Introduction
An increasing number of constructivist IR scholars use the concept of ontological security, adopted from the sociological writings of Anthony Giddens who, in turn, took it from the psychoanalyst R. D. Laing. In that conception, ontological security refers to the feeling of having a ‘stable sense of Self’ and is seen as a precondition for action. Moreover, this scholarship assumes that ‘ontological security’ is something humans seek. Perhaps unconsciously so, but nevertheless it is considered a basic need. It then follows that we must see the attempt to satisfy this need as a motivational driver behind human action (Giddens 1984; Giddens 1991; Kinnvall 2004; Steele 2005; Mitzen 2006; Zarakol 2016). This does not sound controversial, as it mirrors a standard assumption among IR scholars about the human demand for physical security, which ontological security scholarship seeks to complement. Yet, it puts an assumption about human nature at the heart of ontological security scholarship, and as with all such assumptions the implications are wide reaching. For one, it shifts attention away from the notion that having ontological security is a precondition for action towards exploring the kind(s) of agency at play in seeking ontological security. This seemingly subtle move from understanding agency as something that occurs on the basis of being ontologically secure to something expressed in the attempt to become ontologically secure is quite profound. It asks us to explore human choices and behaviour as (manifestations of) attempts to address this need and, in doing so, opens up the view to different kinds of agency.

Turning to focus onto agency is important. As Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) note, the concept of agency often is subsumed by broader theoretical frameworks and receives insufficient attention. While we cannot isolate the concept from its contexts, reflecting on agency has both moral and practical implications as it touches on fundamental questions of free will and determinism and, thus, addresses not only how individuals and collectives do act, but also how they could and should act. To understand the place agency has in ontological security scholarship and, more precisely, to understand the nature of this agency, it is necessary to think carefully about the nature of this presumed need for
ontological security, why it is expressed and how it is satisfied. In other words, we need to think about the composition of the Self and the condition of its (in)stability. Giddens’ notion, building on Laing and Erik Erikson, that ontological security is obtained by putting into place “anxiety controlling mechanisms” (Giddens 1984: 50) serves as a useful entry point. If seeking ontological security is about finding ways to ‘control anxiety’ through consciously or unconsciously putting in place certain ‘mechanisms’, we must ask about the nature of those mechanisms and inquire who is able to create, control, challenge and change them. But we still need to dig deeper. To meaningfully address the nature of these mechanisms we need to have an understanding what they are supposed to control. And so, we must start with an understanding of the origin and nature of anxiety.

As indicated in the title, the paper explores the links between anxiety and agency by focusing on temporal dimension of being\(^1\) and, in doing so, addresses three weaknesses of existing ontological security scholarship in IR. First, it shifts the focus on anxiety, which despite being at the heart of the ontological security framework has received relatively little attention so far. Second, it highlights that an engagement with the concept of anxiety needs to understand humans as temporally situated, which until recently has also been neglected by IR scholars.\(^2\) Third, it explains why the logic informing existing ontological security scholarship cannot account for radical form of agency and offers some thoughts on whether and how this might be rectified. With that in mind, the essay proceeds in three parts. The first part discusses the temporal sources of anxiety and its status as a foundational sentiment, or mood, connected to but distinct from uncertainty and fear. The second part outlines what I call the ‘anxiety paradox’ and discusses three prominent strategies of controlling anxiety and types of agency it entails. The third and final part picks up the philosophical unease with these strategies and points to two avenues for thinking about a more radical kind of agency, which either suspends or embraces anxiety.

**From Uncertainty to Anxiety**

Broadly speaking, human existence is embedded in three worldly dimensions: the social, the spatial and the temporal. And those dimensions give rise to a fundamental feature of the human condition, namely uncertainty: we cannot read minds of others and don’t really know what they think or feel (the social); historical accounts are contested and we don’t really know what the future brings (the temporal); we are living on a planet containing an

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1 In line with the perspective of existential phenomenology informing my discussion I approach the

2 The defining work exposing this neglect in IR is Hutchings (2008).
An abundance of matter, whose moves we cannot control, and which is floating in an infinite space of which we know very, very little (the spatial). While we are trying hard to reduce these uncertainties by learning more about our social, temporal and spatial environment, ultimately we have to accept that our knowledge is limited. We have to live with uncertainty. IR scholars looking at the world through a realist lens have long emphasized the relevance of this condition for decision-making and international relations more generally. Usually drawing on Hobbesian arguments, they hold that uncertainty is a fundamental feature structuring human relations, which constitutes distrust and fear of the other and leads rational actors to engage in balancing behaviour. Ontological security scholarship offers another approach to the question how uncertainty affects human relations and influences action through its focus on anxiety. To understand the value added it is necessary to grasp that uncertainty and anxiety are two different yet intertwined concepts. Crudely speaking, the former designates a lack of knowledge about the world, of not being able to establish knowledge about something. Yet uncertainty as such is a sterile condition, which in the social sciences it becomes relevant only by asking how uncertainty affects feeling, thinking and acting of individuals and collectives. For scholars of ontological security, the answer is anxiety.

