

A Regime Theory of Joy

A summary

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Abstract

This is a resume of the "ease" corpus. The focus is on joy and its mechanisms.

1 The Existence of Joy: Phenomenology

- **Chest-based pleasure:** a distinct pleasant sensation localized in the chest or heart area.
- **High sensitivity (“being moved”):** even very low-intensity stimuli can trigger strong affective responses.
- **Amplification by prediction error:** unexpected or salient elements, such as treasure-like images or sudden changes, can sharply increase intensity.
- **Perceptual intensification:** colors and sensory inputs can feel immediately rewarding, sometimes described as similar to “eating candies.”
- **Granular vision:** perception may appear more detailed and textured, as if the visual field had increased in resolution.
- **Brownish tone shift:** scenes may take on a warm, brownish or golden tint, contributing to a richer perceptual quality.
- **Spontaneous internal selection:** the system appears to automatically scan stored stimuli, such as songs, and bring forward the one that best fits the current state. This is experienced as being “called,” rather than deliberately chosen.
- **Familiarity:** the state is instantly recognizable, not as something new, but as something deeply familiar from early life.

2 Current Models and Their Limits

For contemporary theories, positive affect is assumed to vary along a continuous scale. It can increase or decrease gradually, be modulated by identifiable inputs, and, in principle, be optimized or reproduced through appropriate conditions. Typical inputs include:

- rewards,
- prediction errors,
- cognitive interpretations.

As a result, joy is generally treated as a continuous, controllable, and cumulative phenomenon. This idea encounters difficulty when accounting for a specific class of observations. Some high-intensity positive states:

- appear abruptly,
- cannot be produced on demand,
- disappear when attempts are made to control or stabilize them.

A shared property of these experiences is that entry is not gradual. Instead, the experience appears to reorganize globally and all at once.

3 An Alternative View

These states are not simply higher levels of reward. Instead, they appear to reflect a different mode of functioning, involving a shift in how perception, goals, and discrepancies are processed. This transition does not seem to be gradual. Rather, it is discrete, structural, and non-additive.

Paradox

These states cannot be reliably produced through effort, training, or optimization. More importantly, the very processes that would be expected to generate them often undermine them.

Constraint

A consistent pattern emerges across domains: monitoring and control interfere with the state. This has been observed in contexts such as introspection, skilled performance, and creativity. Two characteristic effects follow:

- attempting to observe the experience alters it,
- attempting to control it degrades it.

Implication

These observations suggest that some forms of joy:

- are incompatible with monitoring,
- cannot be stabilized through standard control processes,
- require a different regime than reward optimization.

4 The Measurement Problem

Studying these states raises a difficulty. Standard experimental methods typically require participants to monitor their internal state, interpret it, and report it. These operations introduce evaluation, control, and self-observation. As a result, they are not neutral: they can alter the very state they aim to measure. A direct consequence follows. When the state fails to appear under experimental conditions, this does not necessarily indicate that it is rare. It may instead reflect that the conditions themselves prevent its occurrence.

Measurement Paradox

The more precisely the state is measured or intentionally induced, the less likely it is to occur.

Development

This perspective offers a potential explanation for a common developmental observation. Children appear to access high-intensity positive states, whereas adults often lose access over time. This shift does not necessarily imply that the state disappears. Rather, it may reflect an increase in cognitive constraints that interfere with its emergence.

5 Proposed Model

In this account, joy is not treated as a gradual output of reward processes. Instead, it depends on a specific configuration of the system, characterized by reduced evaluative control and a suspension of immediate discrepancy correction. Under these conditions, prediction errors are no longer treated as problems to be resolved. Instead, they are incorporated into the experience itself.

Regime

This configuration defines a permissive regime, marked by reduced stabilization and a different functional role for prediction error.

Transition

Entry into this regime does not appear to be gradual. It follows a threshold dynamic: above a certain level of control, access is blocked; once this threshold is crossed, the state can emerge. This transition is characterized by abrupt, all-or-none properties.

