"I Am the Greatest" – Adaptive and Disruptive Varieties of Overconfidence

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Abstract

Confidence may be characterized as the ability to assess one's performance or degree of fluency in a certain area. A significant loss of confidence may bring about phenomena such as pathological self-doubt and lack of self-trust, which are common among individuals affected by depression and borderline personality disorder. By contrast, an exaggerated sense of confidence may give rise to the feeling of grandiosity that is typically observed in schizophrenic delusions, narcissistic personality disorder, and psychopathy. In this paper I take a deeper look at the phenomenon of *overconfidence* and I explore some of its varieties. Specifically, I discuss four case studies to show that overestimating one's abilities in the face of contrary evidence may be *disruptive* or *adaptive* in different circumstances. At the *individual* level, overconfidence may be beneficial when it contributes to foster optimistic beliefs about one's skills and to counter performance anxiety. Yet, a similar set of thoughts and beliefs can be found in the so-called grandiose delusions, which usually center on the idea of possessing special skills, powers, or abilities. At the *collective* level, forms of overconfidence may be detected in the ideals and visions that inform social and political change. However, an exaggerated collective confidence also runs the risk of generating dangerous forms of tunnel vision or misperception, as we witness in the case of wars or pandemics. I conclude by offering some preliminary suggestions on how we may distinguish between disruptive and adaptive varieties.