Crudely put, anxiety designates a feeling or mood that arises from facing an uncertain world. Let me substantiate this by drawing on the work of Martin Heidegger, who discusses the phenomenon of anxiety, its source and impact on being, in his influential existentialist treatise ‘Being and Time’ [Sein und Zeit]. Phenomenology sees an existential link between being and experience. The notion that our sense of Self and of the world is significantly shaped by experience, commonly noted by philosophers, takes on a particular relevance in phenomenology and, together with his emphasis on the temporality of human existence, underpins Heidegger’s emphasis on anxiety as a defining feature of being. As noted by Louiza Odysseos’ (2002), it is instructive to trace the contours of his logic, including the difference he makes between anxiety and fear, in comparison with Hobbes. At first sight Heidegger, like Hobbes, identifies uncertainty as a central factor structuring the human condition. Yet on closer look, his discussion about the nature of uncertainty and its impact on being and social life takes a very different route. While uncertainty is arguably always linked to an unknown future, and thus to the temporal situatedness of being, Hobbes and his realist followers in IR emphasize the social aspect of uncertainty, that is, the human

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3 Scholars discussing the notion of ontological security tend to blend psychoanalysis with existentialist philosophy, or phenomenology, Giddens being a prime example.
inability to truly know the intentions of others and what they will do to us. In this “condition of epistemological indeterminacy” (Williams 2005: 25) even the strongest man is vulnerable when he sleeps and cannot trust his fellow men not to take advantage and rob him of possessions and even his life. Uncertainty is thereby linked to a sense of physical insecurity, with distrust and fear as defining features of social relations captured in Hobbes well-known image of the ‘state of nature’ where humans co-exist in continual fear and danger of violent death. In Hobbes’ account, then, this fear of a future in which only death is certain is shared by all individuals and turns into fear of the other, which provides the rationale for a social contract embodied in the figure of the Leviathan. For Hobbes, then, fear of death is the motivation for establishing a particular social arrangement that is capable of enabling a life without such fear (Epstein 2013).

A Heideggerian approach shifts the emphasis by foregrounding the temporal dimension as the most important aspect affecting our understanding what it means to be. This builds on the seemingly trivial fact that the one thing affecting the Self in a unique way is its own death. Death is unique because it signifies the moment after which ‘being’ in the phenomenological sense becomes impossible (Heidegger 1953: 250). It is only then that the life-span is ‘complete’, which makes death the utmost and unsurpassable possibility of being. Until then, the Self remains incomplete and, consequently, requires us to more accurately read being as coming-into-being, or becoming. And because the finitude of ones’ existence cannot be shared, that is, because death happens only to the dying individual, only in the moment of death is ‘being’ constituted in its wholeness. Crucially, Heidegger notes that it is impossible to have an experience of what it means to die, as even the death of a close family member is an experience that, ultimately, cannot be shared (Heidegger 1953, § 47). The implications of this seemingly trivial point are profound. For a while, Heidegger contemplates that it is not death as such but fear of death which constitutes true being (Ibid, 184ff). This appears to be on par with Hobbes, yet Heidegger then takes a different turn by problematizing the link between death and fear: he points out that without being able to experience death it is impossible to know what to fear. We know that ‘death’ will happen, eventually, which makes ‘death’ an integral part of life, but we are unable to comprehend ‘it’ in the sense of grasping it as a meaningful thing (Heidegger 1953: 246). And so while we can be certain about our inescapable finitude, we cannot really fear that which brings death about, that is, we cannot ‘know’ the existential threat in the phenomenological sense. This

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4 Apologies for the gendered language, but it is useful here to make the point.
inability to locate the existential threat makes it seem to be potentially everywhere and appear out of nowhere (Ibid, 186).

With this, Heidegger leads us to the fundamental insight that it is not fear through which we have to comprehend the ontological structure of being, but anxiety [Sorge] (Heidegger 1953: 191ff). He identifies anxiety, generated by the unknowability of death and the future more generally, as the foundational sentiment or mood [Befindlichkeit] of the human condition. It is a background mood prior to any wills, desires, needs, or drives and provides the ontology of being with an “original structural whole” [ursprüngliche Strukturanze] Although he is reluctant to reduce anxiety to a strictly emotional experience, he places a feeling at the centre of the human condition from which more concrete wills or desires can spring (Heidegger 1953: §41, 192f.).

**The Emergence of the Anxious Mind and the Anxiety Paradox**

The awareness that death may occur at any moment and the inability of comprehending it foreshadows the postmodern emphasis on radical contingency as a central aspect of the human condition. Yet, awareness of contingency is not a phenomenon of post-modern times. Rather, it emerges at the moment of enlightenment – “man’s emergence from his self-imposed... inability to use one's own understanding” to use Kant’s famous words. In Western philosophy, at least, anxiety takes hold of being once it becomes a self-conscious and reflexive subject. As Alastair Hannay (2014 xxiii) puts it “Anxiety...is the mood in which human beings awaken to the peculiarly exposed vantage point they ‘enjoy’ by virtue of their specifically reflective form of awareness”.

Given that it signifies a momentous occasion in the history of human development, the emergence of the enlightened and, hence, anxious being is discussed as occurring in significant contexts. Soren Kirkegaard’s discussion of the Concept of Anxiety uses the biblical story of Genesis as its setting. In this account, Adam living in the Garden of Eden is an innocent and ignorant being in a state of “peace and repose” (Kirkegaard 2014 [1844]: 50); he feels no anxiety. This changes when Adam encounters the tree of knowledge. By eating the apple Adam looses his innocence/ignorance and not only brings sin and death into the

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5 In that sense, it is more basic than a Lacanian perspective emphasizing “desire as the raw, immediate dimension of being” (Epstein 2010: 235). It also should be noted that Heidegger later relativized the emphasis on anxiety as the only fundamental mood structuring being, adding the notion of boredom. I am grateful to Badredine Arfi for pointing this out.
world, but also anxiety. In fact, in Kierkegaard’s account anxiety arises already through the very prohibition of eating from the tree, because this constitutes the awareness that things could be otherwise: “the prohibition makes him anxious, because it awakens in him freedom’s possibility” (p. 54). Kierkegaard thus sees anxiety coming not out of the inability to grasp ones’ finitude, but out of the awareness of having the ability to choose and, hence, to the infinitude of possibilities open to human beings. As he puts it “anxiety is freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility” (51). Although Kierkegaard focuses on morality rather than temporality as the framework within which anxiety arises, he makes an important observation: in the temptation to taste the forbidden fruit, Adam feels both drawn to and wants to flee from the freedom of possibility and, thus, anxiety. Here Kierkegaard identifies what he calls the dialectic property of anxiety “as a sympathetic antipathy and an antipathetic sympathy” (p. 51, italics in original).