Predictions

This model generates several predictions:

- sudden onset of the state,
- strong sensitivity to context, particularly evaluative conditions,
- incompatibility with sustained goal-directed optimization.

Implication

Within this framework, joy reflects a regime shift: a change in the configuration of the system, rather than an increase in input.

6 The Ease Configuration

Term: “Ease”

“Ease” is introduced as a label for a specific configuration of the system. It denotes a particular way in which the system is organized.

Regime

A regime describes how the main parts of the system interact, in other words, how strongly they influence each other and how tightly they are linked.

- discrepancy detection,
- evaluation,
- action selection.

Thus, all regimes involve the same components. What differs is the strength of their coupling.

Standard Mode

Under typical conditions, discrepancies are detected, immediately evaluated, and rapidly converted into corrective actions. This organization supports efficient goal pursuit. However, it comes with a cost: persistent evaluation and a continuous pressure to optimize.

Ease Configuration

In the ease configuration, discrepancies are not immediately corrected. Evaluation is not removed, but reduced in its influence.

Main Consequences

Discrepancies are not rapidly eliminated and can persist over time. Prediction error no longer functions solely as a control signal. It becomes part of the experienced intensity. Perception and action are less constrained by continuous optimization.

Important Clarification

This configuration should not be interpreted as a deficit, breakdown, or pathological state. Control remains available, what changes is the degree to which control is applied.

Access Conditions

Two conditions appear necessary:

- low evaluative coupling,
- coherent discrepancy signals.

When both are satisfied, the regime becomes accessible.

What Emerges

High-intensity positive states. Joy becomes accessible as a property of the regime.

Reactivation of past states. Previously encoded experiences may return with high fidelity. These effects are not separate mechanisms, but consequences of the configuration itself.

Key Idea

The regime is not defined by specific content, but by reduced evaluative coupling.

Variables

Let:

- Z denote overall evaluative load,
- g denote the local coupling between discrepancy and correction.

Z reflects the global level of evaluative pressure, while g determines how strongly discrepancies trigger corrective processes.

Summary

Ease is a configuration, not a feeling. Joy is not produced directly. It becomes possible when this configuration is active.

7 Three Levels

The model distinguishes three layers that shape how the system operates:

Monitoring. A continuous background process that tracks differences between what is expected and what actually happens.

Evaluation / optimization. Over time, these differences are interpreted and turned into corrections, creating goal-directed adjustments and a constant pressure to improve or fix.

Evaluative load (Z). A global index of how much evaluation is active. It reflects how “loaded” the system is with ongoing pressure to correct and optimize.

Local mechanism (g). A parameter that determines how discrepancies are handled in the moment. When g is high, discrepancies trigger immediate correction. When g is low, discrepancies remain as signals instead of being fixed.

Relationship. Monitoring increases evaluative load (Z). Z sets how strongly discrepancies trigger correction (g). g determines whether discrepancies are corrected or simply experienced.

Summary. Monitoring generates pressure, Z accumulates it, and g applies it locally. The final effect is how strongly the system tries to fix what it detects.

8 Relation to Existing Frameworks

The proposed regime may resemble known states such as meditation or flow. However, this similarity is mainly phenomenological, it concerns how the experience feels, not how it operates or how it is accessed. All differences can be traced to a single mechanism: monitoring increases evaluative load (Z), Z sets coupling strength (g), and g determines whether discrepancies are corrected or simply experienced.

Meditative Absorption

Meditative states are typically trained, gradual, and based on sustained attention. They rely on active stabilization and continuous control of focus. By contrast, the present regime requires no training, appears abruptly, and cannot be maintained through effort. Attempts to stabilize it tend to disrupt it.

