

Insecurity in Times of Crisis: Breaking the Dichotomy Between Physical and Ontological Securities

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As traditional International Relations theories expect, states are key actors in managing the COVID-19 crisis, which has led to prompt and profound changes. However, it is important to remember that the state is a social construct that carries the role of providing order and public goods, such as basic healthcare services and food supplies. Consequently, the threat of COVID-19 is not simply biological. COVID-19 shakes the foundations of the constructed societal narrative regarding the role of the state towards the public, which can no longer be taken for granted. As this confidence is undermined, we are [forced](#) to face existential questions that generate ontological insecurity, along with the expected physical threat of death by the disease. This unique state of uncertainty has led to unprecedented scope of government interventions and disruptions of daily routines, which only exacerbate individual, national, and global anxieties.

Ontological security [refers](#) to the security of the 'self', sustained through stable identities, biographical continuity, and established routines, which provide a predictable order. Anthony Giddens [argues](#) that in times of routine, we put aside existential questions about the nature of things that last through time and space. During times of crisis, which Giddens refers to as "critical situations" we are forced to face these questions and realize that they rest on very delicate constructed structures. The COVID-19 crisis is such a critical situation that forces us to face this type of existential questions, both in terms of the role of the State in our lives and in terms of the

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societal norms that shape our daily routines: How will we choose whose life gets prioritized if we have a shortage of ventilators? Should we accept active surveillance over civilians in the name of public health? When, and will we ever, go back to the way things were before? These questions touch upon core values that are part of the self-identity of states and their citizens. Thus, COVID-19 compromises the “protective cocoon,” to reference Giddens, which produces ontological security.

Choosing to focus exclusively on the physical threats posed by COVID-19 serves in itself an ontological security need. Stressing the physical dimension of the threat enables us to put aside our deeper anxieties regarding the social order, while legitimizing various decisions that would otherwise challenge individuals’ or state’s sense of ontological security. While there is a clear and strong physical security aspect to the anxieties generated by COVID-19, this unfolding crisis calls us to take a closer look at the presumed dichotomy between the need for physical security and the need for ontological security. We challenge this assumption and suggest that the motivation of a state to protect against physical threats is rendered meaningless without a sense of self-identity and ontological security.

Whereas at the level of the individual it is well established that physical survival is a primary instinct which may take precedence over other aims, when we talk about social constructs, such as states, they undoubtedly do not have a biological need to physically survive. Acknowledging here that a state’s physical and ontological security are co-constitutive, we further argue that the state’s need for physical security can be seen as one manifestation of the deeper societal need for ontological security. The sense of a state having physical security is constructed, similar to other aspects of ontological security. Our claim is that every physical threat to the state contains an ontological threat as well. In this sense, the pursuit of physical security should be examined together with a state’s pursuit of ontological security, as part of a complex of security concerns.

The combination of the novel unknown physical threat and the challenges it poses to ontological security, together with the exposed fragility of the social structure, explain the strong cross-level existential anxiety which motivates the severe measures taken by states around the globe. While this notion is not limited to this case alone, the case of COVID-19 and the anxieties it creates, especially within democratic liberal states, clearly exemplify the strong impact of the physical-ontological security threat-nexus.