The dialectic in the human attitude towards ‘freedom’s possibility’ – of both feeling drawn to and wanting to flee from anxiety – is also found in reading of humans as temporal beings. This is illustrated by turning to another ‘place of origin’ popular in Western philosophy, ancient Greece, as presented by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (1988 [1947]), as well as John Gunnell (1987). In this account, lives in ancient Greece were embedded in myths and missing a sense of time as distinct from natural rhythms. Placed in a cosmic creation ordered by the Gods, humans did not see themselves as masters of their own fate and did not (need to) reflect on their own finitude; they viewed the world and their place within it from an “atemporal perspective” (Gunnell 1987: 12). Again, it was a world without anxiety (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988: 33, 50ff; Gunnell, 1987: 25ff). The emergence of self-consciousness and, hence, the transition from the mythical view to an understanding of the temporality of human existence, is described in Homer’s epic poems the Iliad and Odyssey. Protagonists like Ulysses are given a sense of uniqueness, influenced by experience and emotions, aware of their mortality and partially claiming responsibility for their actions over the course of the journey (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988: Exkurs 1; Gunnell 1987: 79f).

However, the journey of Ulysses is also a struggle, exemplified in his deliberate alienation from and simultaneous surrender to the forces of nature during the encounter with the sirens (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1988: 55, my translation). Moreover temporal self-consciousness also remains weak, as human existence is still oriented towards a tragic past from which there is no escape, and the possibility of immortality is maintained through the performance of god-like heroic deeds (Gunnell 1987: 87).
This dialectic move of gaining but not fully embracing the temporality of being is also visible in Plato’s writings, especially the *Republic*. At one level, Plato criticizes Athenian society as ordered by values “embedded in a mesmeric folk memory” (Gunnell 1987: 127) and emphasizes the human ability for shaping the future. He holds that the creative mind should extricate itself from the Hellenic myth and engage in re-envisioning order, which Plato does, famously, by imagining five types of city as housing five arrangements of the soul. Yet in doing so, Plato holds that eternity can still be reached through the (philosophers’) ability to envision and create a just order in which the soul could be embedded. The enlightened human breaks with the gods, only to be tied to the polis as a permanent home, “an imperishable space” that transcends human time (Gunnell 1987: 115).

Another example is the emergence of nationalism, the (re)formation of self-consciousness on the collective level. In his popular book *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson famously attributes the emergence of nationalism in Europe and Latin America to the spread of the novel and the newspaper (Anderson 2006). While this is often read as an argument about the rise of the publishing industry driven by capitalism’s search for new markets, a crucial component of Anderson’s argument is that the impact of the printed press was rooted in a transformed conception of time. Similar to the other examples, Anderson describes societies where the decline of monarchical rule went hand in hand with the decline of cosmic or ‘Messianic time’. The secular ‘empty time’ (Benjamin) of modernity taking its place was filled by the printed press, which satisfied a demand for ‘simultaneity’ among individuals trying to find their place in this new temporal universe. As Anderson argues, by reading the same stories in newspapers and novels, these mediums create “the idea of a sociological organism moving calendrically through homogenous, empty time”, thereby forming a shared narrative that connects individuals to a ‘nation’ on a temporal plane (Anderson 2006: 26). Along the same vein, postcolonial writings often points to the emergence of nationalism in the process of decolonialisation through a collective narrative seeking to provide “a content, a history, a meaning, and a trajectory” for an independent society (Krishna 1994: 508). Sankaran Krishna points to the link between such a narrative and cartographic representations of India, through maps and other imagery, to affirm its place in a world of territorially sovereign states “as a timeless essence” (Ibid. 514). Catarina Kinnvall’s discussion of how communities in India experienced neoliberal facets of

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6 Though Krishna notes that this did not manage to settle the anxiety, also due to the added trauma of partition, and thus diagnoses a persistent postcolonial anxiety of a society “trapped in time – former colony but pre-nation” (Krishna 1994: 517).
globalization as a destabilizing force and responded with an attachment to religious nationalism hint at a similar dynamic (Kinnvall 2006).

Sweeping as they may be, these accounts illustrate a peculiar dynamic: reflexive humans gain temporal self-consciousness through emancipation from mythical, cosmic or colonial orders, yet in the process they create new knowledge which, as Horkheimer and Adorno famously argue, is not so different from the myth it sought to replace. This can be seen as an expression of the dialectic identified by Kirkegaard, and it points to a fundamental paradox characterizing the condition of the reflexive (enlightened) individual, which I shall term the ‘anxiety-paradox’: awareness of the ability to organize the temporal world amidst the decline of an overarching metaphysical order is accompanied by reluctance of fully accepting the newfound freedom. More precisely, awareness of being positioned in finite time and recognizing that past and future are dimensions affected by, and affecting, human activity, ‘post-mythical’ conceptions of time do not embrace contingency and ‘chaos’. Instead, they convey a desire to hold on to some sort of continuity and coherence by re-inventing a transcendental layer with an eternal perspective into which human worldly existence is embedded. This, then, is the paradox: Having wrestled agency from the gods, humans use this agency to recreate perhaps not the gods but the epistemological peace they provided.

