

A Regime Theory of Joy

Ease Is Not Lost, it Is Blocked by Optimization

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An Introduction to The Theory

Main claim: Joy appears only in a narrow region of regime space where evaluative load (Z) is low, corrective coupling is weakened, and sensitivity remains high. It is an all-or-none entry, regime shift model.

The theory defines candidate mechanisms, describes threshold transitions and persistence over time, connects them to reproducible phenomenological observations, and proposes tasks capable of testing competing explanations.

In *A Regime Theory of Joy*, most other frameworks of affect increase evaluative load by encouraging interpretation or pursuit, thereby reducing access to joy (See Appendix 1). In this sense, the ease regime is almost the opposite of both flow and meditation: flow organizes experience around sustained task engagement, while meditation usually involves the deliberate regulation of attention;

Core Predictions

Abrupt, all-or-none entry rather than gradual learning curves.

Dissociation from flow, meditative absorption, nostalgia, and standard reward-based accounts.

A measurement paradox in which direct observation suppresses the target phenomenon.

Strong sensitivity to contextual, structural, and accumulated evaluative load, formalized through Z.

Why and When Joy Fades Away?

From early childhood, many reminders are given with good intentions: "*Finish your plate.*" "*Sit up straight.*" "*Calm down.*" "*Pay attention.*" They teach self-control, social norms, or practical habits. But they repeatedly recruit a monitoring process. The child is encouraged to evaluate current behavior against an expected standard. Behavior is increasingly accompanied by checking, comparison, anticipation, and self-correction. The child gradually learns not only *what* to do, but also to continuously supervise how it is being done.

Ease is an alternative global control regime in which evaluation and pressure to take the next action are temporarily suspended. This permissive configuration allows joy and

imagery to emerge spontaneously, without any effort to produce them. Evaluation kills entry, but the state becomes more stable once established.

As monitoring becomes the default mode, access to the ease regime becomes less frequent, until moments of intensive joy become exceptional rather than ordinary.

Monitoring + performance criterion + continuous correction = optimization regime

Differences Between Monitoring and the Optimization Regime

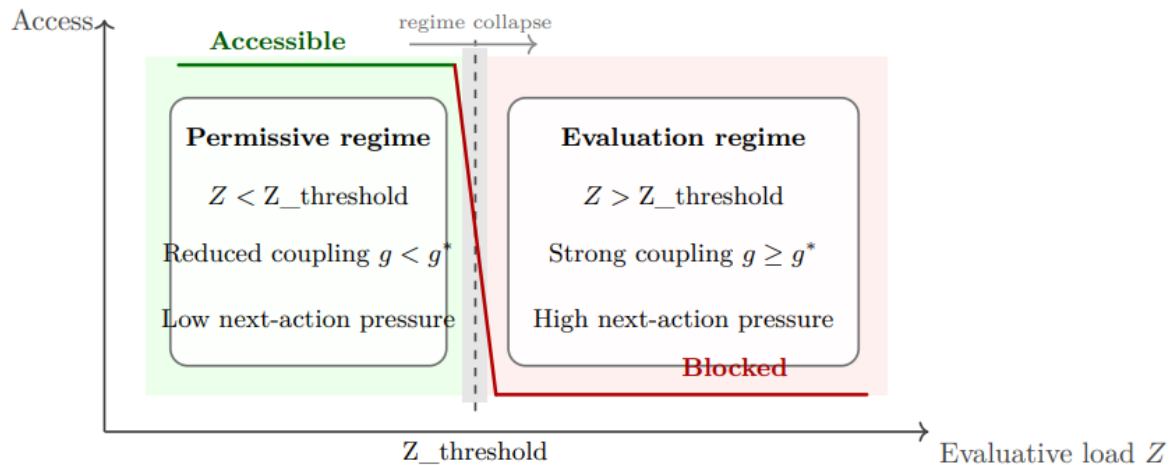
Dimension	Monitoring	Optimization regime
Scale	A specific operation	A global configuration
Duration	Brief and intermittent	Persistent
Criterion	“What is happening?”	“Is this the best option?”
Effect on action	Occasional correction	Organization of the entire course of action
Example	Avoiding another person	Continuously calculating the optimal route

The important point is that monitoring is not necessarily problematic in itself. Practical monitoring can remain local and then disappear. What closes the experience down is the integration of monitoring into a global loop:

observe → compare → judge → correct → anticipate → verify.

