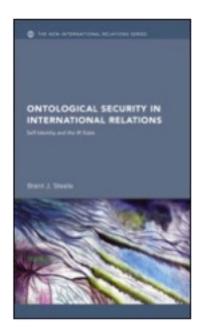# Review - Ontological Security in International Relations

https://www.e-ir.info/2013/07/27/review-ontological-security-in-international-relations/

LUKE M. HERRINGTON, JUL 27 2013

Ontological Security in International Relations: Self Identity and the IR State
By: Brent J. Steele
London: Routledge, 2008

The state's focus on physical security is nigh ubiquitous in International Relations (IR) theory. At least since the 1970s, when the late, great Kenneth Waltz's argument—that "survival is a prerequisite to achieving any goals that states may have"—became a core element of defensive realism, IR scholars have found survival and security to be among the paramount aspirations of states subsisting in an international system often characterized by anarchy. Indeed, Waltz was echoing a sentiment already expressed in the English School by Hedley Bull, who says that "unless men enjoy some measure of security against the threat of death or injury at the hands of others, they are not able to devote energy or attention enough to other objects to be able to accomplish them." This dialogue, which is extracted from *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* , a book by Brent J. Steele, an Associate Professor of Political Science at the University of Kansas, can be taken farther. Indeed, as Steele observes, Alexander Wendt, Alexander George and Robert Keohane, also emphasize the state's "physical survival" priority, while John Mearsheimer's offensive realism posits "that survival is the primary goal of great powers," further illustrating that the "'survival' notion of security" is a major tenant in IR thinking.[1]

Mainstream IR thinking, according to Steele, understands the concept of security as "that which ensures the survival of states so that they can pursue rational ends." Thus, IR scholars have come to understand security as being inclusive of favorable geographies, weapons stockpiles, large, competent militaries, friendly alliances, and material resources—essentially the things most often characterized as part of a nation's hard power assets. Yet, when referring to an individual's insecurity, it is unlikely, avers Steele, "that his or her survival is at stake, unless that

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individual is so unsure of himself or herself that he or she is suicidal." No, in reference to an individual's *feelings* of insecurity, odds are that one is most likely talking about something psychological or emotional. As such, Steele joins a chorus of ontological security theorists who see something missing from the field's traditional understanding of security, and moreover, he seeks to fill this perceived lacuna.[2]

Steele's book builds on the work of other IR scholars who have confronted the issue of ontological security in world politics, such as Jennifer Mitzen, Catarina Kinnvall, Ian Manners, Bill McSweeney, and Jef Huysmans.[3] Though not without its flaws, *Ontological Security in International Relations* is an underrated, complex, and well-researched book. Part of the Routledge series on "The New International Relations," edited by Richard Little, Iver B. Neumann, and Jutta Weldes, which also includes such great pieces of scholarship as Patrick Thaddeus Jackson's *The Conduct of Inquiry in International Relations: Philosophy of Science and its Implications for the Study of World Politics*, Steele's book deserves wider attention from, *inter alia*, those interested in IR theory, critical theory, security studies, identity, and the role of narrative in IR for a handful of reasons. Of course, his approach to ontological security convincingly appends the field's more materialist notions of security, but the merits of the book lie as much with Steele's novel conclusions as they do with the ideas he inspires. For instance, an ontological security-minded perspective, as shall be discussed below, might shed some light on the controversy over the 2012 American film *Zero Dark Thirty*, and it might add to the field's understanding of alternative theories of IR, such as feminism (or even hegemonic stability theory). For this reason, it is a shame that *Ontological Security in International Relations* has not been engaged more thoroughly in the wider literature of IR theory. In fact, the only review of Steele's book currently in existence is a piece from the *Romanian Review of International Studies* that suffers from a number of English-language deficiencies. For these reasons, a thorough, extensive, and extended review essay of *Ontological Security in International Relations* is warranted, and that is precisely what follows.[4]

