation of British neutrality’ during the United States Civil War.¹¹¹ Analyticist characteristics can also be found in more recent contributions to OSS, asking whether the concept of ontological (in)security ‘helps us make sense of current global political trends.’¹¹² In this regard, Cingöz et al. ‘employ... the concept of ontological security ... with the objective of elucidating [the] character and the underlying motivations’ concerning Iran’s ‘axis of resistance.’¹¹³ Focusing on the effects of current developments in the cyber domain, Lupovici suggests ‘that the scholarship of ontological security ... provides intriguing analytical tools’ and ‘a useful lens through which to consider the challenges [that] interactions in the cyber domain may create for states.’¹¹⁴ Mitzen, again, argues that an ‘ontological security lens helps ... in ways that potentially shed light on prospects for continued EU integration.’¹¹⁵ Similarly, focusing on nineteenth-century Anglo-Afghan relations, Bayly states that from ‘an analytical perspective, ... ontological security can bring to the surface relations between the “buffer state” and the neighbouring power.’¹¹⁶ In effect, these contributions proceed from the idea that ‘the assumption that states are motivated by

¹⁰³Jackson 2011, 123, 126.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 135.

¹⁰⁵*Ibid.*, 114; Jackson 2025, 86; Cochran 2002, 536.

¹⁰⁶Diez 1999, 64.

¹⁰⁷Jackson 2009; Diez 1999, 63; Jackson 2011, 144–5.

¹⁰⁸Jackson 2011, 146, 144, 143, emphases in the original; Diez 1999, 65.

¹⁰⁹Dingott Alkopher 2018, 317.

¹¹⁰Mitzen 2006, 352.

¹¹¹Steele 2005, 530.

¹¹²Gülsah Çapan and Zarakol 2019, 264–5.

¹¹³Cingöz et al. 2024, 2.

¹¹⁴Lupovici 2023, 153, 168.

¹¹⁵Mitzen 2018, 410.

¹¹⁶Bayly 2015, 820–1.

ontological security seeking ... illuminates blind spots in existing works.¹¹⁷ However, contributions with more conceptual orientations also displayed characteristics of analyticist methodology. This is, for example, evident in Bolton's analysis of the role of collective emotions and affect for ontological (in)security, arguing that 'conceptualizing OS in relation to moral orders interrelated with the sacred provides a new optic through which to account for the dynamism of foreign policy.'¹¹⁸ In a similar way, Verleye distinguishes several ideal-typical state shame narratives to create 'a suitable and broad analytical tool for IR,' which is able to produce 'a thoughtful ordering of empirical reality.'¹¹⁹

Valid knowledge claims

Scientific methodologies differ concerning their standards for the production and evaluation of valid knowledge claims. While standards for the evaluation of knowledge claims are generally important, this is especially the case for OSS, which reflects Berenskoetter's call for deep theorizing¹²⁰ insofar as it understands anxiety and the search for ontological security as a transhistorical constitutive part of the human condition.¹²¹ As Anthony Giddens argues, 'to be ontologically secure is to possess ... answers to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses,'¹²² concerning issues such as existence, finitude, relations, and autobiography.¹²³ Similarly, drawing on existentialist philosophy, Felix Berenskoetter argued that as 'a fundamental feature of this [human] condition is uncertainty[,] ... anxiety enters our world once we become self-conscious and reflexive subjects,' leading human beings to embrace a variety of 'anxiety-controlling mechanisms.'¹²⁴ Also, for Lacanian contributions, 'anxiety is an ever-present generator of agency.'¹²⁵ Given that 'it seems fair to say that people have always lived with anxieties,'¹²⁶ the search for ontological security has been proposed as the constructivist equivalent of utility maximization in rational choice theory.¹²⁷

However, if anxiety and ontological security seeking represent constitutive elements of the human condition, every human action or interaction could in one way or another be seen as reflective of them. OSS thus encounters a problem similar to rational choice theory: Regarding actors as rational utility maximizers, whichever choice an actor made must have been rational from this point of view. However, to put it with Wendt, this always only appears in the rearview mirror.¹²⁸ In the same way, every action, including its opposite, could retrospectively be explained through the search for ontological security. Thus, while voting for populists represents an

¹¹⁷Oppermann and Hansel 2019, 79–80.

¹¹⁸Bolton 2023, 258.

¹¹⁹Verleye 2024, 42, 36.

¹²⁰Berenskoetter 2018.

¹²¹Zarakol 2017; Rumelili 2020; Brassett, Browning, and O'Dwyer 2021, 10.

¹²²Giddens 1991, 47.

¹²³Ejdus 2018.

¹²⁴Berenskoetter 2020, 275–6, 280.

¹²⁵Vulović and Ejduš 2024, 125.

¹²⁶Krickel-Choi 2022a, 15.

¹²⁷Flockhart 2016.

¹²⁸Wendt 2001.

ontological security-seeking strategy, the opposite is equally true, as for some people, it is exactly voting against populists that stabilizes their ontological security. OSS thus faces the ‘problem of codetermination:’¹²⁹ if ‘everyone is anxious all the time, how do we account for differences in actor behavior?’¹³⁰

Drawing on existentialist accounts, several contributions proposed to address this problem by distinguishing between ‘normal feelings of anxiety,’ which are compatible with ontological security, and ontological insecurity as extraordinary neurotic anxiety.¹³¹ I agree that the latter can neither be regarded as empirically prevalent nor as constitutive of the human condition in general.¹³² I also agree with the critique against the often very loose ascription of ontological insecurity in empirical research.¹³³ However, as neurotic anxiety ‘is not what scholars of ontological security have in mind when they speak of ontological insecurity,’¹³⁴ and as ‘[n]ormal anxiety ... is a necessary part of the human condition,’¹³⁵ separating between normal and extraordinary anxiety does not solve the problem of codetermination. Instead, this requires focusing on the evaluation of knowledge claims based on their methodological underpinnings.