This move has long been recognised by those calling for emancipation from divine authority. Perhaps most famously, Nietzsche, while celebrating the ‘death of god’, wondered how humanity would handle the ‘nothingness’ that followed the death of the deity. Given that life without the metaphysical comfort of the Christian belief system also meant the death of the subject that had been constituted through this system, Nietzsche asked “How will we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers!...What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of the deed not too great for us?” (The Gay Science, p. 120, cited in Michelsen and Hirst 2013: 105). The anxiety paradox suggests that it is. Its claim that humans are unable, or unwilling, to embrace contingency and radical uncertainty about their being in the world and, instead, search for coherence, consistency and continuity has been observed and discussed in philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis and sociology at least since Kant. This includes, not surprisingly, those critical of essentialist accounts of being. Henri Bergson, whose work on the temporal constitution of

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7 Although the enlightenment is a core theme in liberal thought, I do not mean to present a story of progress; neither should the examples be read as supporting the (false) idea of Western civilization as the home of reflexivity. I assume similar accounts of humans struggling with ‘enlightenment’ could be found in other contexts; I am just more familiar with the Western account.
the evolutionary Self has been reclaimed as an avantgarde of postmodern thinking, notes that the “natural inclination” of the mind is to proceed “by solid perceptions...and stable conceptions” (cited in Grosz 2005: 135) and sees the human desire for the scientific ordering of time as a psychological defense against the disorderly influx of experiences (Guerlac, 2006: 76). Lacan notes a human desire to compensate for the ‘lack’ of a ground on which the Self stands through “processes of identification” (Epstein 2010: 334); David Harvey points to the appeal of the ‘eternal myth’ provided by modernism which “had to redeem us from the ‘formless universe of contingency’” (Harvey 1990: 31); Norbert Elias notes the “longing for something permanent behind the impermanence of all observable data...for something imperishable...as the solid fundament of transient lives” (Elias 1992: 128), and Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1991 [1966]: 119) speak of “symbolic universes” which bestow meaning upon death and thereby shelter the individual from the ‘ultimate terror’. In less dramatic terms, the assumption that humans seek cognitive consistency is also central to work in IR analysing the nature, sources and effects of perceptions, representations and identity (Jervis 1976; Hopf 2002, and below).

To be clear, if we accept Heidegger’s logic outlined above, the “need to experience oneself as a whole person in time” (Mitzen 2006: 342) can never be fully satisfied. Anxiety is an ever-present mood that cannot be switched off. So the mechanisms humans put in place to control anxiety, to use Giddens’ terminology, do not suspend anxiety but merely enable humans to obtain a state of mind that offers sufficient epistemological peace about being in the world. They provide a stock of knowledge – “the certainty that phenomena are real and that they possess specific characteristics” (Berger and Luckmann 1991 [1966]: 13) – that pushes uncertainty and the contingency of human existence into the background. So we might say an effective mechanism satisfies a “desire for knowledge” (Huysmans 1998: 236) that tames anxiety and makes it tolerable. In doing so, it works on an emotional level: if anxiety is a feeling of discomfort, even ‘terror’, the mechanism taming anxiety generates a feeling of comfort.  

Three Mechanisms: Numbers, Practices, Narratives
What are those anxiety-controlling mechanisms that enable humans to obtain “cognitive and behavioural certainty” (Mitzen 2006: 342) and, hence, the epistemological peace they

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8 Via the work of Ernest Becker (1973) this view also underpins ‘terror management theory’.
9 Although, as anxiety cannot be entirely suspended as a background mood, the feeling of comfort is never perfect but remains fragile. There is, as Lacan would say, always a sense of ‘lack’.
seek? More specifically, focusing on the temporal dimension, how do humans, upon recognizing that they are masters of their own past and future, attempt to extend themselves beyond ‘their’ time by re-inscribing their existence into a permanent temporal order outside human intervention? The above examples already provided some hints, but it is useful to differentiate more clearly between three strategies through which humans attempt to create a sense of temporal continuity and stabilize being in time: scientific measures using mathematical symbols and logic, routine practice, and narrative. As will be noted, these strategies to also made their way into IR scholarship.

The first mechanism is quantification, that is, the organisation of the temporal dimension through *chronos*, a linear succession of numbers and intervals with a universal logic, providing a scale into which all events and fluctuations can be neatly embedded. As Norbert Elias notes, mathematical measures enable humans to imagine time and space as an eternal order universally accessible through reason and neutral signs (numbers) (Elias 1992: 42, 123). Designed and supported with mechanical and computerized measures, time becomes cognitively controllable and universally accessible through mathematical logic, manifest in the Western calendar, the 24-hour clock, and timetables that map out past and future. Temporal situatedness as individuals and collectives can thereby be universally recorded, managed and planned. Time as *chronos* is imagined not only as running, flowing, passing in a linear fashion of successive and ‘empty’ units, but as part of an eternal order that exists external to human thought and action. Kim Hutchings points out that a *chronotic* conception of time does not emerge out of human artifacts, but ultimately is seen as embedded in nature: “[clocks and calendars] are only able to accomplish their measuring work because they are rooted in the natural phenomenon of time” (Hutchings 2008: 6). Scientific time informs IR theory in two ways. Most obviously, it enables locating events and processes in/over time, thereby giving them a temporal signature and allowing the theorist to speak of periods and benchmark dates, as well as macro-historical dynamics of repetition, progress, or decline (Lawson and Buzan 2014). Moreover, by enabling a clear measure of before and after, *chronos* enables the formulation of theory around a simple logic of causation, that is, it allows positing two variables that are temporally separated with the ‘cause’ preceding the ‘effect’. And in addition to finding causal explanations for historical events it also allows for identifying patterns that occur ‘over time’ and a ‘timeless’ causal logic that can be projected into the future. As such, scientific measures of time suspend contingency from theory by providing the condition for causal explanations and predictions (Hutchings 2008).
The second anxiety controlling-mechanism are routine practices. Their function is discussed by Giddens, who argues that the Self seeks to establish a sense of temporal continuity through everyday practices established in a social setting (Giddens 1984: 35). While highlighting the importance of the social dimension for stabilising meaning, Giddens argues that contingency is reduced not simply because practices are shared but by because they are repeated and become a routine. That is, they emit a familiarity that comes from being ‘established’ in the past and carried over through formal or informal institutional rules. The appeal of routine practices is thus that they hold the assurance of tradition and the promise to exist indefinitely. Said differently, although taking place in a moment, a routine act is not a contingent experience but implies continuity by making the individual part of a structure capable of outliving its ‘irreversible time’, whether that practice is a micro-level routine taking place every day, or a grand ritual taking place once a year. By plucking the individual into what Giddens calls the ‘longue durée’ of institutional time, routines provide a structural frame the individual can hold onto not only for predicting social interactions but to experience the illusion of permanence and, hence, immortality. Again, IR theory has long discussed the powerful role of institutions in ordering social life, noting their ability to reduce uncertainty and their path-dependent nature and, hence, stability. This has recently been complemented by a growing focus among constructivists on practices as forces shaping social relations. Drawing on the work of scholars like Foucault, Bourdieu, and Giddens, this scholarship highlights the socializing and reproductive power of various kinds of practices (performances, habitus, routines) in international relations, explores how they “reify background knowledge” (Adler and Pouliot 2011: 5) and provide ontological security (Mitzen 2006).