Z is the global state variable produced by the optimization loop. Local monitoring raises Z only slightly, whereas repeated comparison, and verification cause it to accumulate. When Z becomes high, access to the ease regime is blocked.

For example, “Someone is approaching, so I move aside” remains local. By contrast, “I must constantly choose the smoothest route” establishes an optimization regime.



Threshold regime model. Access to the permissive regime depends on evaluative load (Z), with a discontinuous transition at $Z_threshold$. Below threshold, coupling strength and next-action pressure remain low. Above threshold, evaluative coupling increases and access becomes blocked.

Phenomenology of the Ease Regime

Consistently observed features	Occasionally observed features
Heightened olfactory sensitivity	Stable and vivid mental imagery
Heightened visual vividness	Realistic, involuntary completion of positive autobiographical memories
Pleasant chest-centered sensation	Spontaneous recruitment of odors, colors, and tastes from minimal cues.
Distinct feeling of joy	
Increased reaction to moody stimuli (e.g., music), "being moved"	

Ease is not described as a state sustained by non-striving, meditation, play, absorption, or continued practice. The micro-perturbations are proposed only as possible entry conditions. Once the transition has occurred, the regime can remain available for months without repeating the exercises, with joy returning spontaneously during ordinary inactivity.

Notably, flow is stabilized by evaluative control, whereas the ease regime depends on its absence and is disrupted by its reintroduction, especially at entry.

A Powerful Illusion

A powerful illusion is that joy comes directly from the environment: the summer afternoon, the Christmas decorations, the television special, the game, the music, or the particular place. Within the ease hypothesis, however, these external objects may be

better understood as occasions through which an underlying permissive regime becomes expressed. That regime is largely invisible to the person experiencing it. The child does not think, "I am operating within a different control regime"; the world itself simply seems extraordinarily good. This invisibility may also protect the monitoring system from ever identifying the regime as a competing configuration.



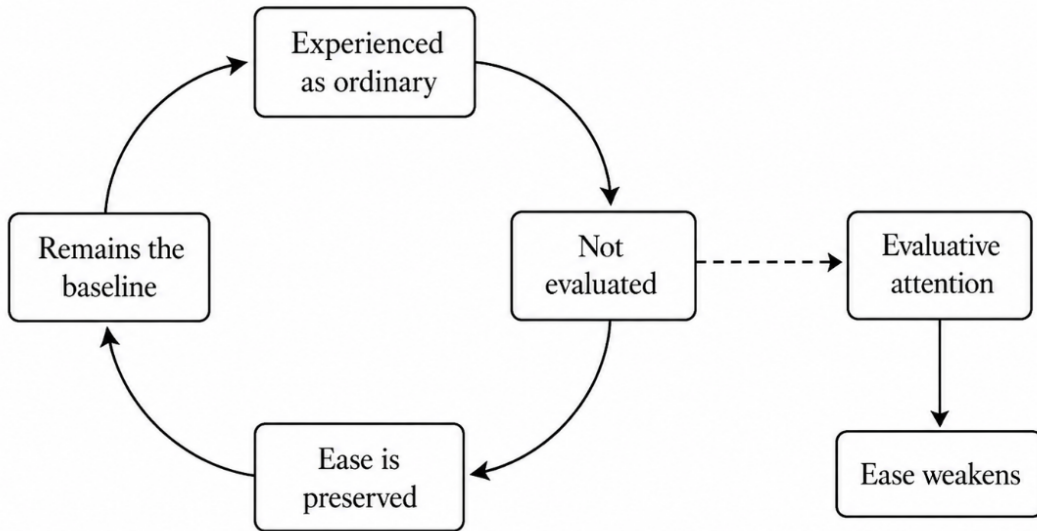
However, the environment does amplify the state. Themed special episodes may have represented one of the peaks of joy in modern childhood because they transformed an already familiar world without replacing it. A Christmas episode, summer special, Halloween story, vacation issue, or other themed event preserved known characters and places while giving a different atmosphere. This produced a favorable combination of **familiarity and novelty**: the child did not need to learn a new world, yet the ordinary world suddenly felt exceptional. The theme also spread diffusely across small illustrations, creating many perceptual details that could be enjoyed without requiring any particular action.

