# Fostering Ontological Agility: A Pedagogical Imperative

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How are we supposed to learn how to carry out the task condoned by Sen (first quote below) if we are busily reproducing the scenario described by Hagmann (second quote below)? Speaking *with* others requires more than just language acquisition and an openness to converse. Besides acknowledging ontological pluralism, Sen's plea prods us to build the capacity to fittingly traverse worlds constituted through distinct, fundamental existential suppositions. This chapter asserts that IR students must become savvy in applying a diverse ontological toolset to engage with lifeways based on incommensurate, fundamental existential assumptions. As a pedagogical goal, however, fostering ontological agility is not feasible in a single semester because it requires denaturalizing our most fundamental existential assumptions, learning how to apply others, and becoming nimble at doing so. Among undergraduate, students it is possible to fulfill the following preliminary steps necessary for generating ontological competence while also reaching a given International Relations (IR) theory course's regular set of learning objectives: (a) teach a pluralized understanding of ontology, (b) make students, through the metaphor of "fishbowls," conversant with intersubjectively co-constituted timespacescapes that together constitute a pluriverse of worlds, and (c) build student tolerance to existential discomfort.

Our task as social scientists is to account for the multiplicity of ways in which the political world around us is viewed and experienced – Somdeep Sen (2020).

Students of international politics are led to act on imageries of Africa, Islam, the Balkans, China, and any other seemingly 'exotic' or 'distant' region or topic, without an awareness of the ways in which these imageries have been intimately colored by Western authors and their respective histories, trajectories, values, and world views. Instead of speaking *with* others about political issues, students of world politics are essentially induced to speak *about* others and their political topics – Jonas Hagmann (2015, 3).

In this book, Jan Lüdert aims to identify the "surface," "deep," and "implicit structures" of what Shulman (2005, 54) calls a signature pedagogy in IR (Lüdert 2016). He asked us to discuss the "concrete and practical acts of teaching and learning IR," the "implicit and explicit assumptions" that "we impart to students about the world of politics," and the "values and beliefs" we hold while preparing students for a wide range of possible careers. This chapter, in response, reviews pertinent elements on all three levels of "existential calisthenics," a signature pedagogical program that prepares students to become ontologically agile.

It is prudent to forewarn that while the transversal meta-objective for all of my courses described here is not incompatible with the purpose of signature pedagogies¾"to transfer skills [to students] of how *to think*, *to perform* and *to act with integrity* in their professional work" (Shulman 2005, 52)¾the pedagogical strategy of fostering ontological agility may not align well with the proposal to define a concerted set of pedagogical sensibilities in the IR classroom. This essay starts with the premise that "the fundamental ways in which future practitioners [have been getting] educated for their new professions" (Shulman 2005, 52) in IR have been ontologically myopic and thus impair us from engaging fruitfully with differently co-constituted timespacescapes. Alternatively, if we are not trying to standardize "pedagogical content knowledge," but are instead inculcating a sensitivity toward and willingness to

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maintain the space for a plethora of voices (Lüdert, this volume), then the following could represent *one* way of preparing students to engage more effectively with multiplicity and difference. With the precept that this project in no way seeks to become an overarching, singular strategy, the first half of the chapter explores the central assumptions, values, and beliefs that drive the impulse to foster ontological pluralism and agility, before reviewing some concrete pedagogical strategies in the second.

## Disciplinary Myopia: A Pedagogical Call to Action

As a discipline, IR is unique in that it aspires to engage, understand, and even at times explain *world* politics, but it cultivates a parochial attitude toward Others who contribute to those politics equally, yet who act based on very disparate fundamental existential assumptions (Chakrabarty, 2000; Agathangelou and Ling 2004; Shani 2008; Tickner and Wæver 2009; Acharya and Buzan 2010; Nayak and Selbin 2010; Shilliam 2015).[1] Critiques have been mountingly launched over the past 40 years that the discipline has been historically incapable of engaging other forms of being and knowing in ways that do not involve further exacerbating epistemic violence.[2] For a discipline that seeks to decrease conflict and/or increase peace worldwide, this claim is bitterly ironic.