Neopositivist methodology moves beyond the general assumption of ontological security seeking as a fundamental human condition to instead test propositions concerning factors which, under specified conditions, contribute to the ontological (in)security of actors with specific characteristics, as well as the effects emerging therefrom. The goal is thus the subsumption of increasingly fine-grained knowledge claims under generalizing laws. This would, for example, entail identifying covariations between factors that might contribute to anxiety, indicators of individual-level ontological insecurity, and support for populist parties. While it is at least questionable whether a concept such as ontological (in)security displays sufficient regularities in terms of its causes and effects to be able to produce knowledge claims generalizable under deductively generated laws, this is an empirical question.¹³⁶ However, the thornier problem relates to the issues of precise conceptualization and measurement of ontological (in)security for qualitative or quantitative comparative analyses aimed at identifying systematic covariations. On the one hand, this requires decisions, for example, about whether ontological (in)security is conceptualized as a continuous or binary variable and the underlying thresholds.¹³⁷ On the other hand, to make knowledge claims within the neopositivist framework, the indicators used to operationalize and measure ontological (in)security and its effects must be both valid and reliable. Thus, testing the hypothesis that anxious people are more inclined to vote for populists requires indicators that accurately measure individual-level ontological (in) security and not some other concept, and which do so regardless of the researcher

¹²⁹Krickel-Choi 2022a, 11.

¹³⁰Krickel-Choi 2021, 13.

¹³¹Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 881–4; Krickel-Choi 2022a.

¹³²Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 881–2.

¹³³*Ibid.*, 883.

¹³⁴*Ibid.*, 883, 887; Krickel-Choi 2022a, 14.

¹³⁵Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020, 886. I thereby regard Laing’s understanding of normal anxiety as a default condition and the Lacanian perspective on individuals driven by constant desire for wholeness as pointing in the same direction (see also Krickel-Choi 2022a, 14–5).

¹³⁶Jackson 2011, 69.

¹³⁷Secen 2024, 8.

conducting the study. Making knowledge claims about ontological (in)security that are valid within a neopositivist methodology is no trivial task.¹³⁸

For critical realism, producing valid knowledge claims about ontological (in)security requires establishing that ontological security seeking is not just some constitutive part of the human condition. Instead, the strive for ontological security must be explicitly established as a causal effect resulting from ontological insecurity and as the relevant – and ontologically real – causal force in specific contexts which ‘correspond to their innermost essence.’¹³⁹ Knowledge claims about ontological (in)security and its effects thus have to be evaluated in terms of ‘demonstrating that it is impossible to ignore,’ thereby connecting ‘undetectable causal powers with manifest actions and behaviors.’¹⁴⁰ This involves the formulation of arguments connecting a priori assumptions grounded in a common-sensical starting point through a series of ‘indispensability claims,’ which then allows applying these ‘causal powers’ to a specific empirical case.¹⁴¹ For example, establishing anxiety and ontological security seeking as the real causal mechanism behind populist voting in a specific situation requires determining its role in a set of conditions which, while individually insufficient, in combination are sufficient (but not necessary) to produce this outcome.¹⁴² Thus, a critical realist perspective demands the difficult task of ensuring that the theoretical accounts of ontological (in)security ‘accurately represent the causal powers actually possessed by [it] in the real world.’¹⁴³

From a reflexivist perspective, knowledge claims are not warranted through their external correspondence but through researchers’ systematic reflection about their role as knowledge producers in a broader social context and the knowledge claims present within it.¹⁴⁴ Reflexivist knowledge production thereby entails the twofold challenge of maintaining that its claims neither correspond to the world ‘out there’ nor are mere ‘partisan political interventions.’¹⁴⁵ It thus draws on pieces of knowledge and tacit assumptions present within specific social arrangements and relates them to their ‘function in reproducing a particular kind of social order.’¹⁴⁶ On the one hand, reflexivist researchers draw on knowledge within the ‘social arrangement’ of OSS to outline the biases inherent therein and the functions they fulfill,¹⁴⁷ arguing that ‘OSS has yet to confront its own complicity in broader racialized orders of knowledge.’¹⁴⁸ This entails, for example, the move from showing that states construct their sense of Self through biographical narratives¹⁴⁹ toward outlining how these narratives uphold dominant social orders by marginalizing

¹³⁸King et al. 1994.

¹³⁹Jackson 2011, 74; 2025, 87; Kurki 2007. The conception of causal effects in critical realism has often been labelled constitutive effects in IR (e.g., Wendt 1998). However, as Jackson argues, ‘[c]onstitutive relations are causal, albeit not causal in the neopositivist sense’ (2011, 107).

¹⁴⁰Jackson 2011, 102, 108.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 102–3.

¹⁴²Ibid., 199.

¹⁴³Ibid., 104, 110.

¹⁴⁴Ibid., 167–8; Hamati-Ataya 2014, 153.

¹⁴⁵Jackson 2011, 169.

¹⁴⁶Ibid., 176, 178.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 169.

¹⁴⁸Gehring 2023, 414.

¹⁴⁹Berenskoetter 2014.

alternative perspectives.¹⁵⁰ On the other hand, reflexivist research draws on pieces of everyday knowledge within particular social groups to uncover their function in upholding the existing social order. For example, starting from the observation of 'leave' voters' frustration both before and after the Brexit referendum, and systematizing this into an argument about the perpetually frustrated desire for wholeness helps to uncover how tacit assumptions within a particular social group contribute to the upholding of social order.¹⁵¹ Thus, within a reflexivist methodology, the question is not how to evaluate knowledge claims based on the assumption of ontological (in) security as a constitutive human condition, but to reflect on the effects of this assumption as well as to use it in order to expose the effects of pieces of everyday knowledge.