Flow

Flow is usually defined by goal-directed activity, a match between skill and challenge, and high engagement in a task. It involves efficient performance and tight perception–action coupling. The present regime does not depend on goals, does not require task optimization, and can occur without structured activity. Explicit goals tend to interfere with access. The contrast is straightforward. Flow reflects optimized control within a task, whereas this regime reflects a suspension of optimization pressure.

Summary

The present regime is non-instrumental and independent of performance. Even when both occur during activity, their underlying logic is different.

9 Prediction Error and Positive Affect

Most models link positive affect to reward prediction error, reinforcement signals, and dopaminergic valuation. In this view, affect depends on outcomes and expectations, and discrepancies are rapidly processed and used for learning. In the ease framework, prediction error is not removed or immediately corrected. It persists and contributes directly to the experience. The difference is not whether prediction error exists, but how it is used. It is necessary but not sufficient. Its impact depends on evaluative load (Z) and coupling strength (g). When g is high, prediction error leads to correction. When g is low, prediction error contributes to experienced intensity. High-intensity positive states cannot be explained by prediction error alone. They require a specific control configuration in which prediction error is allowed to persist and becomes part of the experience.

10 Not Nostalgia

The regime does not originate from memory. Instead, it can enable memory reactivation. Under this configuration, past experiential states can reappear, especially those associated with early-life positive experiences. This is not standard recall. It is a reactivation of the original experience, including perception, affect, and bodily sensation, rather than abstract memory or narrative reconstruction. For example, a familiar object may trigger a rapid return of its associated feeling. The experience is not simply remembered, it is re-experienced. This process is not voluntary and cannot be reliably induced. It may occur automatically and can resist suppression.

Mechanism (Interpretation)

One possible interpretation is that this process resembles pattern completion. A partial cue can trigger the reactivation of a full experiential configuration. Under standard conditions, reactivation tends to be fragmented and quickly categorized or suppressed. When evaluative coupling is reduced, reactivation becomes more coherent, allowing the full state to emerge. The regime does not create new content. It restores access to previously encoded configurations. Reactivation depends on evaluative load (Z) and coupling strength (g), and follows the same constraints as other effects within the regime. The regime comes first, reactivation follows. Memory does not generate the state. The state enables memory to return.

11 Entry Dynamics

Access to the regime is not gradual. Two aspects must be distinguished: access is probabilistic, while entry is all-or-none.

Access

The probability of entry depends on proximity to a threshold and fluctuations in evaluative load (Z). The closer the system is to the threshold, the higher the chance that the regime becomes accessible.

Entry

Once the threshold is crossed, the transition is abrupt. There are no intermediate states. The onset is clear and immediately recognizable.

Threshold

Formally, entry occurs when evaluative load drops below a critical level and coupling weakens ($g < g^*$). At this point, discrepancies are no longer rapidly corrected.

Important Distinction

The all-or-none property applies to entering the regime, not to intensity within it. Once inside, intensity can vary continuously.

Phenomenological Constraint

Empirically, the transition appears as a sudden shift rather than a gradual buildup. This constrains possible explanations.

Regime Shift

The transition reflects a structural change, not an accumulation. Its effect is a sudden increase in experiential intensity, sometimes reaching very high levels.

Global Effect

This is not a single sensation, but a global increase in experiential intensity. It often includes chest-centered pleasure and is not tied to goals or outcomes.

Recognition

The state is instantly identifiable, although the initial phase may sometimes feel unusual due to the rapid reconfiguration of control dynamics.

Summary

Access is gradual, entry is binary, and the resulting experience is global and intense, see Appendix B.

12 Joy as a Regime Property

Joy is not produced directly by inputs, nor is it the result of actions or optimization. It depends on the state of the system.

Control Variable (Z)

Z represents evaluative load, the ongoing process of comparison and correction. When Z is high, evaluation is strong and discrepancies are tightly coupled to correction. When Z is low, this coupling weakens.

Threshold

There is a critical level, $Z_{\text{threshold}}$, that separates two regimes:

- $Z > Z_{\text{threshold}}$: evaluation-dominated regime,
- $Z < Z_{\text{threshold}}$: permissive regime.

