

Call of the void: the attraction of ultimate absurdity

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March 21, 2023

When going near a dangerous area without protective barriers (e.g., oncoming traffic or train tracks), especially a high place such as a bridge or the top of a building, many people suddenly have the ideation (or even a desire) about jumping off into their doom. This mysterious yet quite commonly experienced phenomenon is the “call of the void”, which originated from the French phrase “*l'appel du vide*”.

Jean-Paul Sartre refers to the situation as the “vertigo of possibility”, where human freedom of choice comes to face extreme existential thoughts [1]. The sense of freedom in choosing to end one’s existence is only one easy step away, which is an immense sensation and a striking mental notion about the meaning of oneself. Borrowing the view of Albert Camus [2], in that fleeting moment of awe on the edge of existence, it can be said that one approaches the ultimate absurdity in life: a seemingly absolutely meaningless act of self-killing.



Illustration. Edge of the Abyss (AI-generated with Stable Diffusion)

Many people suggest that pondering upon trading one's life for nothing in return may be driven by the innate morbid curiosity in humans. Scientific investigation into this intriguing psychological phenomenon is very limited. A study published in the *Journal of Affective Disorders* suggests that the high-place phenomenon may be caused by misinterpreting signals of one's survival instinct [3]. The study posits that those who have experienced the urge to jump in such situations are not necessarily suicidal.

Suicide requires a total perceived benefit of killing oneself greater than the total perceived costs of such an act in various scopes of comparison – rationally, emotionally, and instinctually [4]. Even in a lose-lose situation where suffering is inevitable in one way or another, a mind still tries to optimize the value of the self-ending decision [5]. Here, death is expected to bring about something desirable – whatever it may be in the mind: escaping from agony and psychological burden, serving as an altruistic sacrifice, invoking guilt and terror, etc. [6]. But for the call of the void, the subjective cost-benefit analysis appears to be missing.

When browsing the Internet to read more about personal experiences on the “call of the void”, I came across an interesting analogy. Some people connected the feeling to how a successful person at some point suddenly wants to quit it all after building up such a remarkable career. In a sense, the call of the void may be what it literally means: a desire to return to nothingness. The mind constantly works for the sake of survival and adaptation as long as a person still exists and functions [7]. Every value stored in the mind that builds up the “self” is subjected to an almost never-ending dynamic optimization process [8]. Thinking and awareness imply an unavoidable natural degree of deviation from reality [9]. The absolute truth happens when the subject is removed, meaning death is a quick path to non-duality. Jumping off the edge is only a small activation step in terms of energy consumption to eliminate all fluctuations in life values. In other words, beyond that edge is the instant “cheat” solution for all mental processes. If life is inherently absurd [2], then probably such a death would be too ideologically “perfect” to really happen.

At the moment of being called forth by the void, the ego may feel a sense of absolute power of control that it has always been craving. The mind knows that a nature-defying rebellious act against instinct itself is just a simple jump away. But then again, a normal person would likely never actually jump, only to realize that there is an invisible wall between the subjective intending and the objective intended [10].

References

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