An explicitly analyticist methodology provides a possibility to clarify the epistemological status of knowledge claims about ontological (in)security and to evaluate them. Deploying anxiety and ontological security seeking as analytical ideal types, they provide a 'conceptual baseline' against which to understand a concrete empirical case.¹⁵² In this regard, ontological (in)security can be regarded as causal if, for example, in a counterfactual consideration, the occurrence of support for populism appears implausible in its absence.¹⁵³ However, this also implies that for ideal types to generate valuable knowledge, researchers must 'acknowledge their *limitations*.'¹⁵⁴ Exactly due to the one-sided over-accentuation and simplification entailed in the process of ideal-typification, ideal types necessarily and intentionally leave out ambiguities, opposing factors, or simply alternative perspectives, and no empirical situation is ever reducible to just one ideal type.¹⁵⁵ Thus, approaching empirical events through an ideal-type lens will always produce incomplete accounts.¹⁵⁶ In effect, while ideal types provide categories which help to generate and sort empirical observations, 'it is those moments where the messy complexity of actual concrete experience *resists* such categorization that an analytical narrative takes off.'¹⁵⁷ Approaching an empirical situation through the ideal-type lens of ontological (in) security will most likely reveal aspects of the situation that it cannot make sense of, thus highlighting in which respects an ontological (in)security lens is not useful in the sense of 'revealing intriguing and useful things about the objects to which it is applied.'¹⁵⁸ It could, for example, be the case that in specific situations, the analytical lens of ontological security seeking provides less insight into the populist voting behavior of people who do not appear to be ontologically insecure. Or, put differently, in some instances, the counterfactual consideration that people would still support populists if they were not anxious is also plausible. Enabling researchers to evaluate knowledge claims about ontological (in)security by recognizing their explanatory limits, analyticism provides researchers with a clearer understanding of its explanatory contributions. This encourages researchers to identify alternative and potentially

¹⁵⁰Innes 2023.

¹⁵¹Browning 2019.

¹⁵²Jackson 2011, 144, 154, 159; Diez 1999, 65.

¹⁵³Jackson 2011, 149.

¹⁵⁴Ibid., 154, emphasis in the original; Jackson 2025, 83.

¹⁵⁵Jackson 2011, 115, 143.

¹⁵⁶Ibid., 149; Jackson 2017.

¹⁵⁷Jackson 2011, 154, emphasis in the original.

¹⁵⁸Ibid., 146, 154, 115; Rytövuori-Apunen 2009.

conflicting ideal types to generate further insights into the empirical phenomenon.¹⁵⁹ Thus, ideal-typical analytical lenses such as socialization, habit, economic interest, or political culture may have greater analytical purchase in explaining support for populists in a specific empirical context.

Metatheoretical challenges

In this section, I draw on two metatheoretical challenges – at the level of ontology and epistemology – which research on ontological (in)security faces. While these metatheoretical challenges also occur in other strands of research, such as (international) political psychology¹⁶⁰ or research on emotions in IR,¹⁶¹ they have at least partly been debated within OSS. On the one hand, methodological considerations provide a new perspective on these debates. On the other hand, the challenges serve as useful focal points to discuss the metatheoretical implications of grounding OSS in different methodologies. While the metatheoretical challenges are inherent to research on the concept of ontological (in)security, at least in the conventional conception based on the psychoanalytical works of Ronald Laing and its sociological adaptation by Giddens, depending on the methodology, both the challenges and the way of addressing them differ significantly.

Research on ontological security faces the ontological¹⁶² challenge of dealing with the actor's Self, which a focus on the 'security of the Self' risks presupposing and reifying as the starting point of its analysis. This argument moves beyond the much-debated issue of transposing the psychological concept of ontological security to collectives such as states.¹⁶³ Instead, more fundamentally, the Self is inherent in the concept of ontological (in)security. As 'the self ... occupies a critically important terrain of analysis for OSS,'¹⁶⁴ this is the case regardless of the level of analysis. The ontological challenge is thus not that OSS treats states as persons¹⁶⁵ – which would not be a problem specific to OSS¹⁶⁶ – but that it risks to essentialize the Self of whichever actor it analyzes, regardless of the level of analysis, be it individuals,¹⁶⁷ societal groups,¹⁶⁸ states,¹⁶⁹ state–society complexes,¹⁷⁰ international organizations,¹⁷¹ or the international community.¹⁷²

Within the conventional conception of ontological (in)security, researchers have pursued two main strategies to address this challenge. On the one hand, contributions

¹⁵⁹Diez 1999, 65.

¹⁶⁰Gildea 2020.

¹⁶¹Hutchison and Bleiker 2014.

¹⁶²The term 'ontological' in 'ontological (in)security' refers to an actor's 'sense of self' (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017, 4). In contrast, when referring to ontological challenges, I use the term in a philosophy of science sense as referring to researchers' assumptions about the nature of being or 'what exists in the world' (Jackson 2011, 26).

¹⁶³Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020.

¹⁶⁴Gehring 2023, 414.

¹⁶⁵Grzybowski 2022.

¹⁶⁶Arfi 2010; Epstein 2010, 2013; Jackson 2004; Zehfuss 2002; Naude 2022.

¹⁶⁷Nymalm 2024.

¹⁶⁸Browning 2019.

¹⁶⁹Kazharski 2020.

¹⁷⁰Narozhna 2020.

¹⁷¹Mitzen 2018.