Ontological Security

An early criticism that might arise from potential readers approaching this volume without any prior knowledge of ontological security is that Steele's definition of the concept is difficult to intuit early in the book. Savvy readers might put it together piecemeal from the clues found *passim* in the first chapter,[5] but they will have to wait until they get about a quarter of the way through before its definition is made explicit. There, Steele officially adopts Anthony Giddens' basic definition of ontological security—a "sense of continuity and order in events."[6] By contrast, Huysmans, who may have been the first IR scholar to really explore the issue of ontological security in depth, says that, while borrowing the concept of ontological security from Giddens, he does not "borrow the specific meaning" assigned to it by its creator. Thus, it would be interesting to know why Steele opted for the Giddensian approach over another, but *Ontological Security in International Relations* certainly benefits from the lack of a cumbersome epistemological exercise the likes of those definitional debates which feature in the terrorism and globalization literature. Lack of a definitional dialogue notwithstanding, Steele capably operationalizes ontological security effectively enough to demonstrate what *motivates* states instead of explaining the outcomes of a particular foreign policy decision, which is incidentally one of his chief aims. Though Steele largely defers to Giddens, he does elaborate on the concept of ontological security. First, he notes that in order for a state "to be ontologically secure" it must "possess answers to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses." Second, he observes that agents reflexively monitor their behavior, and states are no different. This allows secure agents to turn actions into "routines which contribute to their sense of 'continuity and order' that is so important to their sense of self."[7]

Wendt also addresses the issue of ontological security (and he may be one of the earliest IR scholars to do so), by suggesting that it is one of four "basic interests" generated by the corporate identity of a state. Ontological security, which Wendt describes as "predictability in relationships to the world, which creates a desire for stable social identities," is important because it "motivates actors to hang onto existing" conceptions of the self. Steele is wary of some of Wendt's later ideas though, including one that suggests that expectations about the world can actually morph "into a *material* need," but he still values Wendt's work as important for suggesting at least one way an ontological security approach might be integrated into the study of IR. This said, Steele should have noticed that Wendt's idea of predictability meshes rather well with his own conception of routines, and the Giddensian conception of continuity and order.[8]

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While physical security is important to states, their need for ontological security is even more so, Steele argues. Why then, do states seek ontological security? The answer is that "its fulfillment affirms a state's self-identity." Said differently, states desire "to maintain *consistent self-concepts*" because the self "is constituted and maintained through a narrative which gives life to routinized foreign policy actions." If a routine is disrupted because a state realizes that its narrative no longer reflects its actions, then this results in ontological insecurity, and forces the state to establish new routines to maintain its sense of self and identity. What this means is that an ontological security approach to IR ultimately reveals how a specific type of challenge—a "critical situation" in Giddensian parlance—can undermine a state's identity. Furthermore, this can cause anxiety and shame, which in turn might force the state to take actions that seem irrational according to the traditional security approach.[9]

The "Levels of Analysis" Problem and Emotion in IR

So, where mainstream IR theory sees "security as survival," ontological security is "security as being"; but by employing a concept originally used to understand individuals largely borrowed from the field of social psychology, Steele's book is confronted by the same "levels of analysis" problem so often encountered by political scientists attempting to apply an individual need to the state. In the past, he simply brushed this issue aside. In "Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War," an article that would eventually be incorporated into the wider framework of his book, Steele observes that states, as social actors, must have "human needs" beyond survival. Of course, he cautions that this is a controversial claim, for the application of individual needs and processes to states is a difficult procedure that regularly fails. Nevertheless, Steele dismisses the "level of analysis" issue by simply suggesting that "most models of International Relations base the needs of states on *some type* of individual and human need." Physical security just happens to be the only such need some theorists, such as neo-realists for instance, accept.[10]

In *Ontological Security in International Relations*, on the other hand, Steele tackles the levels of analysis problem more directly, noting that there are a number of productive ways to understand state personification. Indeed, the literature on the role of emotion in IR and "the use of emotion as an ontological basis for state behavior" demonstrates that all mainstream approaches to IR "assume some type of human emotion operating at the level of states." The so-called cold and calculating nation-state of theory-lore, argues Steele, plainly "does not exist in reality or, indeed, in even the most 'rationalist' approaches to international politics." Indeed, neo-realist and neo-liberal approaches both recognize two very important emotions—fear and hate—as foundational to understanding states' behavior, but the fact that these theories "have ascribed *only those two* emotions says more about the agenda of mainstream IR" and its normative functions than it does about the putative "'irrationality' of emotion as a social reality of world politics."[11]