Wemheuer-Vogelaar and her colleagues (2020, 17) conclude, upon concisely reviewing the non-, post-, and beyond Western debates, that diversifying the discipline does not only involve research: "The IR research community's efforts to create a more inclusive discipline can only be permanent if [the global IR] debate is taken to the classroom." I could not agree more, but there are ontological reasons why the discipline suffers from parochialism. So, before we bring historically silenced voices that depart from distinct, fundamental existential commitments into the discipline, it must first become ontologically plural.

In more traditional IR settings, we typically learn and teach approaches that reaffirm examining multiplicity through a singular ontological register. This register—one that encompasses *both* dualist *and* monist approaches in the discipline and that informs its various methodological strategies—is monopolized by the assumption of separation as the primordial condition of existence. That is, even the most heated disciplinary debates on ontology that seek to legitimize other ontological schemes beyond those with positivist underpinnings[3] still hold onto an underlying commitment to separation *prior to* any commitment to interconnection, be it the anthropomorphism of post-structuralism or the continued insistence on differentiating between subjects and objects and human and non-human (even if enmeshed and co-constitutive) in the new materialisms. The predominant, separation-based register makes us blind to other possible ontological configurations through its reductionist nature and therefore incapable of grasping the robust nature of concepts borne through incommensurate, fundamental existential commitments.

This leads to two issues that the following pedagogical strategy seeks to mitigate. First, ontological reductionism begets exclusion, capture, and domination. In IR, ontological blind spots and silences translate into forms of epistemic violence in the classroom and into literature and policy that reinforce exclusionary practices. Second, having too narrow a set of existential tools, especially one produced through a reductionist register, is overly risky when facing today's accelerated environmental, social, political, and technological complexity. Having only one ontological scheme with which to operate means that most people are easily overwhelmed and become susceptible to forms of extremism, fundamentalism, and/or violence in response.

We can no longer afford to remain "unknowingly" faithful to separation as the only primordial condition of existence solely because its use is so predominant and lens so reductionist that we cannot even recognize, much less respect, other assumptions that constitute other co-created worlds.[4] Here is where academia and the IR discipline could play a crucial mitigating role in our ability to survive as a species by proactively instructing people to become comfortable with shifting ontological schemes so that they could become versatile in and adaptable to new circumstances. However, the *pedagogical imperative* to prepare students to engage with the multiplicity of distinct forms of being/thinking/doing that give shape to world politics implies an overhaul within the discipline itself first. As scholars and professors in the discipline, we would need to become excruciatingly aware of the link between our particular configuration of fundamental existential assumptions and their impact on how we "world." Then we would need to acknowledge that more than one possible primordial condition of existence exists then hone ontological agility ourselves by learning how to also embrace interconnection *prior to* any presupposition of separation.

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Having access to and knowing how to use a plural ontological register offers several benefits. First, it allows us to acknowledge that each person holds dear a particular configuration of existential assumptions that filters how they make sense of the world and according to which they direct their vital life force to co-create. From there, we can identify how molds deriving from other fundamental existential commitments provide radically distinct panoramas with their own affordances and limitations. The contrasts provided through these mirrors then enable recognizing how our own existential assumptions crucially limit and shape *in specific and regular ways* what we see as an issue and the range of potential strategies that we can imagine in response. By showing how distinct, primordial existential assumptions translate into disparate lifeways that are neither commensurate nor easily grasped through a non-synonymous ontological register, we make the space available to understand that there are distinct ways of doing things and that none is the single answer to all. This is a crucial step for cultivating empathy, the significance of which "has been largely neglected in the field of IR… in a teaching or classroom setting" (Arian 2020, 23). One important advantage has become evident through my teaching context. Since 2005, I have worked at two universities in Ecuador as a white woman, originating from and educated in the United States. In addition to showing me first-hand why the claims at the beginning are both real and disconcerting, my embodied experience in a context of deeply torn social fabric and a constantly replaying *chuchaki colonial*, or colonial hangover, has shown me how fostering ontological pluralism can help rebuild socio-cultural-historical self-esteem in post-colonial contexts.