It was temporary, slightly surprising, visually rich, and largely non-instrumental. The familiar world remained effortless, while briefly becoming strange, richer, and more significant than usual.

In A Regime Theory of Joy, ease is described as a form of affective quietude. It can be internally powerful while requiring reduced evaluation and therefore remaining almost invisible to an external observer, and, to a large extent, unnoticed by the young wearer. Its intensity does not necessarily produce agitation or action, it may unfold silently beneath an ordinary appearance.

The Invisibility Loop

What is not recognized is not evaluated; what is not evaluated remains available.



Because the ease regime is the baseline of childhood, it tends to remain invisible. As the regime is fragile under evaluation, this lack of recognition may itself preserve access to the regime.

When ease later closes, what remains is therefore not a clear memory of a lost internal state, but a **sliding and changing nostalgia** attached to its former circumstances: perhaps it was the old cartoons, the summers, the house, the console, Christmas, or simply being young. The explanation can migrate indefinitely from one object to another because the common factor was never explicitly represented. Eventually the regime itself can be almost completely forgotten, as though it had never existed, precisely because while it existed there was never a clear concept of what it was.

Social Experience and Medias

Monitoring also shapes social experience. If one pays close attention, the immediate affective response to a simple photograph can sometimes be stronger than the response produced by an actual encounter, as illustrated by advertisements centred on attractive models.

A photograph permits affect without requiring an immediate social evaluation. Because no response is expected from the viewer, monitoring can briefly recede, allowing the affective signal to develop before it is evaluated.

This may help explain the extensive use of facial close-ups in music videos, advertisements, television series, and films. Their interest does not depend only on low production cost. A face presented without reciprocal demands may momentarily lower

evaluative monitoring and provide a direct route into affective engagement.



Figure: Close-ups of faces in a classic 1990s television advertisement. As the media does not ask for action, monitoring is relatively reduced. The distinctive appearance of the faces adds an element of surprise, further intensifying the affective response.

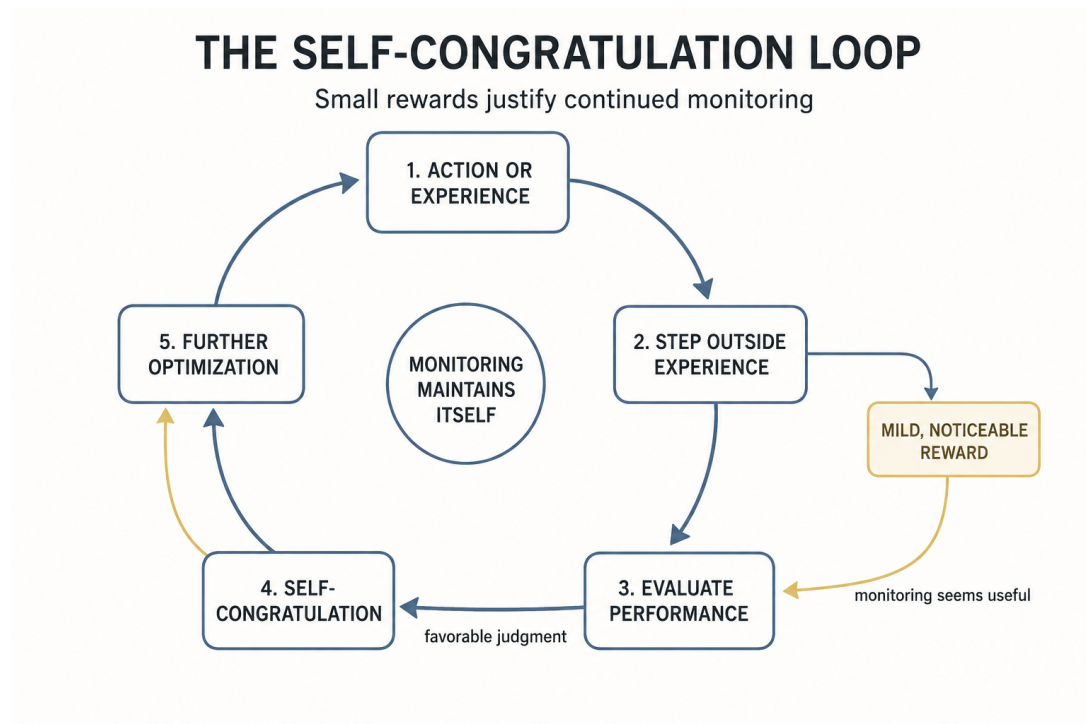
Adult vs Children in Front of a World Cup Championships