This approach to the "levels of analysis" problem works out quite well for Steele, too. As Neumann observes in his Foreword to the book, one of Steele's primary thrusts is "to expos[e] the mainstream view that emotions have no place in state action as fallacious." As Steele argues, while the actions that play a role in the social construction of identity obviously vary on case by case basses, "the need for ontological security is uniformly driven by emotion." To reinforce this, Steele quotes psychologists Jefferson A. Singer and Peter Salovey, who say that "the primary role of emotion in humans is to alert the individual experiencing the emotion that action in some situation is necessary." Thus, emotions are responsible for aiding state agents in the coordination of action by helping agents prioritize various bits of information. For example, in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, this might explain why neoconservatives exploited emotion to legitimize former U.S. President George W. Bush's foreign policy agenda; they were attempting to imbue it with "*meaning*."[12

Neumann suggests that the Hobbesian triumvirate on which states base their action remains a pivotal force in the study of politics in general, and IR more specifically. Two of these—fear and glory—are essentially emotional in nature, whilst the third—gain—remains primarily in the orbit of hard power. If the traditional security accounts in IR theory remain wedded to only one-third of this Hobbesian triumvirate, than how much are scholars missing out on by ignoring the remaining two-thirds? The ontological security approach is thus best seen, not as an alternative to the traditional approach to security in IR, but as a corollary meant to fill in the gaps, which is another reason why Steele's book—along with other works in the ontological security literature—stands out as important.[13]

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Honor-Driven Action

Although Steele does not spend much time talking about glory, one of the foci of his book is a closely-related cousin: honor. Actually, it might appear at first glance that Steele should be criticized for failing to discuss the relationship between these two, obviously interrelated matters, especially since the connection is noted in Neumann's foreword. However, Steele's book is full of thoughtful, insightful endnotes, including a block of which address the relationship between glory and honor. Still, there may yet be a few reasons why this relationship merited further discussion in the primary body of the text. For one, Steele points out that some might view honor "as an extension of individual pride," itself closely connected to the concept of glory. Second, highlighting this matter could have solidified some of the connections between the ontological security and the (classical) realist approaches to IR. While there are a number of distinctions that separate these two theories, Steele maintains that his ontological security argument "shares similar outlooks on state behavior" with realist views. Both approaches see states as self-interested actors. The ontological security approach agrees that "self-interest supersedes international morality or international law." And finally, a state's security interests are derived from its own self-interest.[14]

However, Steele's ontological security theory diverges from realism because it assumes that a state's egoism is not based on material structures, but on self-identity needs. By further elucidating the relationship between honor and glory, however, Steele might have realized that the relationship between these two approaches is far more complex than one might first imagine. As Fareed Zakaria argues, folk interpretations of classical realism can be lampooned for making it appear that nations are "power-hungry jingoists, thrusting onto the international arena anywhere and everywhere," but in reality, realism argues that states only "pursue their ends in a rational way, measuring risks, opportunities, costs and benefits." This is highly significant, for, as Zakaria notes, cost can refer "to the usual material costs, military and economic," but that both costs and benefits can be highly complex, intersubjective matters, since these can include intangibles such as "prestige and glory." From this vantage point, Steele's theory of ontological security is distinguished from realism not by a debate discussing whether a state's actions are determined primarily by material or self-identity needs, but by the relative weight these theories assign to each.[15]

Steele touches on this matter briefly, pointing out that Richard Ned Lebow treats honor similarly to the way Zakaria treats glory—as a material need. This approach suggests that honor and glory are only meaningful to a state if recognized by another state. As such, this would engender a competition for honor through a zero-sum game, and while there may exist some sort of ranking mechanism for states to determine their level of honor in relation to one another, this ultimately treats honor as a finite resource. Steele aptly demonstrates that honor's link to self-identity, its subjectivity, and its social component make it more appropriate to think of honor as a collective good, "meaning it can be shared and acknowledged." But, a wider discussion of the relationship between honor and glory, especially in this context, might have posed an interesting question about the relationship between ontological security and soft power. Some thinkers, such as Giulio M. Gallarotti, treat "honor, glory, and prestige" as elements of soft power, and since a state's possession of honor might then enable it to persuade other actors towards a particular action, one might wonder: what is the relationship between ontological security and soft power? Steele's arguments against the material aspects of honor suggest that it cannot be treated like a currency similar to economic or military power, which aids only certain states, like the Great Powers, in controlling "others without the use of force." With this in mind, the issue of soft power complicates the matter of honor even further than glory does.[16]