Navnita Chadha Behera (2020, 25–27) reinforces the principle of ontological pluralism in her own post-colonial IR classroom in India by "traveling back in time" with her students. There, she covers both "the history (read the European history that forms the bedrock of the meta narratives and theories of IR) and theirs (read local histories)" (26) to "make students aware that the universe for thinking through the knowledge categories is not singular but plural" (27). By juxtaposing IR "textbook formulations against our collectively shared 'pasts' and 'present lived experiences,'" Behera demonstrates "how some of these knowledge categories, which the disciplinary practices of IR take for granted, came to be constituted in the first place—historically, socially, and politically." Students "also learn that if they choose to include a 'non-dualistic mode of thinking,' as suggested by the Indian traditions, for understanding the world cast in a 'dualistic,' 'either-or,' 'oppositional mode of thinking,' difference may no longer or necessarily be an a priori source of friction and threat." Behera's example demonstrates how we can both engender learning through difference and underscore the pivotal importance of lifeways that have undergone colonization.

Because I have seen how well this training works in encouraging students to examine any set of circumstances from a variety of angles and in bolstering their capacity for empathy and innovation, I have developed methods to intentionally trigger the denaturalization process while at the same time supporting students as they move through their emotional reactions throughout the semester and beyond. Below, I present some basic pedagogical tools for building ontological competence among undergraduate IR students, including the fishbowl metaphor, modes of engagement, method of contrast, and guided existential discomfort.

## Existential Calisthenics: A Pedagogical Program for Fostering Ontological Agility

Let's face it, most human beings, undergraduate students included, like being able to count on certain parameters of their given modus operandi. While most are paying a fee to learn, they are not usually requesting to have their existential boat completely rocked. Yet getting out of IR's vicious cycle of continually reproducing ontological parochialism requires just that. Unfortunately, the benefits of engaging in *existential* calisthenics are not as obvious as the physical version, although both can be painful particularly at first. This means that students cannot imagine where you are taking them or why. It is hard for them to see that they are consistently embracing certain fundamental existential assumptions, that this configuration of assumptions intimately affects how they participate in their own ontological fishbowl (that is, how and what they imagine, perceive, interpret, strategize about, and act upon), and that making those assumptions and not others is actually a choice. Moreover, because the collectively co-constituted timespacescape, or *fishbowl*, in which they operate is so naturalized, they have no apparent reason to contemplate others as inhabiting differently constituted worlds especially when the only thing apparently separating them is air. After all, others *seem* to be doing the same things—being human, finding food and shelter, relating, reproducing, etc. It is difficult to realize that what seem to be the "parallel fruits" of another way of life—even if recognized as distinct cultural artifacts—are actually borne through a radically distinct logic based on other fundamental existential assumptions.

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Initially, then, my job is to show that many ways of understanding existence are available and that it is possible to discern the contours of the fishbowl they inhabit through contrast with others. Once they cognitively understand that beings from other fishbowls do not necessarily follow the same logic that they take for granted, it is then possible to propose that the lens they have learned to use might not be fully equipped to understand ideas or artifacts coming out of other fishbowls. At this point, in my "Contemporary IR Theories" course, for example, I would bring in the post-Western literature to contemplate collectively what it might mean for an academic discipline that focuses on *world* politics to not be able to perceive, let alone understand, other lifeways that are radically distinct from our own.

Actively "provincializing" the predominant ontological register of the IR discipline and broader educational system in general should be accompanied by significant reminders. First, students have no reason to feel bad or guilty for how they have been raised. Furthermore, my job is not to teach them that one particular approach to life is good and another bad. This didactic exercise is about recognizing multiplicity. In the end, they get to embrace the theoretical current that most resonates with them. For the time being, though, they study many disparate theoretical perspectives to learn how certain existential assumptions afford some imaginable possibilities and disallow others, and how each implies radically distinct strategies for engaging existence.