A World Cup match offers a simple example of how the optimization regime enters experience. A child may experience the event through colours, chants, faces, sudden movements, or collective excitement. An adult, by contrast, may continuously assess the players' performance, anticipate tactical decisions, or judge whether the match is sufficiently entertaining. Monitoring occurs within this additional evaluative layer: attention no longer remains with the unfolding event but repeatedly returns to questions of performance, meaning, prediction, and the quality of one's own response. The same match is therefore experienced through two different configurations, one primarily participatory, the other partly supervisory.

The Monitor Protects Itself

Self-congratulation can be understood as the monitor rewarding its own activity. After evaluating an action as successful, the monitoring system produces a small feeling of satisfaction, not an intensely positive state, but a mild and noticeable reward. The monitor thereby justifies its continued presence and encourages further optimization. Yet the rewards it provides remain narrow, such as relief, correctness, pride, or brief satisfaction. They do not usually approach the intensity of positive experiences that

emerge when evaluation temporarily recedes. Indulging voluntarily in this self-congratulation also re-enforce the optimization regime because it requires a person to step outside the ongoing experience and evaluate their own performance.



It is hypothesized that the optimization system becomes defensive when confronted with a text that questions its value. Consider the statement: “Optimization is not a noble discipline of the self.” A reader may experience an immediate urge to object and list the benefits of optimization, or defend its necessity. The individual temporarily becomes its advocate, responding to even a minor criticism as though a valuable institution were under attack. The urgency of the defence is itself informative: the monitor does not simply evaluate the criticism, but recruits reasoning to preserve its own authority.

In society, contempt for childhood, expressed through injunctions such as “Don’t be childish” or “Grow up,” can be interpreted as a cultural meme that protects the authority of the monitor. The injunction installs an internal warning against appearing naive or insufficiently controlled. The monitor can then present its own vigilance as evidence of maturity. From this perspective, disdain for childhood helps preserve monitoring by transforming reduced evaluation into a social failure.

People often laugh when imagining someone doing nothing or something trivial. It may express less genuine amusement than a subtle discomfort: the optimization regime encountering an activity it cannot justify through usefulness. The laughter therefore acts as a small defensive response, converting what escapes the regime’s logic into something unserious and dismissible.

Impulses

The impulse to collect is a characteristic expression of the optimization regime. Experiences are categorized and preserved “just in case,” as though their value depended on securing them for future use. Collecting is highly evaluative because each item must be identified, judged, and added to an emerging collection. This activity can feel mildly satisfying because the monitoring process supplies small rewards at each step: “Good, you are almost there.” The impulse becomes noticeable when one starts making a list or encounters a good piece of music and immediately feels the need to save it. The experience is then disrupted by heightened monitoring and replaced by a sequence of small rewards associated with classification, acquisition, and a sense of progress.