In spite of this, he does an effective job at demonstrating how honor comes to play an important role in a state's ontological security. His discussion of the subject serves two stated purposes: first, to provide theoretical depth to scholars' increasing understanding of the concept of honor in IR; and second, to set up one of the three case-studies he uses to test the ontological security approach.[17] Where honor is concerned, Steele turns to the case of Belgium in World War I. It is here where his argument that ontological security can be more important to a state than its physical security (or even its very survival) is most convincing. After receiving an ultimatum from Germany demanding unrestricted access to Belgian territory, and knowing that their failure to acquiesce could result in terrible consequences, Belgian policymakers chose to fight anyway. Since IR theory ordinarily encourages the explanation of outcomes, one might recollect the oft-cited Melian Dialogue, in which Thucydides (by way of the Athenians) states that "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." In other words, the same judgment might be made about Belgium as has been made about Melos: honor-driven behavior is dangerous and irrational in an

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anarchic world where the need to survive ought to drive agent behavior. However, the inquisitive student may yet be left wondering why Belgium chose to fight Germany in the first place.[18]

Thankfully, Steele's savvy approach to ontological security seeks "to demonstrate a more comprehensive interpretation of what motivates states, or what sense of 'security' they intend to satisfy." Rather than trying to explain outcomes, Steele wants to understand the motive behind the decision-making process. So, why did Belgium choose to fight? Utilizing a case-narrative approach to add empirical substance to his claims, Steele employs discursive analysis to bring each case to life. By analyzing the statements, comments, and speeches given by Belgium's foreign policy elites, Steele reconstructs a critical situation in Belgium's history and reveals that, like Melos in the Peloponnesian War some centuries earlier, the role of honor and shame played an important role in its decision to fight a superior adversary. More specifically, it was Belgium's conception of honor, and its self-perceived place in the wider European community, and commitment to that community, that led the small country to fight an oversized enemy. Stated simply, this apparently suicidal decision satisfied the country's need for ontological security, demonstrating that self-identity needs are (at least in some cases) more important than, and thus capable of overriding, a state's desire to survive.[19]

Moral and Humanitarian Action

Honor-driven behavior isn't the only putatively irrational behavior that mainstream IR theory has difficulty explaining and understanding. The same could be said for both moral and humanitarian actions. Drawing on the works of Reinhold Niebuhr, Steele finds that while nation-states are generally selfish, this does not preclude the possibility for moral action. On the contrary, he says, "[t]he mere awareness by an agent of its limitation, the admission of an agent that pure moral action is an impossibility, is the first step, […] for an agent to realize the possibilities of self-interest in a constructed sense of morality." Moral action then, is possible after internal reflection, especially when an agent recognizes that such action bears upon its own self-identity commitments. This was the case in the 1860s, when Great Britain debated the virtues and pitfalls of intervening in the American Civil War. From a purely strategic perspective, say that of hegemonic stability theory, Great Britain's hypothetical intervention in the war could have ensured the permanent division of a rising competitor, and with it, both British hegemony and survival. The fact that Great Britain incurred immediate economic costs during the war as a result of a Union blockade against Confederate ports might have been further incentive to intervene. But Great Britain ultimately chose neutrality, and again, Steele argues that this decision is best explained through an ontological security-minded perspective of IR.[20]

The most parsimonious explanation is that the Civil War became an incredibly complex moral issue for Great Britain after Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation (EP). Prior to its issuance, intervention would not have been at odds with Britain's self-identity commitments, but as Steele's discursive analysis reveals, after debating the matter in Parliament, intervention after the EP would have run counter to Britain's self-conception. The EP changed the very meaning of the war, "creating," says Steele, "an ontological distinction between the two warring parties." That is, the Union transformed itself "from an army of preservation to an army of liberation." It created within Britain a pro-North, anti-slavery political bloc that became too powerful for the British prime minister, Lord Palmerston, or his cabinet to ignore. By 1833, Britain had banned the slave trade, and abolished slavery within its own empire, and this accomplishment had become quite "a powerful and resilient source of British pride." The EP thus stirred British anxiety over slavery. Intervening in the war on behalf of the Confederacy or recognizing the Confederacy would have increased the South's legitimacy, and with it, the legitimacy of slavery. So, while Steele argues explicitly that morality did not play a role in Britain's decision to remain neutral during the Civil War, he limns an implicit picture where a constructed morality can be a complex aspect of a nation-state's ontological security, ultimately meaning that if Great Britain had recognized the Confederacy, it would have had to grapple with the shame of not living up to its biographical narrative and become ontologically insecure as a result.[21]