¹⁷²Hom and Steele 2020.

sought to unpack the actor's Self by moving beyond the presupposition of any specific substantive content, to instead point toward the openness of its construction.¹⁷³ Thereby, however, the Self remains the starting point and center of the analysis. On the other hand, scholars deconstructed the Self as the result of processes of ontological security seeking by other actors, usually at a 'lower' level of analysis. For example, understanding states' identities as the result of multiple conflicting identifications and narrations attached to them by societal actors,¹⁷⁴ the analysis shifts toward the ontological security seeking of the different societal actors participating in this discursive process. However, moving beyond the state's Self as the subject of ontological security to instead take as given the Self of these societal actors leads to a regress. The state's Self is thus the result of ontological security seeking by societal groups, the societal groups' Self the result of ontological security seeking by subgroups, and so forth, until reaching the level of the individual. At this point, the Self is either deconstructed from a Lacanian perspective (see below)¹⁷⁵ or finally essentialized. This, however, does not remove the ontological challenge as, ultimately "the individual" is just as unobservable as the state is.¹⁷⁶

Additionally, OSS also faces an epistemological challenge consisting of three aspects. First, ontological (in)security is not just an attribute of an actor but a very fundamental experience.¹⁷⁷ While identities and perceptions of security can be discursively constructed, an actor either has a stable sense of self, or they do not have it; either an actor experiences anxiety or it does not. Ontological (in)security, as the (absence of) a 'stable sense of self,'¹⁷⁸ thus refers directly to an actor's 'real' condition – not real in physical or material terms but in an ontological sense. OSS thus faces the challenge that it is inclined toward assuming that there is something 'real' behind the discourse.

Second, this is especially the case when deploying the concept of ontological (in)security in arguments about their (constitutive) causes and effects. In order to make arguments about the effects of social processes on an actor's sense of ontological (in)security, or, conversely, the effects of ontological security seeking on the actor's observable actions,¹⁷⁹ OSS thus entails a disposition toward assuming that actors are ontologically (in)secure or are driven by ontological security seeking. Claiming that people's support for populist parties represents an attempt of ontological security seeking in response to anxieties induced through processes of globalization, this argument would not make sense if people were not really anxious due to globalization.

Third, however, this requires an epistemological leap of faith. This is most evident when focusing on ontological (in)security as a subjective condition¹⁸⁰: 'Since we cannot know what an actor actually experiences at any given moment, we have to infer their feelings and experiences from their behavior.'¹⁸¹ However, there always remains 'a large and significant epistemic gap between the observation of behavior

¹⁷³Krickel-Choi 2024.

¹⁷⁴Lebow 2016; Berenskoetter 2014; Ringmar 1996.

¹⁷⁵Browning 2019.

¹⁷⁶Jackson 2011, 90.

¹⁷⁷Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020.

¹⁷⁸Kinnvall and Mitzen 2017, 4.

¹⁷⁹von Essen and Danielson 2023.

¹⁸⁰Pratt 2017, 79–80.

¹⁸¹Krickel-Choi 2022a, 12.

and the conclusion that this behavior is the ... *motivated* action ... of an individual person.¹⁸² It is, at an epistemological level, quite impossible to know whether a person was really ontologically insecure and whether that was the reason behind their populist voting decision. However, the challenge also exists for strands of OSS that regard ontological (in)security as an intersubjective phenomenon in the form of collective emotions,¹⁸³ 'public moods,'¹⁸⁴ or affective environments,¹⁸⁵ as it would require contrasting actors' intersubjective reality to the researcher's 'objective' reality. In other words, the epistemological basis for the statement that 'we are in an age of anxiety' is not at all clear.¹⁸⁶ As a result, OSS faces the challenge that the epistemological impossibility of differentiating between (inter)subjective constructions of ontological (in)security and both individual and collective actors' real condition implies that the former is understood as the latter.¹⁸⁷

OSS grounded in different methodologies perceives of and deals with these metatheoretical challenges in different ways. Neopositivism, assuming that 'we can never directly perceive a causal effect, and are limited to inferring it from our observations,'¹⁸⁸ enables OSS to ignore the metatheoretical challenges, as there is no reliable way to evaluate causation as such.¹⁸⁹ In effect, regarding causal relationships as 'added onto the experience by the mind,'¹⁹⁰ neopositivism focuses solely on empirical covariations between indicators of anxiety and indicators of factors theorized as causes and effects thereof. It would thus, for example, be sufficient to test systematic covariations between hypothesized causes of anxiety, such as socio-economic decline, psychological indicators of anxiety, and people's populist voting choices. Methodologically, there is thus neither the possibility nor the requirement to go beyond this surface-level covariation to instead make assumptions about ontological realness or real causal effects. As a result, neopositivist OSS avoids the metatheoretical challenges as it can remain agnostic about the existence of actors' Selves and whether ontological (in)security constitutes a real condition.

Critical realism enables scholars to tackle the metatheoretical challenges inherent in the concept of ontological (in)security head-on. Generating explanations based on the unobservable mechanism of ontological security seeking to account for observable phenomena, for this conjecture to exercise empirical effects, 'it must be taken to be real, to *actually* exist, and thus to be something other than an instrumental theoretical convenience.'¹⁹¹ Thus, if ontological (in)security provides 'the best explanation for various puzzling things that we *can* see,'¹⁹² it must be regarded as real insofar as it produces real effects.¹⁹³ In this regard, if anxiety and ontological security seeking can be conjectured as the best explanation for the populist voting

¹⁸²Jackson 2011, 90, emphasis in the original.

¹⁸³Manners 2024.

¹⁸⁴Rumelili 2021.

¹⁸⁵Solomon 2018; Bolton 2023.

¹⁸⁶Rumelili 2021, 1021.

¹⁸⁷Krickel-Choi 2022a, 15.