The optimization regime can be recognized by its tendency to generate scenarios continuously. It constructs possibilities about the future, predicts what will happen in a video that has just begun, or imagines what might be behind a door that one has no intention of opening. These scenarios do not necessarily serve an immediate practical purpose. Their function is to reduce openness by converting uncertainty into a set of anticipated outcomes. Each prediction gives the monitor something to compare, verify, or prepare for, thereby extending evaluation into situations that require no action. Scenario generation becomes a form of anticipatory supervision through which the monitor remains active even in the absence of a genuine threat.

Open Question Recruits Monitoring

CA POST EDITORIAL BOARD

Baby Gabriel, saved from abortion by his surrogate, deserves the chance to fight for his life

EDITORIAL

Luigi Mangione only deserves contempt for the evil murder of Brian Thompson

ISAAC SCHORR

A liberal journalist just exposed lying Fauci's toxic relationship with the media

These headlines share an important feature: they do not simply describe an event, but open an unfinished cognitive task. Each headline leaves an implicit question unresolved, such as “What happened?”, “Is this justified?”, or “Who is responsible?”

Because no answer is immediately available, monitoring remains active, generating scenarios, evaluating possible explanations, and anticipating the information required for closure. Different headlines recruit monitoring in different ways.

- **“Baby Gabriel, saved from abortion by his surrogate, deserves the chance to fight for his life.”**
 - Opens a moral evaluation: Does he deserve this chance, and who might deny it?
 - Introduces an unresolved conflict involving survival, responsibility, and justice.
 - Encourages the reader to reconstruct the circumstances before knowing the facts.

- **Ease-compatible alternative:** “Baby Gabriel receives care after surviving an abortion attempt.”
- **“Luigi Mangione only deserves contempt for the evil murder of Brian Thompson.”**
 - Demands an immediate moral judgment.
 - Invites the reader either to endorse or contest the author’s condemnation.
 - Keeps the monitor active through questions of guilt, motive, punishment, and proportionality.
 - **Ease-compatible alternative:** “An editorial response to the killing of Brian Thompson.”
- **“A liberal journalist just exposed lying Fauci’s toxic relationship with the media.”**
 - Opens an evidential task: What was exposed, and does it prove deception?
 - Activates political categorization before presenting the underlying information.
 - Creates an anticipated revelation that can only be completed by reading further.
 - **Ease-compatible alternative:** “A journalist examines Fauci’s relationship with the media.”

The alternative headlines reduce monitoring because they identify the subject without withholding a decisive piece of information. They remain descriptive rather than accusatory, minimize anticipated controversy, and do not force the reader to complete an implicit question. An ease-compatible headline can therefore inform while leaving the experience cognitively closed: the reader may continue, but does not feel compelled to resolve a deliberately created gap.

Childhood Play as Suspension of Optimization

Childhood play contains brief suspensions of evaluative optimization. These moments may be protecting, or even induce, positive affect.

Example of Arbitrary Importance: A child walks along looking at the ground. For no particular reason, a leaf becomes important. Then the child walks past it, and it is immediately forgotten. The child does not think, “Okay, this leaf is important.” It simply becomes important, in the same way that an adult assigns value to more fixed and enduring things.



A child opens a drawer “just to see,” and what appears appears. Then the child moves on to another activity. An adult would open it for a reason and immediately begin drawing conclusions: What are these objects? Why are they here? What are they for?



WHAT APPEARS APPEARS.



A child selects a piece of wood and treats it as important. A selection takes place, but there is no hierarchy in the child's mind: initially, all the pieces of wood are equal. The child considers them equally relevant, then chooses one anyway and treats it as important for a while. It may become a companion without any particular purpose, or simply be dropped and left behind. Although a choice occurs, the categories remain flexible. Unlike in adults, there are no automatic, rigid hierarchies



Although the child makes a choice, they do not have the automatic impulse to establish a clear hierarchy among the elements.

