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ON BEING CONFIDENT

Bruno Haas

The ethically significant concept of being confident is analysed as the ability to face the void – an idea perhaps better studied in (Zen) Buddhism than in the West.

Confidence is frequently invoked in religious texts like the Bible, in movies and songs, in self-help books, and in advertisements. For the latter, consider slogans like: 'Yes, we can', 'Just do it', 'Never hide', 'Don't be a maybe'. However, the concept of confidence has received little philosophical interest so far.

The aim of this article is to provide an analysis or elucidation of the concept of being confident. To start with, I distinguish having confidence from being confident, before briefly relating confidence to the attitudes of self-trust and self-confidence. In section 3, I try to explain being confident by reference to its opposites, doubt and shyness, before presenting my main proposal as to what the unifying core of the concept is, in section 4. I will conclude, in section 5, by indicating one reason why confidence has not been much regarded in philosophy so far, and by relating confidence to a particular ideal of a person and to practical exercises to be found in Buddhism.

1. Having confidence and being confident

To begin with, it is important to keep apart different uses of the word 'confidence', most importantly to distinguish what I will call the *relational* and the *non-relational* concept of confidence. Relational confidence is at stake whenever

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we 'have confidence in' a person, institution or thing – for example, in a bridge. Roughly, to say this is to express one's trust or reliance on the other person's abilities, good will or virtue, or trust in the reliability, effective operation or service of the object or institution. Confidence in the relational sense is often synonymous with 'trusting *x*'. (One of the persons we may trust or have confidence in is ourself.) Other expressions of relational confidence are used when we 'put our confidence in a person' or 'take someone into confidence'. Furthermore, I can 'be confident that *p*' – for example, that the sun will come out tomorrow. With relational confidence, or 'confidence-in', it is always appropriate to ask: 'what is the *object* of your confidence?'

Non-relational confidence, by contrast, is not a relation between the person and something else but rather a state the person herself may or may not be in. When we say of someone that he or she 'is confident', 'a confident person', or that she manages a task, or endures a situation 'confidently', we ascribe non-relational confidence to her. Being confident in this sense is not a relation between the person and something or someone else – rather, it is an intrinsic property of the person. Examples of situations in which persons need confidence are negotiations, exams or challenges where a lot, personally, is at stake, or when confronting death, separation, or loss. We call confident a person who is positive in a specific way, or at least not easily resigned, who has a 'can do'-attitude, or is able to go forward without hesitation, as well as one who is not shy and can endure other's high expectations or looks, and doesn't question herself.

Certainly, to be confident may in some situations go along with or presuppose a certain measure of relational confidence: facing an exam, you will hardly *be* confident without also *having* confidence *in* your ability, or trust and the firm expectation *that* you are up to the task. However, such a dependence doesn't seem to be entailed by non-relational confidence, since we do encounter people confident in the face of death without any belief in an afterlife,

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or anything like that. Conceptual analysis should also remain tacit on the question whether the state of being confident is persistent or transient, i.e. whether one may be confident sometimes, but not at other times. Empirical research may reveal it to be realized only in persons who are constitutionally confident – who, as it were, have a 'strong backing' or 'thick skin' – but I will remain open on whether such a constitution is necessary to exhibit confidence in specific situations.

2. Being confident, self-trust and self-confidence

In the last section, I distinguished relational from non-relational confidence. The aim of this article is to elucidate non-relational confidence or 'being confident'. While all concepts of confidence and trust have in common the theme of being sure, of being able to rely, or free from doubt, the crucial difference is that trust and relational confidence are relational concepts – you can always ask: 'whom do you trust?' – whereas non-relational confidence is an intrinsic property of persons. But isn't confidence trust *in oneself*, self-trust? If 'confidence' in the non-relational sense referred to a self-reflexive attitude of trust in oneself, as for example is exhibited in the ability to count or rely on oneself, then confidence would be a species of trust. But self-trust and confidence seem to be two different attitudes. While the absence of doubt of any sort (including self-doubt) seems sufficient for confidence, self-trust seems to be more than that – as Carolyn McLeod puts it, it is 'an attitude of optimism about our own competence and moral integrity'.[1] You need no such notion to 'just do it'.

We should also, I think, conceptually distinguish confidence from self-confidence: the latter seems to involve a reflective awareness and positive estimation of oneself which confidence *per se* does not need to involve. The 'self-' in 'self-confidence' seems to indicate that being self-confident implies having thoughts, beliefs, or a concern

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about oneself. That is why self-confidence is not always regarded as a positive trait: self-confident persons are often self-centred, vain or overly proud. Also, people who have a lot of confidence in themselves sometimes feel superior to others.