¹⁸⁸Jackson 2011, 66–7.

¹⁸⁹Ibid., 61.

¹⁹⁰Ibid., 61, 64.

¹⁹¹Ibid., 83, emphasis in the original.

¹⁹²Ibid., 79, emphasis in the original.

¹⁹³Wight 2007, 2012; Joseph 2007.

behavior of individuals or societal groups, understanding as ontologically real both these actors' Selves and their anxiety and ontological security seeking is not just possible but in fact necessary. OSS grounded in critical realism thus explicitly addresses the metatheoretical challenges.

Reflexivist OSS can ignore the metatheoretical challenges as its mind-world monist position renders any claims about actors' Selves and their condition of ontological (in)security as 'really' existing in the world 'out there' nonsensical. More specifically, reflexivist contributions to OSS address the ontological challenge by drawing on non-essentialist notions of the Self and criticizing the biases inherent in its essentialization. For example, outlining the racialized colonial ordering functions and power dynamics inherent in the notion of the Self, Thomas Gehring proposed an 'autopoietic' conception of the Self and humanness as a praxis.¹⁹⁴ Reflexivist research on ontological (in)security has also drawn on the critical potential of Lacanian non-essentialist notions of the Self. These understand subjects as constituted 'around a void' and engaged in perpetually frustrated attempts to reconstitute their 'primordial loss,' thus rejecting the very 'idea of a single, coherent, and unified subject.'¹⁹⁵ Lacanian accounts start from the assumption that subjects do not have pre-formed identities but are 'impelled to engage in acts of identification, identifying with various socially inscribed signifiers' that help them to generate a social identity in the form of a place in the social order and recognition through others.¹⁹⁶ However, as these signifiers are 'embedded in preexisting social understandings, discourses, and practices of what being those things means,' they always remain foreign to the subject.¹⁹⁷ As a result, being thrown into a world of alien structures of meaning, the 'subject can never fully possess or "own" the signifiers it identifies with,'¹⁹⁸ thus rendering them perpetually insufficient to ground the subject's Self-identity.¹⁹⁹ Subjects, therefore, subscribe to 'fantasmatic narratives' which display their desires for fulfilment and transform them into an empirical lack. This lack is both directed toward specific objects of desire and caused by them through their central position in the symbolic framework.²⁰⁰ While these objects promise closure and fulfillment, 'no empirical "object" can ultimately resolve the ontological lack and make us complete again' rendering subjects in a continuous process of becoming.²⁰¹

On the one hand, reflexivist research on ontological (in)security deployed Lacanian perspectives concerning subjects' strive for closure and completeness of the Self to unveil exclusivist and oppressive practices, including the appeal of populist discourses,²⁰² the racialized othering of migrants,²⁰³ political homophobia,²⁰⁴ or

¹⁹⁴Gehring 2023, 419.

¹⁹⁵Browning 2019, 229; Eberle 2019, 246; Epstein 2010, 335, 337. However, Lacanian arguments are not exclusive to reflexivity, but can, for example, also be embedded in critical realist or analyticist methodologies. An example of the latter is Ali and Whitham, who, analyzing the representation of Muslims in British public discourse, 'construct a conceptual and analytic framework through Žižek's Lacanian theory of ideology as a tool or heuristic' (2018, 401).

¹⁹⁶Browning 2019, 229–30; Eberle 2019, 246; Vieira 2018, 151; Epstein 2010, 336.

¹⁹⁷Browning 2019, 230; Eberle 2019, 246.

¹⁹⁸Browning 2019, 230, Epstein 2010, 336.

¹⁹⁹Browning 2019, 230.

²⁰⁰Ibid., 230; Eberle 2019, 246–7; Vulović and Ejodus 2024, 125–6.

²⁰¹Eberle 2019, 247.

²⁰²Kinnvall and Svensson 2022, 2023; Browning 2019.

²⁰³Ali and Whitham 2018.

²⁰⁴Bilgic 2024.

the persisting power dynamics emerging from shared desires between states and specific societal groups.²⁰⁵ On the other hand, reflexivist OSS used Lacanian conceptions of the Self to criticize the marginalizing effect of power structures depriving subjects of complete and unified Selves. This is the case, for example, for post-colonial states, which in an international order characterized by post-colonial hierarchies can never achieve full recognition of the Self on their own terms.²⁰⁶ In effect, reflexivist contributions to OSS address the ontological challenge by highlighting the biases in essentialist notions of the Self and the power dynamics in subjects' strive for completeness, thus excluding conceptions of an 'essentialized or pre-social self.'²⁰⁷

This also holds implications concerning the epistemological challenge. As Lacanian arguments make 'an ontological claim about the "real" nature of the individual self'²⁰⁸ as being constituted by lack and driven by desires embedded in fantasies of wholeness, this would again require an epistemological leap of faith. However, reflexivist contributions to OSS are not concerned with the correspondence of knowledge to anything external and instead reflect upon the social-ordering effects of practices of knowledge production within OSS and specific social groups.²⁰⁹ For example, focusing on anxiety in the EU, Thomas Diez and Franziskus von Lucke emphasize that their interest 'is not about the degree to which the EU as such, or individuals in the EU, *feel or are* ontologically secure or insecure' but about 'how actors ... *articulate* ... and thus discursively construct the EU's being and becoming.'²¹⁰ Additionally, reflexivist contributions to OSS outline, for example, how populist discourses always produce the anxiety that they then promise to alleviate²¹¹ or how populist politics are motivated and sustained by desire as 'our attachment to socially available "objects" pushes us to engage in practices through which social orders are reproduced.'²¹² This focus on the effects of knowledge production enables reflexivist research on ontological (in)security to leave the epistemological challenge aside.