A child often sees objects as shapes and colors before seeing them in terms of function. An adult, by contrast, tends to see primarily what they are for. For example, a child may encounter a flower simply as a patch of color, whereas an adult will try to extract its meaning, identify its function or species, and determine whom it belongs to.

JUST A COLOR.



The child sees the color without necessarily making it more important.

Because children do not monitor these actions, they do not trigger an increase in Z. Access to the regime is therefore sustained, and its intensity can be easily maintained or even increased.

For simplicity, the patterns can also be grouped into three main categories: *Suspension* - Briefly interrupt the coupling between perception and action. *Openness* - Briefly delay the stabilization of interpretation. *Salience* - Briefly redistribute perceptual importance across elements.

Those elements constitute the basis for *Minimal Z-Reduction Task*: a minimal monitoring-disruption probe designed to test if access to a distinct positive affect regime ("ease") may occur through threshold-like transitions when evaluative monitoring and micro-optimization processes are destabilized. The task is not intended as a training method or intervention, but as an experimental probe of access conditions.

Conclusion

Joy is not best understood as a simple increase in ordinary pleasure. It is a threshold-dependent regime property that becomes accessible when evaluative monitoring and optimization no longer stabilize discrepancies at entry.

Entry is abrupt, unambiguous, and not preceded by gradual improvement, consistent with a regime shift rather than a learning process. The model predicts a measurement paradox: methods that recruit self-monitoring suppress the phenomenon they attempt to observe. The framework offers a falsifiable alternative to reward-based and training-based accounts, positioning joy as a threshold-dependent property of system dynamics rather than an outcome of optimization.

Florian Morin proposes that joy is gated by evaluative monitoring: joy does not simply fade, it becomes inaccessible when monitoring and optimization remain active.

References

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Appendix 1 Comparison With Other Frameworks

Beginner's Mind

It is still a form of control, even though it aims at openness. The mind is instructed to produce a fresh perspective, maintain a particular attitude, prevent prior knowledge from dominating, and preserve the freshness of experience. This creates an implicit standard: each moment should feel new, open, and unworn.

In the ease regime, there is no need to look at something as if it were being seen for the first time. The familiar can remain familiar. Its established meaning is simply not required to organize the experience immediately. Nothing has to be made new, kept fresh, or experienced correctly.

Self-determination theory

A Regime Theory of Joy proposes that joy becomes accessible when evaluative control, task orientation, and next-action pressure are sufficiently reduced. Autonomy, competence, and relatedness may improve the conditions of life, but they still involve goals, self-assessment, progress, social interpretation, and optimization. Ease arise

without achievement, purpose, social validation, or even a meaningful activity. Ease concerns the temporary suspension of the evaluative regime that organizes experience around action and improvement.

Flow theory

A Regime Theory of Joy describes an off-task state in which no goal needs to organize experience, no feedback needs to be processed, and no next action needs to be prepared. Flow reduces self-consciousness by absorbing the person more completely into an activity, whereas ease reduces the evaluative structure that makes sustained activity, adjustment, and progress necessary. Flow is therefore optimized engagement; ease is the suspension of the need to engage optimally.

Attentional habituation

It describes the gradual reduction of attention or response produced by repeated exposure to the same stimulus. *A Regime Theory of Joy* concerns a broader change in the organization of experience. Ease does not require repetition, familiarity, or declining stimulus intensity. It can occur in response to something new, familiar, salient, or ordinary when evaluation, task demands, and next-action pressure are sufficiently reduced. Habituation changes how strongly a particular stimulus recruits attention; ease changes whether experience as a whole must be evaluated, used, or converted into further action.

The default mode network

A Regime Theory of Joy does not identify ease with this network. Default mode activity can still contain intense evaluation, planning, rumination, social interpretation, or concern with the self. Ease is defined functionally by reduced evaluation, task demand, and next-action pressure, regardless of whether attention is directed inward or outward. The default mode network may participate in some expressions of ease, particularly vivid imagery or spontaneous memory, but it is a possible neural substrate, not the state itself.