The third mechanism, the use of narrative on both the individual and the collective level to lend human existence a sense of temporal continuity and purpose, is well established in the literature. Scholars have pointed to the ability of narratives to situate the Self in both past and future and “deal with life as it unfolds over time” (Ringmar 1996: 451), also captured in the suggestion that humans have a “natural impulse to narrate” (White 1987: 1). Some discuss the power of poetry and scriptures in creating ‘spaces of remembrance’ that carry being over into the ‘afterworld’ (Assmann, 1999: 39-43); others point to the enduring attraction of narratives about the future where the trajectory of human development gains meaning in utopias and dystopias (Berenkoetter 2011). Similarly, narratives about ‘bigger
than life’ individuals often function as symbols for collective identification to which a large number of people become emotionally attached, a common feature in nationalism as well as religious doctrines. The latter often also contain a teleological promise, as do the secular philosophies of, for instance, Kant, Hegel, and Marx. Although these meta-narratives differ regarding the relative openness of the future, they all picture the world on a path through time and invite us to travel along and to optimize our standing on it. This appeal of narratives is expressed in IR theories in two ways. In the first instance, the constitutive power of narrative shaping collective identity and, by extension, structuring foreign policy and international relations on various levels has been explored extensively by constructivists (Ringmar 1996; Bially Mattern 2005; Hansen 2006; Kinnvall 2006; Steele 2008; Berenskoetter 2014). Taking a step back, in addition to acknowledging narrative as an alternative to Humean causation to explain the social world, critical scholarship has pointed out how IR theories themselves function as stabilising mechanisms both inside and outside the ivory tower, whether that is realism’s claim of standing in a tradition beginning with Thucydides and stressing a cyclical view of history, or the progressive path towards a democratic peace based on the wisdom of Kant charted by liberal theorists (see Hutchings 2008).

The creation of these anxiety-controlling mechanisms thus plays out on both the level of the observed (the social world studied) and the observer (the theorist explaining this world). And, of course, the three mechanisms, separated here for analytical purposes, are neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. In social life and in IR theory they often intersect for enhanced effect, as in the case of practices and narratives captured under ‘discourse’, and are combined with social mechanisms such as recognition. Moreover, they not only create a sense of certainty of being in (social) time but also in (social) space. Yet whatever their shape or form, for them to function effectively the invented nature of the mechanisms must be forgotten, hidden, or seen as coming out of an extraordinary mind to shake off the doubt of their contingent origin. After all, something seen as a random human construct will not have the sustainable power to tame anxiety. Rather, they must take on the form of reality understood as “the quality appertaining to phenomena that we recognise as having a being independent of our own volition” (Berger and Luckmann 1991 [1966]: 13).

10 On immortality ideologies in Western philosophy, see Sheets-Johnstone (2003).
11 Many of those aspects are laid out in detail by Hutchings (2008).
12 Though some combinations may not fit and generate a tension.
13 For a discussion of different socio-political arrangements providing ontological security for societies historically, ranging from Ancient Egypt to the modern state, see Zarakol (2016).
The Question of Agency

Understanding the sources of anxiety and strategies to control it offers valuable insights for scholars of international politics. It provides a powerful rationale for the relevance of these three mechanisms in social life and invites analysts to explore how they structure everyday life and shape the subjects within them on both the domestic and the international level. Now let us turn attention to the kinds of agency at play in the emergence of anxiety and the creation and maintenance of those controlling mechanisms. The discussion so far has hinted at three kinds of agency.

The first kind might be called emancipatory agency. It is the agency closely tied to the understanding of the enlightenment as an act of liberation. That is, it comes to the fore in the realisation of having a choice and drives the emancipatory move based on the ‘courage to use one’s own mind’. Put in temporal terms, it understands that the future is open. It is illustrated in Ulysses’ journey and in Adam becoming aware of the ability to act otherwise and, thus, is not simply an agency that just ‘is’, but an emerging (awareness of having) agency that questions existing worldly constraints and seeks to liberates being from them. It is expressed in a being that acts upon the recognition that things can be different and that one is, or can be, the master of one’s own destiny with the ability to transform one’s being in the world. It is a kind of agency that can bring about, in the words of Ernesto Laclau, the “absolute chasm...between the emancipatory moment and the social order that has preceded it” (Laclau 1996: 1).