3. Confidence as freedom from doubt and shyness

In the preceding section, I have argued that non-relational confidence, unlike self-trust and self-confidence, does not imply comparative, or indeed any, thoughts about oneself. Rather, it seems to be constituted by the absence of doubt, hesitation, shyness, despair or similar states. In this section, I want to probe how far we can get in understanding confidence by considering its opposites.

As mentioned, relational and non-relational confidence have in common a person's being free from doubt. In relational trust, we lack doubts about our trustee – in being confident, we lack doubts more generally: about ourselves and our projects being appropriate, doubts relating to how others think about us, as well as doubts pertaining to what is to become of us. Three 'directions' of such doubt may be distinguished: towards oneself, towards others and towards one's future. (Another way of putting the same point is in terms of shyness. A confident person is one who is not shy and doesn't shy away. She is not shy about herself, not shy in front of others, nor does she shy away from what she faces.) Let me run through these, to see whether we can find a core meaning, a positive feature that accounts for these qualities being ways of being confident.

(1) Lack of doubts about oneself and one's projects. The confident person doesn't question herself or the appropriateness of her projects. She knows what she wants, and is determined and resolute. She can go forward without hesitation or thinking twice. In being confident, she is self-standing, in balance and doesn't fear getting lost. Many

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images of confidence are related to stability or balance: a firm ground to stand on.

Religious doctrine, of course, describes confidence as a result of knowing an all-mighty and benevolent God to be on your side and to provide that kind of grounding. Insofar as your projects are assigned to you by God, hesitation and doubt are to no purpose. Many philosophical views have tried to replace God with Substance, Reason, or Spirit – in my terminology, all these claim that non-relational confidence stems from relational confidence. But so far, we have seen no reason to think that such reference has to be there, as a conceptual matter. On the contrary, there seem to be persons who are confident without believing in any such doctrine: who seem to be independently self-standing. Whereas religious persons may think that they are 'on a mission from God', some non-religious people are similarly determined and dedicated, and don't hesitate or question their own position and projects.

Also, it would be a mistake to understand the ability to remain unchallenged as a form of strength of self, or self-assurance. Above, I argued that confidence, as opposed to self-confidence, is not a relation-to-self. And being sure of oneself wouldn't solve the problem, either: why would people who are convinced that they are great exhibit the characteristic immunity to questioning themselves that we are currently considering? While apparent super-heroes may be less prone to be questioned by others, I can see no reason why they would be able to put aside questions they *themselves* may ask.

What, then, may account for this particular sort of stability? Somehow, the confident person has managed to integrate herself, so as to do wholeheartedly and without reservation what she has decided to do. Such a person has integrated the different 'voices' of herself so that she speaks with one voice.

(2) Confident persons are independent of other's opinion, without being self-centred or stubborn. If others question their purposes, they don't *thereby* become doubtful whether

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it is really worth it. Rather, to get such a person to reconsider her projects, one has to present substantial reasons to her. A person lacking confidence is one who is constantly seeking assurance, heedful of whether others accept her, dependent on positive public evaluation and estimation. Confident people, by contrast, are assertive and not dependent on others' encouragement – nor do they need, to strengthen their self-esteem, others to look down upon.

The sun-glass commercial 'Never hide' illustrates this aspect of confidence. To someone for whom confidence is a problem (as for most of us, sometimes), withstanding the looks of others, their expectations and estimations, can be daunting. Everyone knows the experience of wanting to hide, because you aren't dressed as the others are, for example. The desire to belong or blend in is understandable and may be universal, but the most confident person exhibits it least of all. Being confident, then, is the ability to show oneself as one is, unguardedly and without pretence.

(3) Confidence vis-à-vis one's future involves the confident person's not shying away from what is coming, and lack of fear of uncertainty. Going forward, she is not easily distracted but rather looks ahead and doesn't feel whatever may be facing her to be much of a threat – she sees the opportunity in every challenge.

Is confidence thus a species of hope? Not exactly. While confidence may involve a temporal dimension, it is one which is better described as a certain way of being 'on the brink of' something new, than as being sure, positive or hopeful that such-and-such is going to be the case, or that I will at time *t* be in such-and-such a state. Confidence need have no such content – more properly, it seems to be a way of relating to what is impending.