An *analyticist* methodology enables researchers to circumvent the metatheoretical challenges. On the one hand, analyticism evades the ontological challenge of the actors' self. From a phenomenological perspective, OSS can bracket the question of whether a specific actor has or seeks to construct a self – and even if it represents an actor in the first place – to instead regard the entire empirical situation under an 'as if' assumption.²¹³ For example, regarding a societal group as an actor seeking to stabilize its Self by seeking to inscribe a certain narrative onto the state can generate useful insights into the group's inclination to support populist politicians. Thereby, however, the ontological status of the actor's self is irrelevant, and seeking to make statements about it is neither necessary nor useful. Instead, reifying or essentializing the actor's Self as anything more than an analytical concept is not necessary for it to serve its explanatory function.²¹⁴ On the other hand, analyticism's mind-world

²⁰⁵Maitino and Vieira 2024.

²⁰⁶Vieira 2018; Bilgic and Pilcher 2023.

²⁰⁷Epstein 2010, 336.

²⁰⁸Krickel-Choi 2022a, 15.

²⁰⁹Jackson 2011, 167–8.

²¹⁰Diez and von Lucke 2024, 4, emphases in the original.

²¹¹Homolar and Scholz 2019.

²¹²Eberle 2019, 246.

²¹³Jackson 2011, 118–9.

²¹⁴*Ibid.*, 154.

monist perspective allows moving around the epistemological challenge of OSS as scholars remain deliberately agnostic about whether ontological (in)security represents an actor's real condition with real effects. The assumption that globalization causes anxieties which lead people to vote for populists promising to alleviate them provides valuable insights into the current populist 'wave.' However, from an analyticist perspective, the epistemological can of worms of the realness of these connections may remain closed since 'as if' assumptions suffice to produce these knowledge claims.²¹⁵ As a result, faced with metatheoretical challenges inherent in the concept of ontological (in)security, '[i]nstead of wading into a dense philosophical thicket and trying to fight their way through it,' analyticism enables researchers to 'simply go around ... a set of non-issues.'²¹⁶ This, however, requires that analyticist research must be self-conscious of and explicit about its methodological positioning.

Critical potential

The critical potential of research on ontological (in)security depends on the scientific methodologies on which it is grounded. For contributions to OSS based on neopositivism and critical realism, the critical potential is limited due to their mind-world dualist grounding of knowledge claims in the real world, either in the form of a mirror image based on covariation or the uncovering of its deep and unobservable properties. Analyzing, for example, the correlation between socioeconomic decline and populist voting behavior, or the underlying mechanisms through which anxieties are caused and (potentially) alleviated in this process, both methodologies take the external world as a given. As a result, their critical potential remains limited to evaluating the results of the research. However, the normative argument that increasing socioeconomic inequality should be addressed to tackle support for populists is neither part of the analysis as such nor does it in any way necessarily follow from it.²¹⁷

While the critical potential of both analyticism and reflexivity is much greater due to their mind-world monist position, it differs significantly.²¹⁸ For analyticists, ideal-typified value commitments cannot be evaluated through empirical analysis, and disputes about them cannot be scientifically solved. In contrast, for reflexivists, the fact that the methods of knowledge production are not turned against these value commitments to make 'themselves subject to further scientific critique' is insufficient.²¹⁹ For example, even though from a reflexivist perspective ideal types could be fruitfully incorporated into critical discourse analysis, this would also require analyzing the researcher's discursive embeddedness from which ideal types emerge.²²⁰ As 'knowing the world and changing the world are inseparable,' the whole purpose of this endeavor of eliminating biases in knowledge production is 'that a clearer view of things can be achieved,' which may then open up possibilities for the non-arbitrary

²¹⁵Hellmann 2009, 640.

²¹⁶Jackson 2011, 117.

²¹⁷*Ibid.*, 199–200. The potential for critique in critical realism is thereby somewhat greater as the focus on unobservable properties may uncover both underlying structures of oppression and 'as-yet-unrealized possibilities' of emancipatory potential (*ibid.*, 167).

²¹⁸*Ibid.*, 178.

²¹⁹*Ibid.*, 168–9, 178.

²²⁰Diez 1999, 64–6.

transformation of social conditions.²²¹ Uncovering, for example, that support for populist politics is connected to desires for closure and wholeness may provide the basis for inducing transformative change.²²²

Analyticist OSS thus necessarily falls short of the reflexivist critical potential. However, this does not require forsaking all critical ambition. In IR, the relationship between pragmatist-analyticist perspectives and critical approaches has been somewhat diffuse: Pragmatism has been characterized as a strand of post-positivism,²²³ as an alternative moving beyond both positivism and post-positivism,²²⁴ as closely connected to critical theory,²²⁵ and as the more relevant point of critique against theory-centered mainstream IR than post-positivism.²²⁶ While this conundrum is somewhat representative of the 'less-than-useful' categorizations outlined above,²²⁷ there are at least two ways in which critical potential can be integrated into analyticist OSS.

First, the value commitments underlying an ideal type do not have to be normatively desirable. Instead, 'it is quite possible to acknowledge the scientific value of an ideal type, the value-laden basis of which one quite vehemently rejects'²²⁸ and thereby to highlight and criticize the fact that a particular empirical situation appears to function according to the logic of this (negative) normative value. For example, showing that ideal-typical notions of people striving for homogeneity, closure, and coherence elucidate popular anti-immigratory sentiments does not mean to endorse them. Instead, as the outcome appears to be implausible in their absence, analyticist research contributes to critique by showing the very prevalence of (normatively undesirable) value commitments.