Humanitarian action is another area that Steele justifies as rational behavior, not because it satisfies a state's physical security, but because it satisfies some aspect of a state's ontological security needs. Some states' self-identity needs, as constituted through their biographical narratives, lead them to take actions based on those needs. Sometimes, they fail to do so. For a country like the U.S., which prides itself on being a beacon of liberty and civil rights, failing to act in certain humanitarian crises can engender shame (the inverse of honor). For the U.S., one such

episode was the genocide in Rwanda. Failure to intervene there has become a source of shame for the U.S., compelling this "haunted hegemon" to restore its ontological security by intervening in Kosovo with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) against a Serbian ethnic cleansing campaign some years later. Similar sources of shame existed in the United Kingdom (UK), for instance, which saw Slobodan Milosevic as a modern-day analogue to Adolph Hitler, and saw any failure to stop his actions as a reenactment of the British policy of appeasement employed during World War II. Steele makes a similar case for each NATO ally (his least convincing being the brief treatment he gives to Italy) and ultimately succeeds in illuminating the relationship between shame and ontological insecurity.[22]

Technical Issues, Organization, and the Unwritten Chapter

Generally speaking, *Ontological Security in International Relations* is a well-written book, and many of its flaws can probably be dismissed by the fact that much of it was originally written as part of, and adapted from, Steele's University of Iowa doctoral dissertation, "Ontological Security, Shame, and 'Humanitarian' Action." For instance, it is unclear if it is an editorial problem, a computer coding issue, or an oversight on Steele's part caused by a transfer of original text from his dissertation to the new manuscript that would eventually become his book, but the reader is occasionally greeted by un- or mislabeled internal references suggesting that he or she recall some thought on a page earlier in the book. Of course, this issue can be forgiven, but it does make research a bit more challenging for someone potentially interested in these references. Readers exploring the issue of Belgium's decision to fight Germany in World War I, for example, might have a hard time finding Steele's comments on the "Belgian ancestors" after seeing it referenced in a discursive analysis of King Albert I's speech to the Belgian Parliament on the importance of Belgium's place in Europe because they will inevitably be sent to page "000."[23] Similar such mistakes are found on both the preceding and following pages, as well as elsewhere in the book.[24] Of course, Steele's isn't the first volume on ontological security published by Routledge; Catarina Kinnvall's*Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security* is currently in its second edition. Given that Steele's work deserves wider attention, hopefully Routledge will allow the author plenty of time to correct such mistakes as a paperback edition of his book is likewise warranted.

This aside, Steele's book is well organized, thoroughly noted, inclusive of a solid bibliography, and a fairly useful index. Neumann's foreword is a good selling-point, but it is interesting that even he extrapolates interesting ideas from Steele's book that weren't quite fully fleshed out (again, take the connections between Steele's discussion of honor, and Hobbes' ideas on glory as an example). Organized into a total of seven chapters, the book features a thoughtful introduction, two quite readable chapters on the theoretical foundations of the ontological security thesis, three additional chapters featuring Steele's case-studies, and a seventh for the conclusion. Ultimately, the book passes on presentation, and it is quite readable; some advanced undergraduates might even find his work accessible and thought-provoking. That said, his book is probably best suited for those graduate students and scholars who already have a solid understanding of security studies or IR theory.

Some readers might feel as if Steele's concluding chapter is somewhat rushed. Weighing in at over twenty pages, it actually does a fine job at reviewing the book, summarizing his conclusions, and suggesting ways to move forward. Really though, this problem might have more to do with the fact that his section on "self-interrogation" deserves a lot more attention than the short treatment it receives in the final chapter. Indeed, the issue of self-interrogation might deserve a chapter and case-study of its own. Both timely and extremely prescient given conversations on torture, and the mistreatment of U.S. detainees in the War on Terror that have taken place over the last several years, the subjects confronted therein are some of the most important in the entire book. Steele must have sensed that this unwritten chapter on self-interrogation was a missed opportunity, however, as he addresses the topic more thoroughly in a follow-up article, "'Ideals That Were Really Never in Our Possession': Torture, Honor and US Identity," in the journal, *International Relations*. As such, readers of *Ontological Security in International Relations* should take it together with the article, and treat the two as a packaged deal.[25]