The second kind of agency is the one that uses this newfound freedom to re-order its temporal existence by creating (new) anxiety stabilising mechanisms. It might be called creative-constitutive agency. It comes to the fore in times of heightened anxiety when old mechanism lost their force and there is a demand for new ones, which it tries and is able to satisfy. It is the Plato who, having escaped the cave/gods, rebuilds the idea of an eternal order in the vision of the city and places himself within it. It transpires in Anderson’s account of collectives who replace the divine order of messianic time with a secular biographical narrative told through the printed press. In the field of IR, we find it in the attempt of academic committees to create a distinct body of theory for the new discipline; in popular figures like Kenneth Waltz or Michael Doyle who created paradigms known as structural realism and the democratic peace, or in Francis Fukuyama and Samuel Huntington whose
images of a global (dis)order provided comforting, in the sense of clear and familiar, worldviews for a post-Cold War (American) mind.

The third kind of agency is the muted agency of those who, thrown into a world replete with anxiety stabilising mechanisms, cannot or, rather, do not want to question let alone escape from them. It is agency that fits into, functions within, and sustains existing mechanisms composed of scientific symbols, routine practices and grand narratives. Doing so may “feel agentic” (Mitzen 2006: 347), but it merely involves acting out a role in a given script and moves along in the process of ‘structuration’ (Giddens 1984). It is a reproductive agency, and thus minimally creative in the conservative sense. Being is part of an unreflexive process where the motivation to remain attached to a particular mechanism is lodged in the unconscious. In the realm of IR theory, this muted agency can be observed on two levels: in theories that provide a sense of temporal continuity and only allow a conception of agency that accepts a particular temporal path and seeks to optimize ones standing on it. In realist thought, such agency is limited to recognising the distribution of power and pursuing a balancing strategy; in liberal thought it is limited to spreading liberal norms and building relationships with other democracies. On the second level, the muted agency applies to scholars and practitioners who adopt and work within a particular theoretical framework handed down to them, unwilling to question its assumptions and content with reproducing its epistemic comfort and authority.

Thus far, scholarship on ontological security is concerned with the second and, mostly, the third kind of agency (although the two are rarely separated out). The former involves work looking at how agents have set up ‘new’ anxiety controlling mechanisms at pivotal moments characterised by a state of heightened anxiety generated by external intervention. For instance, analysts have discussed how the US government responded to the public demand for meaning following the ‘shock’ of the September 11 attacks by encouraging to continue habitual behaviour, such as going shopping, and by creating a powerful narrative supported by corresponding practices under the ‘war on terror’ label (Williams 2005; Solomon 2014). Yet as such moments of externally inflicted ‘upheaval’ or trauma are rare, most work has dealt with agency that is clinging on to and thereby sustaining existing mechanisms, whether that is in form of particular narratives (Steele 2005) or routine practices (Mitzen 2006). The heuristic value of this focus is significant as it is very well suited to explain the support for and persistence of particular orders. Just like realists view ‘survival’ as the baseline goal
underpinning all others, scholars of ontological security can argue that the pursuit of power, wealth, recognition, etc. is ultimately based on the need to control anxiety by operating within particular social orders and expectations. So one might say the focus is justified because it covers a common kind of agency. But the deeper reason for why ontological security scholarship highlights creative-constitutive and muted agency lies in the logic of the anxiety paradox. The view that ‘having ontological security’ is the precondition for action is based on the assumption that reflection about the contingency of our lives, especially about our unknowable yet inescapable death, will make being “overwhelmed by anxieties” (Giddens 1991: 37) and generate a sort of ‘deer in the headlight’ paralysis. In contrast, anxiety-controlling mechanism allow us ‘to get on with our lives’ (Mitzen 2006: 346), even if such ‘getting on’ is only a muted agency. Consequently, such a perspective cannot accommodate an agency which highlights that things could be otherwise and seeks an uncertain future, because this is logically tied up with a heightened state of anxiety and, as such, ontological insecurity (Kinnvall 2006; Steele 2008; Croft 2012; Rumelili 2014). Paradoxically, the logic ends up associating emancipatory agency with paralysis rather than action.\(^{14}\)

One may counter that it is analytically artificial to separate emancipatory and creative-constitutive agency, and to hold that all actors seeking to escape existing mechanisms do so while simultaneously setting up new/alternative ones. In other words, interruption and creation are two sides of the same coin. This may well be the case in many instances, but it still avoids the question of how we arrive at the moment of transition. That is, it does not address the fact that ontological security scholarship is ill equipped to see or explain unhappiness with particular mechanisms and the will to shed them.\(^{15}\) Because it cannot accommodate the desire to open things up, current scholarship on ontological security lacks a place for a kind of agency that wants to and can escape existing mechanisms, if only for a moment. This entrapment in the conservative bias of the framework is problematic for both analytical and normative reasons, especially when looking at cases where anxiety-controlling mechanisms support conflict (Mitzen 2006; Rumelili 2015). It is also the reason why some scholars are highly critical of the concept (Rossdale 2014; Lebow forthcoming).

**Radical Agency and Ontological Security: Two Possible Avenues**

\(^{14}\) Although, admittedly, ‘not moving’ is also an action of sort.

\(^{15}\) As Ernesto Laclau (1996: 1) reminds, emancipation is “not an act of creation but instead of liberation”.