Nor is confidence, I think, to be confounded with optimism. While being optimistic is to be positive that particular obstacles that you may encounter will be overcome, confidence seems characteristically related to the 'threat' constituted simply by the mere indeterminacy of the future. An epitome of confidence is the actor entering the stage at the

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premiere, all alone, with no assurance or even conception of what is to come. Or consider someone confidently entering a love relationship, or moving to another country. This aspect of confidence explains why confidence is a particularly *human* virtue: because we, as beings cognizant of future, not yet present, possibilities, are easily frightened by our lack of conception or control – by utter indeterminacy. Absence of fears regarding what may come and an openness towards future possibilities are importantly part of being confident.

In this section, I have analysed the absence of doubt and shyness involved in confidence by considering three aspects of it: internal stability or integration, the ability to expose oneself to the looks of others, and non-fearful openness towards the future. Confidence is there when a person knows what she's doing, doesn't need others for assurance, and doesn't shy away or panic when confronted with problems, but rather is open towards whatever may be coming.

4. Confidence as the ability to face the void

Is there a common core or essence of these traits of the confident person? As interesting as the points made so far may be, my analysis so far is wanting for not revealing what the different features encountered have in common. Why do we call such seemingly different characteristics as the social basis that allows you to show yourself, the personal integration that allows you to be active, and the ability to tolerate indeterminacy that allows you to be open to the future, all by the same name?

Now what is striking is that the concept seems to resist straightforwardly positive characterizations. For example, being confident is not simply being sure – rather, it is compatible with a high degree of uncertainty, as well as with the realization that many times before you failed. Think of a lover who knows that he has no good 'track record' in

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relationships and thus has reason to think his love is unlikely to last this time: nonetheless, he may be confident. Similarly, confidence is not simply firm and stable self-integration – it may be exhibited precisely in letting deep changes to one's personality happen.

Indeed, it is precisely this 'doubly negative' character that may turn out to be the key to understanding confidence. Instead of looking directly at certainty (or structure) as something one may possess, I propose to consider a certain person's capacity *not to mind* the *absence* of certainty (or of structure). In a metaphor, my claim is that confidence is the ability to *face the void*.

I use the metaphor of a void to signify any kind of existential uncertainty. Death, for example, is perceived as threatening in large part for transcending our conception, for being utterly unknown. There is nothing we can say. We don't have a grip on it. It is beyond our grasp. Another instance of what I mean by the void is darkness. Thus, Ernest Hemingway's short story 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' – ending in the famous soliloquy 'he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada …' – draws connections between confidence, light and nothingness, as when the older waiter admits to being one 'of those who need a light for the night'. 'Void' may also signify unseizability, i.e. the absence of a determinate structure or of points of contact that enable us to navigate and manipulate things. Again, what is dreadful is the experience of lacking contact, or the world's being beyond one's reach. Consider the horrifying image of being buried alive, or 'locked' inside your body.

The challenge posed by these predicaments is similar, for a reason already mentioned: humans, having and often needing a conception of themselves and their prospects, are often frightened by having no conception of what is to come, as well as by being unable to make contact with what we encounter. Any of these voids may be terrifying and cause a characteristic vertigo – and to this, I claim, being confident is related. A good tightrope walker exhibits

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something characteristic for the attitude of confidence, there called 'having a good head for heights': to the chance of falling such a person doesn't react by being immobilized or horrified.

Of course, we shouldn't think too dramatically of confidence. There are occasions for confidence each and every day. But what they have in common is being situations where we meet something not easy to seize. There are voids little and huge: subjective, social and partial annihilations and losses of structure can be terrifying. A void, even a little one, when it is near or impending, inspires *Angst* or anxiety in some of us – in those who lack confidence. This is so because some of us, in a specific situation, seem to forget that life will go on even when things dear to us change or disappear.

That is what my talk of *facing* the void signifies. *In principle*, we all know that life will go on – if that were all to it, we'd all be confident. Confidence, however, is needed in practice. The mere abstract possibility that one day you will die, for example, usually does not pose a challenge in the relevant sense. Confronting a diagnosis of cancer does. Eleanor Roosevelt recommended: 'You gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face.'

What does it take to be able to face this? It means not faltering, or vanishing, but retaining one's capacity for self-guidance and activity. A person who can face the void is someone who will not *despair* in situations where his or her annihilation, or loss of control, or withdrawal of all support is at stake – that is the reason why such persons don't tend to lose their capacity for resolute action or at least inner self-direction, integration, and don't need to hide. Let me elaborate by considering two examples: that of facing death, and that of mobbing.