The threshold determines access to the state, not its intensity.

Crossing the threshold produces a discontinuous shift rather than a gradual change.

Evaluation-Dominated Regime (High Z)

This regime is characterized by continuous monitoring, goal-directed behavior, performance tracking, and rapid error correction. Experience is structured by goals and outcomes. Positive affect is limited, unstable, and depends on external results.

Permissive Regime (Low Z)

In this regime, discrepancies are not immediately stabilized, optimization pressure is reduced, and the link between action and outcomes is weaker. Sensitivity to input increases. Joy is not something that can be progressively built. It appears when the system crosses a control threshold.

13 Screens and High-Intensity Experience in Children

Children show a strong attraction to screens.

External vs Internal View

From an external perspective, little appears to be happening. Activity may seem minimal or repetitive. From an internal perspective, the experience can be highly intense. Screens typically provide:

- frequent prediction errors,
- highly salient visual events,
- rapid perceptual change.

Result

These properties sustain discrepancies and amplify experiential intensity. At peak, intensity can become extremely high, sometimes approaching overwhelming levels.

14 Evaluative Reinforcement and Developmental Reframing

Evaluative load (Z) is not only maintained by external demands. It is also reinforced internally through a self-stabilizing process.

Internal Reinforcement

Monitoring does not operate neutrally. It produces evaluations that can function as implicit rewards. When the system engages in optimization, evaluation can generate signals such as:

- “this is correct,”
- “this is better,”
- “this makes sense.”

These signals reinforce the current mode of operation. As a result, the system is encouraged to maintain monitoring and continue optimizing.

Functional Effect

This creates a self-reinforcing loop:

- monitoring produces evaluation,
- evaluation reinforces optimization,
- optimization sustains monitoring.

Over time, this stabilizes a high- Z regime.

Developmental Reframing

A related process may occur during development. As access to high-intensity states decreases, this change is not necessarily experienced as a loss.

Instead, it is often reinterpreted as progress, for example:

- increased maturity,
- improved realism,
- better control.

Key Consequence

This reframing has a stabilizing effect. It aligns the system with evaluation-dominated functioning and reduces the likelihood of questioning the shift.

Interpretation

The loss of access is not only a change in experience. It is accompanied by a change in how the change itself is evaluated. This makes the transition self-consistent: reduced intensity is interpreted as improvement.

Summary

Monitoring reinforces itself by generating positive evaluations of optimization. Developmental reframing further stabilizes this regime by interpreting reduced access to high-intensity states as a gain in maturity.

15 Anti-Instrumental Access

Attempts to use, optimize, or reproduce the state tend to have the opposite effect. Evaluation increases evaluative load (Z), which strengthens coupling ($g \geq g^*$). As a result, discrepancies are rapidly corrected again, and access to the regime is blocked or terminated.

Result

Goal-directed processes push the system above the threshold and prevent entry into the regime.

Key Difference

In contrast to standard models, increased control does not lead to increased positive affect. Here, more control reduces access. The state should not be targeted directly. What matters is the structure of control. Examples include reducing monitoring, limiting narrative capture, and avoiding constant evaluation. The main difficulty is not identifying the right activity, but preventing it from becoming a goal. The regime is difficult to access not because suitable inputs are rare, but because optimization tends to eliminate the conditions required for access.

16 Cultural Sources of Evaluative Load

Evaluative load (Z) is not only generated internally. It is reinforced by cultural models, scientific frameworks, and everyday beliefs.

Key Idea

These frameworks do not simply describe experience. They shape how it is approached, introduce conditions, and trigger monitoring.

Common Pattern

Across domains, experience is often treated as conditional, optimizable, and comparable.

Effect

The result is persistent monitoring (see Appendix A).

17 Regime Collapse

The regime ends when evaluative control returns. Coupling is restored ($g \geq g^*$), discrepancies are corrected again, and the state disappears.