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Any attempt to rectify this weakness and theorize a form of temporal agency that can account for the radical discontinuity that emancipatory moves entail has to rethink the link between agency and anxiety. Going back to philosophy helps. After all, human activity geared towards finding and improving stabilising mechanisms and to eradicate inconsistencies and vulnerabilities in their design has long been criticized in Western thought as a betrayal of the emancipatory promise of the enlightenment. Already Kant complained:

“Laziness and cowardice are the reasons why such a large part of mankind gladly remain minors all their lives, long after nature has freed them from external guidance. They are the reasons why it is so easy for others to set themselves up as guardians. It is so comfortable to be a minor.” (What is Enlightenment, emphasis added)

Kant’s dismay about the easiness with which humans succumb to epistemological peace is echoed by a long list of thinkers including Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Bergson, Heidegger, Horkheimer and Adorno, Foucault, Derrida, Butler, Bauman – to just mention a few. Crudely put, the critique comes in two flavours: the argument that attachment to those mechanisms limits individual freedom and creativity and that they hamper authentic being. While different in character, these two meet in the basic critique that the propensity of humans to surround themselves with a seemingly comforting structure constrains capacity for and, indeed, prevents a more profound kind of agency. So the anxiety paradox is seen as a problem: scientific time, routine practices and grand narratives may function as anxiety controlling mechanisms, but they prevent the Self from ‘true’ being and acting.

This stance is illustrated in Heidegger’s (1953, §37) discussion of how temporal anxiety of being is tamed by the comforting knowledge provided by the ‘everyday’. For Heidegger, the everyday is a world of social co-existence in which the Self is a part just like ‘anyone’ else. Thus he calls this world the Man, a term similar to ‘one’ or ‘they’ signifying something general, which allows the Self to diffuse the issue of its own death by giving in to idle talk [Rede] and ambiguity [Zweideutigkeit] seemingly providing the Self with knowledge of ‘everything’ and that everything is ‘in order’. In fact, Heidegger argues, this structure places being in a mode of “groundless flotation”, a state of being “everywhere and nowhere”, a process of “getting lost” in the Man. He calls this mode of being Verfallen ['falling away'], which designates a process of crumbling, decomposing, or losing quality (Heidegger, 1953: 167-177). The attraction of getting lost in the Man – Heidegger speaks of a “constant temptation to Verfallen” (p. 177) – is that it allows avoiding conscious engagement with the
future. For Heidegger, the temporal experience of being lost in the Man is the presence (p. 346), characterised mainly by forgetfulness of what was and a by a lack of genuine engagement with what could be. Everyday practices are momentarily acts that make the presence stand out more sharply without paying attention to past and future; routines are fundamentally conservative and rest on the hope that the future will be like the present. As such, while the future is not absent from the ontological structure of the Man, a being is dispersed in the presence (Ibid., §68c). And although Heidegger is adamant that, logically speaking, Verfallen cannot be seen as a negative process of ‘falling down’ from a higher state of being (Heidegger, 1953: 43, 175f), he clearly is unhappy about this process because it does not allow for the experience of what he calls authentic being (p. 179).

Heidegger’s diagnosis echoed the intellectual Zeitgeist in Europe in the 1920s when thinkers complained about a dehumanization of life in the industrial age, and it resonates in Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of the culture industry and in Foucault’s discussion of governmentality (Horkheimer and Adorno 1988 [1947]; Burchell et al. 1991). Such diagnoses usually entail a call for resisting, intervening in and escaping from, indeed overthrowing these mechanisms and the social systems they carry. Understood in temporal terms, it calls for a kind of agency not attached to chronos but to kairos. Whereas the former signifies a conception of time as continuous and ordered, kairos stands for discontinuity and the suspension of order. It is an in-between space of absolute freedom and, thus, contingency (O Mrchadha 1999: 106). As such, it captures the temporal form of the emancipatory moment and also designates a particular experience of time. As Kim Hutchings shows, kairos has been discussed by thinkers from Machiavelli to Arendt and is generally understood as designating a “transformational time of action” (Hutchings 2008: 5). In the same vein, kairotic agency is seen as empowered by a positive attitude towards the contingency of fortune, the ability to learn and reflect and a “fundamental human capacity for renewal” (Hutchings 2008: 33, 50, 62). Incorporating such a radical form of agency into the ontological security framework is a significant challenge because it requires questioning the reality/inevitability of the anxiety paradox. Put another way, it requires recovering the neglected side of the dialectic identified by Kirkegaard, namely being drawn to anxiety. This task is beyond the scope of this paper, however let me still outline two avenues for thinking about kairotic agency. Although quite different in character, they meet in discarding the reading of anxiety as a background sentiment that has to be controlled.
The first avenue emphasises the incomplete nature of being and the need to embrace the productive potential of the contingent experiences underpinning anxiety. It has some similarities with the postmodern take of being as, in the words of David Harvey, swimming, even wallowing, in the chaotic currents of change and to embrace fragmentation and ephemerality “in an affirmative fashion” (Harvey 1991: 44). Social order in this perspective is not perfect and fixed but incomplete and full of tensions and contradictions, which can be productively exploited, and agency emerges through the cracks of these (dis)orders and gains life through plural and fleeting encounters. An example is Judith Butler’s Foucauldian conception of performative agency subverting existing systems through creative processes of resignification (Butler 1990), or Ned Lebow’s emphasis on role-playing as “a form of play that invites subjunctive “as-if” mechanisms of disguise, substitution and recombination” (Lebow 2012: 285). While useful, these accounts still conceive of agency primarily through existing social arrangements and, thus, are not radical enough. They also are not formulated through the temporal dimension. The latter is the focus of Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) sophisticated pragmatist conception of agency as permanent strategic re-arranging of past, present and future in a “dialogical structure”, however they also maintain the emphasis on the social dimension.