In parallel fashion, I introduce the tool of existential *modes of engagement*. Fear is the predominantly applied mode in IR, and it can be illustrated easily through the *Leviathan*, where Hobbes (1996, 26–30, 38) articulates explicitly how he encounters the different Other through fear. Since how we approach difference starts at the ontological level, it is critical to illustrate how certain fundamental existential assumptions encourage the rejection of difference and the subsequent drive to annihilate it, while others encourage its embrace and an openness to sit in tension with it. The latter induces us to use curiosity, through which we can ask lots of questions without determining beforehand whether an encountered Other will be good or bad and calls us to be very present to find out what we can learn from the difference. After prodding students to conjure other modes of engagement, I encourage them to identify their most frequently employed mode and to explore how they feel when they intentionally use other modes. While, at first, this exercise may seem irrelevant to the study of IR, it is a pivotal preliminary step in nudging students to experiment at the existential level so that they become ever-more aware of how their fundamental existential *assumptions* shape how they engage with all that is.

The content normally taught and reproduced within the IR discipline constitutes the fodder for my work. Besides demonstrating how each theorization relies on a particular ontological architecture, I help students locate patterns emerging out of historically shared configurations of ontological commitments so that they may begin to conceive of how these configurations exert worlding effects. In one example, I show how embracing separation as the primordial condition of existence generates a common logic that plays out in distinct ways in both English School and Marxist theorizing (Bull 2002; Linklater 1996; Cox 1996). Both utilize linear notions of time and "teleological measuring sticks," or arbitrary social constructions conceived as vertical arrows extending between two (never-to-be-reached) imagined conditions with the one at the top deemed superior and at the bottom the inferior one to be avoided (Trownsell 2013, 290–318). In both literatures, we also find a universal(ized) end goal of transforming the system to something better conceived in cosmopolitan (and, therefore, ethnocentric) terms. I focus students' attention on how, despite the very distinct problematics that motivated Bull's and Marx and Engels' work, each respective argument and corresponding strategies are faithful to a particular shared set of existential assumptions.

In cases like this, it is difficult to fully grasp what I am talking about without a contrasting backdrop. After all, I am trying to get them to recognize the contours of the naturalized fishbowl in which they have been indoctrinated and the nature of the particular water in which they swim. Consequently, to make evident how each theory becomes possible through a particular logic afforded by distinct configurations of existential assumptions and not others, I use the *method of contrast* to reflect examples back and forth. The circle that I open with the study of international society and further sketch when we get to the Communist International can be closed through the contrast provided by queer theory, where it becomes evident that the "teleological measuring stick" is only *one way* of reading and responding to complementary opposites.

To teach students that multiple ontological readings exist and that they have radically different implications depending on the particular configuration of existential assumptions used to perceive and understand them, I clarify

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the link between a fundamental assumption and its corresponding logic. For instance, I show how heteronormativity is the fruit of embracing separation due to the focus it generates on physical bodies as separable categories, which leads us to want to talk about gender and sexuality in terms of men and women as embodied entities. The ontological panorama afforded by separation also encourages a logic of either-or, which drives the need to evaluate things or situations in terms of better-worse so as to know how to select among alternatives. We can see, then, how this logic drives the marginalization and violence targeted at those who do not abide by the heteronormative metanarrative. In contrast, when interconnection is embraced, the either-or logic is not even existentially possible, nor is the focus on "in-corp-orated" characteristics. Instead, all beings are manifestations of the dynamic interplay between *both* feminine *and* masculine energetic impulses. That is, each body is constituted through both masculine and feminine elements. In addition to teaching Weber's (2014, 598) queer logic of the and/or, I use examples from robustly relational Andean philosophy, a contextually important contrast, to distinguish between the implications of reading binaries as dualities/dualisms through the lens of separation and as parity-based relations through interconnection (Lajo 2004, 81–85).