Second, analyticism entails an inclination toward reflection. Critics might argue that analyticist research inevitably reifies both the objects of study and the researcher's (biased) value commitments deployed to them. In terms of the former, I argue that analyticism implies an agnostic position, enabling researchers to explicitly bracket questions concerning ontological realness. If made explicit and reflected upon concerning potential 'lapses' of ontological reification, this position differs from implicit (neopositivist) or explicit (critical realist) reification processes. Concerning value commitments, reflection is an inherent part of the process of ideal-typification, requiring the researcher to be explicit about the ethical claims transformed into ideal types. Outlining the biases, tacit assumptions, and silences inherent in the deployed ideal types demands the researcher 'to be reflexive about her own categories used and the theories *from which* she thinks and acts,'²²⁹ as well as their embeddedness in the social and discursive context.²³⁰ This entails, for example, reflecting on the implications of analyzing populism primarily through the ideal type lens that people are generally anxious and driven by anxiety minimization, instead of the ideal typified value commitment of radical agency based on the embrace of anxiety.²³¹ In fact, some

²²¹Jackson 2011, 160, 165–8.

²²²Kinnvall and Svensson 2023.

²²³Cochran 2002.

²²⁴Hamati-Ataya 2012.

²²⁵Bohman 2002.

²²⁶Rytövuori-Apunen 2005.

²²⁷Jackson 2011, 36.

²²⁸*Ibid.*, 168–9.

²²⁹Hofius 2020, 178, emphasis in the original.

²³⁰Diez 1999, 66; Jackson 2025, 85.

²³¹Berenskoetter 2020.

forms of (radical) support for populist politics, such as the January 6 attacks on the United States' Capitol, might be better understood as attempts to claim radical agency through the embrace of uncertainty. These reflections about the ideal type value commitments deployed to empirical situations thus have the potential to elucidate biases in our analyses.

Moving beyond the potential for critique, analyticist research on ontological (in) security differs from reflexivist contributions in that it constitutes the methodological basis for a pragmatist-oriented normative turn in OSS, as proposed by Jason Ralph.²³² While there have been extensive debates about the conservative status quo bias inherent in understandings of ontological security as generated through closed identities and fixed routines,²³³ according to Ralph, this is precisely the reason why the call to 'embrace anxiety' is not very appealing for many people.²³⁴ Instead, drawing on pragmatist ethics, Ralph proposes a focus on improving people's lived experiences in constantly changing environments. This perspective regards normative value not as substantive but as processual, located in the practice of learning and growth,²³⁵ which may contribute to overcoming violent and exclusivist orders without abolishing all forms of order as such.²³⁶ This pragmatist ethical perspective is constituted on an analyticist methodology in two ways.

On the one hand, focusing on the ability of agents to assert control over their experience of being entails that these questions can only be answered in specific contexts. Whether an actor's situation-specific experience of being would improve through the continuation or adjustment of routines and identities cannot be answered in the abstract.²³⁷ This resonates with analyticism's phenomenological orientation, which generates knowledge about specific situations and the role that value commitments, such as inclinations for stability and openness for change, play in them, while recognizing that these insights do not have transfactual value. Identifying the role that ideal typical (non-)exclusionary value commitments play in a specific situation and the potential ways to improve people's situation-specific experience of being without recurring, for example, to populist politics, analyticist OSS can thus contribute to learning and growth.

On the other hand, Ralph argues that the question concerning the possibility of nurturing healthy growth depends on a certain 'faith' in the functional value of thoughts:

We may one day learn that what we currently believe is in fact untrue, but in the meantime, belief can help us in a practical way ... It can, for instance, help us to cope with uncertainty and to do things in that context.... Unverified claims "form the overwhelmingly large number of truths we live by."²³⁸

Thus, thoughts do not necessarily have to be true to be of practical value, e.g., by helping actors to overcome anxiety in a specific context.²³⁹ This is reflective of the

²³²Ralph 2024.

²³³*Ibid.*, 2.

²³⁴*Ibid.*, 4.

²³⁵*Ibid.*, 3–4; Owen 2002, 669.

²³⁶Steele 2024.

²³⁷Ralph 2024, 3–4.

²³⁸*Ibid.*, 5.

²³⁹*Ibid.*, 5.

analyticist mind-world monist position, which recognizes the functional value of ideal-type ethical claims in producing insights about specific situations while rejecting both to securely ground these insights 'within the world' and to regard them as 'true' beyond their functional value. Grounding functional knowledge claims in value commitments which do not have to correspond to the world 'out there,' analyticist OSS provides the basis for learning processes whereby people's situation-specific experience of being can be improved by focusing on the functional value of ethical commitments, for example, in overcoming exclusionary populist politics through processes of altercasting.²⁴⁰

Conclusions

OSS represents an established research program in IR, characterized by broad empirical applications, thriving theoretical debates, as well as increasing diversity within the field. While this has led to the identification and distinction of different strands of OSS, relevant methodological differences have so far not been discussed. In this paper, I addressed this issue by drawing on Jackson's taxonomy of scientific methodologies, thus advancing three main arguments.

First, OSS is characterized by broad methodological diversity in terms of the philosophical underpinnings of knowledge claims. Research on ontological (in)security has been grounded in neopositivist, critical realist, reflexivist, and analyticist methodologies, regarding the concept as a variable in systematic comparative analyses, an underlying although unobservable causal mechanism, an object of and tool for critical reflection, or an instrumentally deployed ideal type. This diversity of knowledge claims advanced in contributions to OSS cuts across existing distinctions within the field.