Future Applications for Ontological Security Theory

Steele, whose newest appointment will take him to the University of Utah, where he will serve as an endowed chair

and full professor, makes several very intriguing observations on reflexivity in his *International Relations* article, some of which may be useful in explaining the controversy over the film *Zero Dark Thirty* (*ZDT*). *ZDT* chronicles the ten year hunt for Osama bin Laden. Like most Hollywood-produced movies, the film's historical accuracy might best be dubbed questionable, but this has little to do with the thrust of its criticism. The film contains graphic presentations of torture (the so-called advanced interrogation techniques authorized by President Bush after the 9/11 attacks), and these scenes provoked a major backlash from anti-torture advocates, including actors Martin Sheen and Ed Asner, U.S. Senators Dianne Feinstein and John McCain, and organizations such as Interfaith Communities United for Justice and Peace. This actually meshes rather well with Steele's "'Ideals That Were Really Never in Our Possession," wherein he maintains that honor played an important role in mitigating the controversy over the disclosure of the U.S.'s use of torture. With that in mind, Steele (re)introduces the concept of reflexive imaging, which challenges a nation-state's self-identity through audio-visual presentations that elucidate disconnects between a state's actions and its biographical narrative. In this case, the anti-torture lobby perceived that *ZDT* was endorsing the use of torture, and suggesting that it works as a legitimate means of extracting accurate intelligence from enemy combatants.[26]

Keeping in mind, as Steele avers, that the constitution of self-identity is a highly political process with *political implications*" for the state agents and leading decision-makers involved, the fact that *ZDT* seems to have challenged the dominant narrative that torture "does not work" was a highly disruptive and dangerous act of reflexive self-imaging. As such, policymakers like McCain and Feinstein joined with the chorus of Hollywood elites lambasting the film. Feinstein even made *ZDT* and the film's creator, Kathryn Bigelow, the targets of a Senate investigation. Ultimately, this case serves to reinforce the fact that consequences can accompany the actions of any actor employing the use of tools that trigger reflexive self-interrogation, for *ZDT*, which was expected to receive numerous awards at the Oscars in 2013, was damaged by this scandal to the extent that the only award it received was a shared Oscar for sound editing. The U.S. Senate Intelligence Committee dropped its wildly superfluous investigation of *ZDT* the following day.[27] In a certain sense then, this case also illustrates how ontological security theory shines a light on the darker dimensions of identity, namely the power of the state to discipline actors for their role in subverting collective identity.

There are other avenues for further exploration though. Steele engages feminist theory and feminist concepts quite thoroughly in his book, suggesting, for example, that ontological security theory might help expand upon the "'public man-private woman' binary" limned by the feminist literature. This obviously ties back to his use of emotion, and his arguments about nation-state emotions given that such ideas can be dismissed as private, feminine, and thus irrational. But as Steele has shown, emotion-driven actions can be completely rational affairs in the constitution of self-identity. Laura Sjoberg takes this line of reasoning even farther. She shows that emotional-issues themselves have gendered dichotomies. Expanding upon Steele's discussion of honor and the case of Belgium, Sjoberg argues that "the role of honor in state self-identity" cannot be fully understood "without reference to both masculine and feminine conceptions of honor in the state." This provocative idea leads to a series of interesting insights about the gendering of state identity, including the fact that Germany acted as a "hypermasculine aggressor," and that Britain, as Belgium's "chivalrous protector," also fit the mold of a gendered (that is, masculine) actor. Indeed, honor's gender-based binary is further explicated by the idea that Belgium's foreign policy elites were upholding their (masculine) honor by preventing the violation of Belgium's purity (feminine honor).[28]

As these examples show, *Ontological Security in International Relations* inspires a number of ideas, and as such, there are a number of potential future applications for Steele's ontological security approach. What Sjoberg has illustrated with regards to feminism may be equally applicable to other IR theories. For instance, Steele has a number of interesting insights regarding hegemony, suggesting that the ontological security research program might have ramifications for such approaches as hegemonic stability theory. The issue of self-interrogation and the case of the *Zero Dark Thirty* controversy also needs further attention. To flesh some of these (and other) ideas and applications out, there is no doubt that Steele's book is worthy of further attention.

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[1] Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (New York, New York: Random House, 1979), 92; Hedley Bull, *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics* (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 1977), 5; and Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self Identity and the IR State* (New York, New York: Routledge, 2008), 50-51. See also, Alexander George and Robert Keohane, "The Concept of National Interests: Uses and Limitations," in *Presidential Decisionmaking in Foreign Policy: The Effective Use of Information and Advice*, ed., Alexander George (Boulder, Colorado: Westview, 1980); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); and John Mearsheimer,*The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York, New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2001), 31.

[2] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 50-51.