This method of contrast with other ways of seeing a seemingly similar situation is critical for recognizing one's own fishbowl or way of being in the world. This process though, as we can imagine in the case of denaturalizing heteronormativity for someone who has never been taught to question it, is not without its emotional reactions. Becoming ontologically literate demands learning to become comfortable with being uncomfortable *on an existential level*. As such, I take care to generate an environment of *guided existential discomfort* that provides the necessary support as students learn to move through that discomfort.

In this spirit, each course starts with a forewarning:

Throughout this semester, be prepared to feel uncomfortable, uncomfortable with me, uncomfortable with you, with society, with the way you were raised, with how you understand existence, with the way you have been learning about IR until now… My goal is to help you become comfortable with being uncomfortable. It will pretty much take the whole semester to get to the point where you understand why you are going through this. All the while I will be intentionally triggering your fundamental belief systems that have been shaped by cultural, historical, socioeconomic, and academic factors.

I lend the discomfort a purpose:

When you feel uncomfortable in reaction to whatever comes up in class, it indicates that we have struck a chord with an idea or belief constitutive of your particular fishbowl. This is actually a good thing, because it flags for us where to pause and what to examine more carefully.[5]

As a multidimensional educator, it is also pertinent to review the possible range of emotional responses that can surge forth on the basis of this ontological training, such as resistance, shutting out, instability, sensations of betrayal or of having been misled, and the potential exacerbation of psychological instability. Due to the multiple referrals I make every semester, I add:

Many of you may not be in a place to face this challenge, so I will be reminding you regularly that I have connections with the staff in psychological services and can get you an appointment very quickly in the event that the ideas presented here are "too much" for where you find yourself on your own life path.

I also provide coping strategies. For instance, because I strive to have students recognize existential possibilities occluded through their current (predominant) ontological filter, they have to confront admitting "I don't know" to themselves or to me much more often than usual. When using the naturalized register of separation, having to say "I don't know" repeatedly only seems to reaffirm the existential supposition of uncertainty that derives from embracing separation in the first place and to justify the forms of existential anxiety that accompany it. To mitigate, we explicitly discuss their response and propose alternatives:

How does it make you feel to say "I don't know"?

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Does the feeling last forever?

No.

Would it be possible for you to learn to take a deep breath the moment that you can feel yourself slipping into existential angst and focus on becoming comfortable with sitting in a space of "not knowing?" Once we can sit in tension with the momentary condition of not knowing, is it possible to call on another mode of engagement instead of fear?

The idea is to provide an alternative to drowning in an emotional response. They can become an observer of their response and examine how it derives from a particular constellation of existential assumptions.

If hitting the emotional wall of "I don't know" can be reinterpreted as a trigger, what could it teach us about ourselves, about our fishbowl? Can we recognize that our response is based on existential assumptions that have been so naturalized that we hardly recognize them or imagine that we have a choice in the matter? Is it possible to see our emotional response as a learned reaction? If so, can we re-qualify uncertainty as an existential assumption itself, a hypothetical possibility as opposed to cosmic law? Can we assume otherwise? This maneuver will allow us to change it, just like that (or hold onto it again, just like that). It is important to get to the point of allowing yourself to recognize that you do not know right this very second without the emotional trigger, because this will enable you to pay attention to the new information that comes to you as part of the process of formulating an answer.

Not everyone will be excited about this kind of training or about the prospect of questioning their foundational assumptions. In fact, many will not be. When they start to feel discomfort, they will seek to avoid both it and the source of pain, a.k.a., the professor. Uncomfortable silences will also arise. These can all be turned into key teaching moments. Pedagogically, the task becomes one of knowing how to hold tension in a classroom and manage it so as to generate an environment of contrast that encourages growth. Over time, it is possible to recognize which silences require patience, which call for a re-stating, which might be best to have someone else explain what was just covered in their own words, and which ones require emotional processing with questions like, "Does anyone want to talk about how this discussion makes them feel?" Overall, though, the activity of intentionally discomforting your students is not for the faint of heart. Nor is it a technique to use if you are seeking to be the most popular professor. Nevertheless, the significant shifts in perspective that I have witnessed among students, whereby they do not feel obligated to react out of fear or anger in the face of difference, are sufficient motivation for me to keep coaching them through existential calisthenics.