Trigger

Collapse is often caused by:

- checking the state,
- evaluating its quality or duration,
- asking what it means.

Asymmetry

The system is not symmetric. Entry is fragile and requires low evaluative load (Z), whereas persistence can tolerate some degree of monitoring. There is a memory effect: entry requires a strong reduction of Z , while persistence tolerates partial increases. However, once collapse occurs, full evaluative control is restored and re-entry becomes more difficult.

Zshift Mechanism

A self-reinforcing loop maintains high Z :

- intention to access the state,
- checking and monitoring,
- increase in evaluative load (Z),
- restored coupling,
- blocked entry or collapse.

Core Loop

Attempts to access the state trigger monitoring. Monitoring increases Z , and elevated Z prevents access.

Developmental Shift

Over time, monitoring becomes anticipatory. The system not only reacts to current discrepancies but also predicts and evaluates future states. Monitoring shifts from an occasional process to a constant background activity.

After Collapse

Following collapse, the system remains biased toward high Z , making rapid re-entry unlikely. Together, these processes stabilize the evaluation-dominated regime and block access to the permissive regime. Trying to recover the state maintains the conditions that prevent it.

18 Control Reduction Is Not Enough

Reducing control alone does not reliably produce the regime. It may reduce negative affect or increase flexibility, but often fails to generate a coherent, high-intensity state. Some interventions can produce dissociation, perceptual instability, or diffuse affect, without leading to stable or structured positive intensity.

Key Distinction

Lowering evaluative load (Z) is necessary but not sufficient. An additional condition is required: signal coherence.

- **Reduced coupling (g):** discrepancies are less frequently converted into correction.
- **Coherent signals:** discrepancies persist and propagate in a structured way.

Failure Mode

If control reduction is too broad, signals degrade and structure is lost. The result is low Z and weak coupling, but no organized intensity. The regime requires a selective reduction of micro-optimization, not a global disruption of processing. Effective interventions should reduce evaluative load (Z), weaken coupling (g), and preserve perceptual and salience structure.

Tolerance (Reframed)

Tolerance is not only reduced sensitivity. It may also involve anticipatory monitoring. Repeated exposure leads to expectation and checking, which increase Z , restore coupling (g), and reduce access.

Summary

Control reduction is required, but coherence is critical. Without structure, the regime does not emerge. When both are present, transition becomes possible.

19 M-ZRT: Purpose

The Morin Z-Reduction Task (M-ZRT) is not an induction technique. It is a discriminative protocol designed to distinguish between two models: learning-based model: gradual improvement, increased reproducibility, and performance-dependent outcomes, and threshold-based model: repeated failures, sudden onset, qualitative shift, and persistence beyond the immediate context. The expected pattern is many failures followed by an abrupt transition. This is not noise, but a defining feature. The M-ZRT is brief, non-instrumental, and minimally structured. Its purpose is to perturb ongoing activity without forming a routine.

20 Perturbation Classes (M-ZRT)

The task relies on three types of minimal perturbations. They are defined by their function, not by specific content. The goal is to disrupt evaluative control while preserving salience.

Openness

Function. Weaken goal closure and interrupt deliberate control. **Properties.** No objective, no continuation, no evaluation. **Examples.** A brief mental image that is not maintained, or an incomplete thought (e.g., “what if...”) left unresolved.

Salience

Function. Amplify one element without turning it into a goal. **Properties.** Temporary, with no action attached. **Examples.** Noticing an object as dominant, or a brief internal change such as a fading image.

Suspension

Function. Interrupt ongoing optimization and break continuity. **Properties.** No correction, no justification. **Examples.** A brief stop in movement, or a change of direction without fixing it.

Combination

These perturbations can be combined, for example: openness \rightarrow salience \rightarrow suspension. This disrupts monitoring from multiple angles while avoiding the formation of a routine. The central principle is to decouple salience from optimization. Openness breaks closure, salience amplifies signals, and suspension breaks continuity. Together, they reduce evaluative coupling while preserving the potential for high-intensity experience. The main constraint is to avoid turning the task into a method.