More useful is Henri Bergson’s conception of a Self that bundles contingent worldly experiences into a distinct sense of what he calls “inner time” through a process of “creative evolution”. Specifically, Bergson’s ‘inner time’ is grounded in the intensity of the sensations triggered in response to worldly events (Guerlac, 2006: 61f). Sensations derived from particular experiences evolve by mixing with other experiences, the synthesizing dynamic of which makes ‘inner time’ a creative process in which the fusion of diverse experiences is a source of energy. Past, present and future collapse into a singular but not homogenous conception of time composed of multiple experiences, which Bergson calls “duration”. As Suzanne Guerlac (2006: 66) puts it, “duration implies a mode of temporal synthesis that is different from the linear narrative development of past-present-future…it knits temporal dimensions together as in a melody”. When drawing on these experiences, the Self is “closer to dreaming than to knowing” and its movements take the form of “dancing” (Guerlac 2006: 47ff). This account of agency is not goal-oriented or about making choices, instead it highlights what might be called intuition and is grounded in a passionate Self (Grosz, 2005; 16). Largely due to their attempt to escape the liberal reading of the Self as autonomous and to avoid any charge of essentialism. For critiques of Butler’s account of agency as defined negatively against existing order, see McNay (1999), Dow Magnus (2006).
Guerlac 2006). And so, the Bergsonian perspective opens the door to a conceptualisation of temporal being distinct from social order and not paralysed by anxiety. Because contingent experiences are fused into an evolving “inner time” that serves as a creative force, the Self is not bothered by the indeterminacy of the future. In fact, it does not worry about the future or even conceive of the future as a significant space, but dances seemingly aimlessly through the world, which lends it the potential for radical agency.

The second avenue is opened by Heidegger and holds that anxiety can be suspended in a moment of what he calls authentic being, which endows the Self with the resolve [Entschlossenheit] of kairotic agency. It reads such agency as the act of stepping out of the Man and as an intervention into the world, which, in contrast to chronotic accounts that see the future as a continuation of the past, separates past from future and, thereby, opens the future as future (O Murchadha, 1999: 27). In contrast to Bergson, the Heideggerian avenue thus maintains the importance of the future and the inevitability of death as the reference for conceptualising being and, thus, agency. It has to do so because, as noted earlier, in Heideggerian logic the uncertain future is the primary source of anxiety and prevents being from fully being itself. So an account of kairotic agency must reconfigure how being relates to the future and, in particular, the possibility of death. Grappling with his own argument that authentic being is the state of fully being itself, which takes place only in the moment at which being faces its own death (Heidegger 1953: §53), Heidegger spends much of the second half of Being and Time discussing how this might be possible. In effect, this requires rolling back the notion of the overbearing structure of anxiety and to argue that the moment of facing death does not refer to the actual experience, but to the understanding of being as ‘being-towards-death’.

This is not the place to explore what exactly ‘facing death’ involves, except to note that it designates a state of mind in which death is accepted as a possibility and integrated into being as finite and, thus, whole. It is a moment in which conscience calls upon being to accept its fate; it draws being into the “simplicity of fate” (O Murchadha 1999: 109). In this moment, being sees its future as open and clearly identifies possible forms this future might take, including the endpoint, death. This reconfiguration as being-towards-death suspends anxiety. More precisely, in this moment anxiety is replaced by fear, and it is this fear that pulls the Self out of its “complacent absorption in everydayness” (Guignon 2006: 282) and
allows being to “find itself” (Heidegger 1953: 250f, 268, 308). Fear thus returns to Heidegger’s picture, although it must be said he does not anchor authentic being in fear; accepting the possibility of death and the simplicity of fate also suspends fear. Though Heidegger maintains that the state of authentic being is an exception, a rare occurrence that emerges suddenly and unexpectedly and is experienced as a moment of singularityization [Vereinzelung] (Heidegger 1953: 187ff., 336ff.). In this moment, being leaves behind the existing order of things and embraces the future as an open realm, as a space of possibilities, and where being becomes, for a moment, its possibilities. And it opens the door for the most radical form of agency, revolutionary agency, which, as Felix O Marchadha (1999) points out, expresses itself first and foremost in the ability to imagine revolution as a possibility.

We might say that the two avenues sketched here dissolve the anxiety paradox in different ways, by either embracing or suspending anxiety. This does not mean they are incompatible, in fact there are fruitful points of connection: both work in the phenomenological tradition and, in contrast so sociological accounts, both highlight the ‘internal’ configuration of temporal being, a form of what Kirkegaard termed the ‘subjective spirit’. And one might think of ways to combine Bergson’s view of how the experience of contingency is a source of creative energies with Heidegger’s emphasis on being as oriented towards the future and, especially, death. However we conceptualise kairotic agency, the important question in the context of this paper is whether it makes sense to think of it as ontologically secure.

**Conclusion**

This paper attempted to contribute to scholarship on ontological security by making three conceptual interventions. First, it brought to the forefront the temporal structure of the concept of anxiety and point to a crucial element underpinning the argumentative logic of existing scholarship on ontological security, namely the anxiety paradox. Second, the paper directed attention to the forms of agency operating under this logic and pointed out that it cannot account for emancipatory agency. Third, it outlined two avenues of thought around (or overcoming) the anxiety paradox, loosely drawing on Bergson and Heidegger, which open the door for more radical forms of agency for temporal beings. In conclusion, it is worth reiterating that the primary aim of this discussion was to delineate a problem, not to

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17 Some aspects of this kind of agency is discussed in literature on suicide (terrorism), see Fierke (2009); Michelsen (2015).

18 Which is not the same as giving in to individualism.
offer solutions. With current scholarship on ontological security trapped in the conservative bias of the framework, the key question is whether the anxiety paradox is an *aporia* – “a self-engendered paradox beyond which it cannot press” (Doty 1997: 375) – or whether accounts of radical/kairotic agency can be integrated into the ontological security framework. If ontological security is about gaining and maintaining a stable sense of Self through temporal continuity, can it integrate a revolutionary agency, which by default celebrates instability and discontinuity? Of course, the answer depends partly on how we decide to read these concepts. But, in the end, it requires reflecting on how central the anxiety paradox is for the framework and, perhaps, whether it should be replaced with Kirkegaard’s insight of a dialectic. And so, the question of radical agency shakes the intellectual foundations of ontological security scholarship.

**Literature**


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