Second, greater reflection on scientific methodologies is important as different (implicit) philosophical foundations determine the types of knowledge claims advanced, their evaluation, their dealing with metatheoretical challenges, and their critical potential. While the understanding of anxiety and ontological security seeking as a constitutive human condition and the corresponding 'problem of codetermination'²⁴¹ make standards for the evaluation of knowledge claims extremely relevant, this is not possible absent reflection on methodological assumptions, since scientific methodologies differ considerably in terms of their standards for the production and evaluation of valid knowledge claims. Additionally, grounding OSS in different methodologies also holds implications concerning the perception of and dealing with two metatheoretical challenges: the ontological risk of reifying the Self and the epistemological challenge following from the inclination to regard anxiety and ontological security seeking as ontologically real. Further, scientific methodologies also have important implications for the critical potential of OSS, which differs significantly depending on the philosophical foundation of the knowledge claims advanced.

Third, while I explicitly embrace the inherent value of methodological pluralism and of research based on the respective methodologies, in this paper, I sought to highlight the potential of grounding research on ontological (in)security in an

²⁴⁰Ibid., 6–7.

²⁴¹Krickel-Choi 2022a, 11.

analyticist methodology, which a variety of contributions to OSS already (tacitly) draw on. More specifically, analyticism provides both a promising possibility to evaluate the (limits of) knowledge claims advanced by OSS as well as a convenient pathway to circumvent the metatheoretical challenges. Moreover, while analyticist OSS falls short of the critical predisposition of reflexivity, it nonetheless entails critical potential and also moves beyond other critical approaches to OSS in that it undergirds a pragmatist-oriented normative turn in OSS.

Bringing into focus the methodological diversity of contributions to OSS and their effects, this paper complements and contributes to existing attempts to grapple with the diversity of the field. Just as IR more generally, which has been characterized by long-standing anxieties due to its 'fragmentation of debates and research agendas ... and diversity of methodologies,'²⁴² OSS has been described as an anxious research program 'torn between embracing its unconventional roots ... and engaging with the mainstream of IR scholarship to demonstrate its own legitimacy within the discipline.'²⁴³ In this regard, as the concept of ontological (in)security has been applied to study 'an ever-increasing range of phenomena in world politics' and 'different understandings and meanings of ontological security' emerged, Hugo von Essen and August Danielson argue that there exists an increasing risk of the concept becoming 'somewhat ambiguous' and more 'vague and less useful.'²⁴⁴

On the one hand, this paper contributes to recent attempts to order the diversity in the field of OSS. Different strands of research on ontological (in)security have been distinguished according to their disciplinary roots,²⁴⁵ 'mainstream' or 'critical' orientation,²⁴⁶ or according to the levels and units of analysis focused on.²⁴⁷ Similarly, von Essen and Danielson proposed a typology of ontological security mechanisms to 'analyze, classify, and categorize the different understandings and meanings of ontological security in the literature.'²⁴⁸ This paper does not substitute these efforts but complements them by providing a framework for understanding the methodological underpinnings of research on ontological (in)security and the resulting differences in terms of knowledge claims advanced, their validation, their dealing with metatheoretical challenges, and their implications for critique.

On the other hand, this paper seeks to facilitate and improve dialogue and debate within OSS. Given that 'internal variety is arguably one of OSS's greatest strengths, as it creates a vibrant research community characterized by theoretical openness and innovation,'²⁴⁹ the field benefits from embracing its plurality based on 'a sense of complementarity' of different but internally justified bodies of knowledge.²⁵⁰ The paper contributes to this strength by providing a 'common vocabulary' enabling researchers to evaluate the knowledge claims advanced and offering 'a commonplace about which to disagree.'²⁵¹ This allows researchers to be 'more cognizant of

²⁴² Guzzini 2020, 285.

²⁴³ Krickel-Choi 2021, 13; Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017.

²⁴⁴ von Essen and Danielson 2023, 2, 3.

²⁴⁵ Bolton 2023, 234–5; Rogers 2024, 193.

²⁴⁶ Rosedale 2015.

²⁴⁷ Croft and Vaughan-Williams 2017.

²⁴⁸ von Essen and Danielson 2023, 2–3.

²⁴⁹ Krickel-Choi 2022a, 5.

²⁵⁰ Jackson 2011, 189, 210; Guzzini 2020, 285.

²⁵¹ Jackson 2011, 192–4, 210.

strengths and limitations of their ways of producing knowledge²⁵² about ontological (in)security. Acknowledging and supporting the diversity of OSS, this paper enables different strands of the field to engage in more ‘productive dialogue’ and ‘meaningful scientific controversy.’²⁵³ This entails, for example, discussions of methods and operationalizations in OSS, for which the methodological considerations in this paper provide a useful framework. Additionally, future research could also beneficially transfer these methodological discussions to other subfields, including international political psychology²⁵⁴ or research on emotions in IR.²⁵⁵ The paper is thus not only relevant for researchers in OSS but also for scholars in adjacent fields and those from other fields of IR seeking to engage with arguments about ontological (in) security.

Acknowledgements. I presented parts of this paper at the EISA’s 2023 *10th European Workshops in International Studies* in Amsterdam. I thank Pelin Dengiz, Thomas Diez, Elena Dück, Nicolai Gellwitzki, Gabriella Griecius, Anne-Marie Houde, Nina Krickel-Choi, Oliver Merschel, Eric Pardo, Lauren Rogers, Ben Rosher, Franz von Lucke, Federico Salvati, Dominik Sipinski, Bruno Sowden-Carvalho, Sören Stapel, Pawel Tverskoi, Chris Vloedbeld, Leonardo Zanatta, as well as the editors and the three anonymous reviewers for valuable comments and suggestions for improving the paper.

Funding. No specific funding was received for this research.

Competing interests. The author declares none.

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²⁵²Ibid., 211, emphasis in the original.

²⁵³Owen 2002, 654; Jackson 2011, 39, 192, 194.

²⁵⁴Gildea 2020.

²⁵⁵Hutchison and Bleiker 2014.

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