[3] See, for example, Jef Huysmans, "Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier,"*European Journal of International Relations*, 4 (1998): 226-255; Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity, and Interests* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ian Manners, "European [Security] Union: From Existential Threat to Ontological Security," COPRI working papers, 2001. Available from http://www.ciaonet.org/wps/mai04/; Catarina Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity and the Search for Ontological Security," *Political Psychology* 25.5 (2004): 741-767; and Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations*, 12.6 (2006): 341-370.

[4] Laura Maria Herța, Review of *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* by Brent J. Steele, *Romanian Review of International Studies* 6.2 (2012): 73-77.

[5] One such clue is an allusion to the Giddensian definition of ontological security. Steele says that an aspect of his "inquiry into the empirical puzzles reviewed in" *Ontological Security and International Relations* necessitates an understanding of the "*context*" of, and the "*continuity*" for which certain foreign policy decisions are designed serve. He does this "because self-identity is secured through ontological security, which is itself defined by [Anthony Giddens] as a 'sense of continuity and order in events." Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 7; Steele's emphasis.

[6] Steele actually draws on Giddens extensively, deferring to him on most matters of definitional importance.

[7] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 6-8, 50-51; and Huysmans, "Security! What Do You Mean?," 251n.

[8] Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State,"*The American Political Science Review* 88.2 (1994): 385, 388; and Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 57; Steele's emphasis.

[9] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 2-3; Steele's emphasis. For more on critical situations, see 12-13.

[10] Ibid., 15-16, 50-51; and Brent J. Steele, "Ontological Security and the Power of Self-Identity: British Neutrality and the American Civil War," *Review of International Studies* 31 (2005): 529; Steele's emphasis.

[11] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 16.

[12] Iver B. Neumann, foreword to *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity in the IR State* by Brent J. Steele (New York, New York: Routledge, 2008), xi; and Steele,*Ontological Security in International Relations*, 16-17. Also see Jefferson A. Singer and Peter Salovey,*The Remembered Self: Emotion and Memory in*

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Personality (New York, New York: The Free Press, 1993).

[13] From a certain point of view, Steele's book and other approaches to ontological security could be treated as another effort to diminish the importance of material interests in the IR literature by focusing on the importance of ideas. What Daniel Nexon has said about religion could thus carry similar weight when applied to a discussion of ontological security. That is, scholars could use this "as nothing more than a new vehicle for long-standing criticisms of the field, for example, that it pays inadequate attention to cultural [and ideational] forces." However,*Ontological Security in International Relations* is not just another attempt to score points in an enduring debate. Neither should it be reduced to such; for, from another perspective, Steele's approach to ontological security can also be seen as a bridge between constructivism and realism, a third way in the material-idea debate. As Steele asserts, "ontological security explicates how 'resource possession brings greater responsibility because the possession of resources" bears on identity commitments. Said another way, accounting for material capabilities and resources as components of states' self-identities can help explicate "how, when, and why shame is triggered in the ontological security process." Take, for example, the case of Rwanda and U.S. hegemony. The fact that the U.S. had the material capabilities to intervene in and stop the genocide there inspired the subsequent shame felt by the U.S. when it failed to act. What this means is that knowledge of a state's material resources is "vital for recognizing which types of situations threaten the self-identity of nation-states," a fact, Steele believes, that helps the ontological security approach avoid the pitfalls sometimes associated with mainstream interpretivist approaches. Neumann, Foreword, x; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 7-8; and Daniel H. Nexon, "Religion and International Relations: No Leap of Faith Required," in *Religion and International Relations Theory*, ed. Jack Snyder (New York, New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 141.

[14] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 38-39, 45. Also see 168n, especially endnotes 18-21.

[15] From this perspective, it may even be difficult to distinguish self-identity needs from material needs, but given his reticence to accept the similar reasoning employed by Wendt, Steele might not accept this possibility. Ibid., 45; and Fareed Zakaria, *From Wealth to Power: The Unusual Origins of America's World Role* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1998), 20-20n.

[16] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 39-40; and Giulio M. Gallarotti, *Cosmopolitan Power in International Relations: A Synthesis of Realism, Neoliberalism, and Constructivism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 99.