When facing death, I am – at least my living body and my individual, worldly existence is – about to turn to nothing. Characteristically, there are certain, while few, people whom we call confident here. There may be

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different sources of such admirable equanimity or 'assenting acceptance': religious faith and unshakable belief in an afterlife, but also a sense of having achieved a full and worthwhile life and being ready to let go. In confronting death, for most of us nowadays, there is at some point an almost irresistible tendency towards desperation that can take the form of self-deception, self-alienation, paralysis, or panic. If that is to be avoided, the task is to re-establish one's agency, or flexibility and inner mobility: the ability to choose which attitude to take as expressive of oneself. Few people face death cheerfully, but that is not required, either: certainly one can be confident and sad. Being confident enables one to feel authentically whatever it is one is feeling in that very moment.

'Annihilation' in a social sense is at stake in cases of mobbing. Thus, Cinderella's stepmother and stepsisters treat her as if she wasn't there: socially, in making her wear the old grey smock, morally, in not seeing reason to keep promises given her, and personally, in not even presenting her to the prince who asks to see all young women to let them try his shoe. What is experienced as threatening in mobbing is the deprivation of all interpersonal contact: you are left in a void, and utterly lack anyone to hold on to, or to even perceive your presence. Cinderella is an epitome of confidence because in spite of all this, she is quite active – in planting trees, in working through her loss by crying (so productively as to make the tree grow) and, of course, in secretly attending parties and dancing.

5. Buddhist confidence

Confidence, I have argued, is the ability to face the void. This understanding can explain what the different forms of freedom from doubt encountered in section 3 have in common. Those who can face the void lack doubts about themselves and their projects: such persons are not internally hesitant, but rather able to go forward without

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excessive caution, because they know that life will go on, and have 'stopped to look fear in the face'. Being untroubled by what is unfamiliar, they are able to determine for themselves what is worth striving for even if all previous sources of orientation have vanished. In a social dimension, such a person has the ability to show herself as she is, unguardedly and without pretence, because she doesn't fear others' censure or withdrawal of support. Towards the future, confident people are open, because they lack the need for certainty and a clear conception of what is coming.

It seems evident that confidence is of great value in a human life; at least it seems attractive to many of us. Indeed, it is an interesting question why it has attracted so little philosophical attention over the last centuries, in our tradition. I cannot expand on the reasons I think there are for this, but only, in conclusion, hint at one of them. What I would like to argue on another occasion is that we seem to face a basic choice between two ethical ideals, one of them focusing on confidence, the other more on safeguards or guarantees. Here, I can only indicate what I think that choice is, by sketching connections of the concept of confidence to some Buddhist teachings, in particular to those of Zen Buddhism.

While Christianity and Western conceptions, too, may have aimed at inspiring confidence, I think the idea is much more congenial to Buddhism. A reason for this is that in Western thought, confidence is the result of something: a metaphysical doctrine (God, Substance or Spirit), or method (prayer, Stoic contemplation of the harmoniously and rationally ordered universe, or Cartesian self-examination). Though it is natural to seek protection in 'making contact with something larger and more enduring than oneself' (Richard Rorty), despite all efforts of philosophers and theologians so far, doubts remain whether, in the long run, any such connection will stick.

In Buddhism, by contrast, confidence is thought to result from realizing the illusory nature of all suffering – and

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letting go. Whereas Western ways to confidence may be described as *shielding* the person from the threat of nothingness, this model consists in *not shying away from* becoming empty and losing all individuality. Buddhist exercises aim at a state where you have 'nothing on your mind', especially no concepts. Some schools say that you should, by practising meditation, rid yourself of or annihilate your 'ego'. Thus, these Eastern practices aim at enabling you to endorse, embrace, or 'enter' the void. Where successful, the state of being nothing somehow has lost its dreadful nature.

How can we achieve this, in practice? The Buddhist practice of Zazen, for example, instructs us to practice for a while 'simply sitting', i.e. being awake without judging or wanting – to relate to one's thoughts and feelings in a merely observing mode, without pursuing, identifying with, focusing on, or evaluating any of them. While the point of this practice is not to reach a certain, esoteric state of mind, the effect of practising for some time is to become more attuned to our bodies and to what is presently going on around us, to develop one's empathy, and be less occupied with our selves, ideas and will. Being at one with the situation and acquainted with our deep impulses, we can let go, stop holding on, trying to control the course of things. And just do it.

Bruno Haas is Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Göttingen, Germany. bruno.haas@phil.uni-goettingen.de

Note

[1] Carolyn McLeod, *Self-Trust and Reproductive Autonomy* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 6.

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