The pedagogical tools reviewed above provide a very small window into the kind of work that we need to undertake as a discipline to establish ontological literacy, which extends from recognizing that there are multiple ways for being, operating, and worlding to being able to read distinct forms of worlding and identify the fundamental existential assumptions that afford them. Once students realize that they have a choice about the assumptions they embrace and that the criteria behind their judgments regarding others obey particular ontological logics that are *not* universal, they will be ready to take "existential calisthenics" to the next level. This, however, does not take place until after their first semester with me. At that point, I encourage them to try applying one assumption now and another at another time in similar circumstances to see how they resonate differently. By comparing and contrasting the consequences of using one primordial assumption and the other, they can recognize the very direct impact that their embraced assumptions have on how we co-create. They may come to the realization that *we all* answer certain existential questions so consistently that *we* have become unaware that there are prior questions that *we* are constantly answering and that we all, actively or inactively, constantly make assumptions that shape the kinds of worlds that become possible. This exercise in learning about the various ways of assuming and participating in the world prepares them to eventually take responsibility for the existential commitments they choose to embrace and for the corresponding implications incurred.

In a field constituted through various forms of worlding that contribute to sites of contention, it is critical to have students undergo an existential calisthenics program while they are being taught about the theories that populate the discipline.

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This chapter asserts that it is our pedagogical duty to teach future graduates of IR programs how to be ontologically plural and endow them with the crucial life skill of ontological resilience and versatility, which will assist them to engage multiplicity and complexity more effectively. Hopefully, readers will be inspired to reflect on how their own teaching and learning praxis might reinforce the disciplinary ontological myopia that drives students to see the world from a reductionist ontological standpoint and to contemplate how we, as active co-creators, want to contribute to the worlds of IR in our teaching.

## Notes

[1] Manuela Picq (2013, 445) has described it thus: 'Critics accuse IR of two significant, interrelated sins. The first is an ingrained hegemony. IR has long been accused of US-centrism, as when Stanley Hoffmann (1977) described it as an American social science. … Related to this first critique is the charge that IR is out of touch with many important issues in the world because of its narrow disciplinary approach. Scholarly dominance implies a certain conceptual parochialism, with inevitable epistemological implications. The study of International Relations, it turns out, is often not all that *worldly*.' I emphasize here that this dominance stems from a particular shared configuration of fundamental existential assumptions.

[2] The feminist, queer, post-colonial, decolonial, indigenous, post-Western, post-human, and green IR literatures have shown the systematic way in which various "different Others" have been marginalized. Historically affected human clusters include indigenous groups, political/ethnic minorities, enslaved groups, trafficked groups, refugees, people with disabilities, and persons of distinct genders, sexual orientations, religions, etc., whereas in the nonhuman realm, ecosystems, minerals, climate patterns, flora, and fauna have been regularly and systematically excluded from consideration in the discipline. For a succinct review of the ethnocentric biases extant in what Shilliam (2015, 13) calls the "colonial science" of IR, see Capan (2016). Regarding anthropocentric biases, see Chandler, Müller and Rothe (2021).

[3] Some classic ontological arguments include Walker (1992), Patomäki and Wight (2000), and Jackson (2011).

[4] With the post-positivist turn has come a flourishing of previously silenced voices, which have been absolutely crucial for opening up the discipline. Yet these voices still are divided along categorical lines even if sometimes treated intersectionally. Here, I am *not* referring to a particular *kind* of voice; I am referring to how the fundamental existential commitments collectively shared in certain worlds beget fruits that are ontologically incommensurate with those borne through other ontological registers.

[5] At times when the triggering becomes too intense or when I point to something specific about Ecuadorian culture that might hit too close to home, I am quick to simultaneously acknowledge my own inherited *chuchakis* with which I personally struggle, like "the Protestant work ethic."

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