[17] His tertiary purpose is to integrate some aspects of ontological security theory into the Just War tradition (JWT), by pointing out that ontological security "can be used to modify a condition of […] *jus ad bellum.*" Belgium's act of "national suicide" is problematic from the normative perspective of the JWT, because it seems to violate the "reasonable chance of success" condition for war. Some readers may not be convinced that the just war discussion fits into the overall context of the book, but it is definitely a fascinating account, and Steele does effectively demonstrate that an ontological security approach can modify the just war theorist's understanding of a reasonable chance for success. At least in Belgium's case, success must be understood not on the premise of physical survival, but on the premise of the fighter's goals. Does fighting strengthen "community support for the principle that is the basis for the resistance?" Internally (in Belgium), where that principle is honor, the answer is yes. Externally (in the wider European community), where that principle is neutrality, the answer remains yes. Steele,*Ontological Security in International Relations*, 109-112.

[18] Ibid., 94-96.

[19] Ibid., 7-9, 11-12, 94-113.

[20] Ibid., 37-38, 76-93.

[21] Ibid., 76-93. See especially, 77, 85, and 92.

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[22] Ibid., 114-147.

[23] It's actually not entirely clear to what Steele is referring when he references the Belgian ancestors. The reference is found in a wider discussion of Belgium's response to a German ultimatum for free passage through Belgian territory as the latter sought to execute the Schlieffen Plan and to attack France. Belgium's "general faith in European respect for its sovereignty" and neutrality might have even led Belgian policymakers to naively assume that the "dreaded emergency" of a German invasion would not come to pass. Perhaps this is the subject of Steele's reference. King Albert's speech on Belgium's place in Europe was one that highlighted the "necessity of [Belgium's] autonomous existence in respect of the equilibrium of Europe," an historical reality that emerged as part of the settlement at the London conference in 1831, where Belgium was first recognized as an independent state. Thus, policymakers like King Albert were "keeping in the faith of the 'Belgian ancestors'" by remaining firmly committed to its own neutrality and place within the wider European system of states. Like Albert's hope that war would not come—even in the face of a German invasion—to Belgium, neither King Leopold II nor the Belgian Parliament "reached […] dire conclusion[s] about Germany's intentions" when they were originally told of the Schlieffen Plan in 1904 by Kaiser Wilhelm himself. This faith in Belgium's tradition of neutrality stretched back, not only to June, 1831, when Belgium first "declared itself 'perpetually neutral,'" but also to April, 1839, when Europe's great powers all acquiesced to this neutrality and signed a treaty ensuring its enforcement. Ibid., 98-105.

[24] For instance, see Ibid., 86, 140, 143.

[25] Ibid., 150-162. Also see Brent J. Steele, "'Ideals That Were Really Never in Our Possession': Torture, Honor, and US Identity," *International Relations* 22.2 (2008): 243-261.

[26] Kathryn Bigelow, dir., *Zero Dark Thirty* (Culver City, California: Columbia Pictures, 2012); Michael Cieply, "Ed Asner Adds His Voice to 'Zero Dark Thirty' Protest," *New York Times*, 13 January 2013; available from http://carpetbagger.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/01/13/ed-asner-adds-his-voice-to-zero-dark-thirty-protest/; Steven Zeitchik, "Senate leaders Feinstein and McCain condemn 'Zero Dark Thirty,'" *Los Angeles Times*, 19 December 2012; available from http://articles.latimes.com/2012/dec/19/entertainment/la-et-mn-feinstein-mccain-condemn-zero-dark-thirty-20121219; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 65, 155, 158-160; and Steele, "'Ideals That Were Really Never in Our Possession,'" 245, 256-257.

[27] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 30-32, 65, 151-152, 157; "Senators to Investigate Contact Between CIA, 'Zero Dark Thirty' Filmmakers," *Rolling Stone*, 3 January 2013; available from http://www.rollingstone.com/movies/news/senators-to-investigate-contact-between-cia-zero-dark-thirty-filmmakers-20130103; Tim Reid and Jill Serjeant, "'Zero Dark Thirty' fails at Oscars amid political fallout," *Reuters*, 25 February 203; available from http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/02/25/entertainment-us-oscars-zero-idUSBRE91O07S20130225; and Ann Hornaday, "'Zero Dark Thirty' investigation closed – mission accomplished?," *The Washington Post*, 26 February 2013; available from http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/style-blog/wp/2013/02/26/zero-dark-thirty-investigation-dropped-mission-accomplished/.

[28] Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*, 35-36, 66-67; and Laura Sjoberg, "Gender, Structure, and War: What Waltz Couldn't See," *International Theory* 4.1 (2012): 19-20.

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