Limitations

Effectiveness depends on how the task is interpreted. If it is treated as something to perform correctly or to evaluate, evaluative load (Z) increases and access is reduced. Even without explicit instructions, participants may optimize implicitly due to prior beliefs about control and measurement.

21 Civilizational Fragility of the Regime

The permissive regime appears fragile at the civilizational level. Children rarely report these high-intensity states, not because they are absent, but because they function as a baseline. The experience does not stand out as something to be identified or described. At the same time, the evaluative layers required for categorization, comparison, and reporting are not yet fully developed. In adulthood, access to the regime becomes constrained. High evaluative load stabilizes the optimization-dominated mode. Past experiences of high intensity are often reinterpreted through alternative explanations, such as:

- “it was a different time,”
- “things felt stronger because I was younger,”
- “it was due to context or circumstances.”

Ease is also difficult to measure and test. The very processes required for observation, such as monitoring, reporting, and interpretation, tend to disrupt access. As a result, the regime remains both common in early life and largely invisible in formal accounts. Joy, in the ease sense, is rarely reported by children, reinterpreted by adults, and disrupted by measurement. Together, these factors contribute to its apparent absence, despite its potential accessibility under specific conditions.

22 Conclusion

Joy is best understood as a regime shift, not a gradual increase in positive affect. It emerges when evaluative load drops below a threshold, allowing discrepancies to persist and directly shape experience. Because monitoring and control disrupt these conditions, standard methods tend to block access, creating the illusion that such states are rare. In reality, they may remain accessible but hidden, stabilized in childhood, suppressed in adulthood, and difficult to observe without altering them.

23 Appendix A

Framework	Core assumption	Implicit effect on Z	Induced monitoring type
Hedonic adaptation / habituation	Affective responses decrease with repetition	Installs expectation of decline, leading to anticipatory checking	Temporal monitoring: <i>is it fading?</i>
Emotion regulation models	Emotions should be managed and optimized	Introduces continuous top-down control over experience	Normative monitoring: <i>am I regulating correctly?</i>
Reward-based accounts	Positive affect depends on outcomes and prediction errors	Encourages outcome-seeking and comparison between expectation and result	Outcome monitoring: <i>did I get the reward?</i>
Flow (general model)	Optimal experience arises from a balance between skill and challenge	Requires ongoing alignment between internal capacity and task demands	State monitoring: <i>am I in flow?</i>
Flow (difficulty optimization variant)	Enjoyment depends on maintaining optimal challenge	Transforms experience into a calibration task requiring continuous adjustment	Calibration monitoring: <i>is this difficulty optimal?</i>
Quality ranking / tier-list culture	Experiences can be ranked and optimized to identify the best option	Converts experience into a comparative selection problem with constant alternatives	Comparative monitoring: <i>is this the best option?</i>
Complexity-based happiness models	Well-being depends on optimizing multiple factors simultaneously	Turns experience into a high-dimensional constraint problem	Constraint monitoring: <i>are all conditions satisfied?</i>
Serotonin / lifestyle guarantee models	Positive mood is reliably produced by specific conditions such as sunlight or exercise	Creates expectation of predictable outcomes and mismatch detection	Causal monitoring: <i>is this working as expected?</i>
Memory-centered value theory	The value of an experience lies in the memory it will produce	Shifts focus toward future recall and narrative construction	Prospective monitoring: <i>will this be a good memory?</i>
Nostalgic idealization (<i>it was better before</i>)	Past periods were inherently richer or more authentic than the present	Devalues current experience by comparison with an idealized past, sustaining dissatisfaction and disengagement	Temporal-comparative monitoring: <i>was it better before?</i>
Measurable well-being frameworks	Well-being is stable and quantifiable	Promotes self-evaluation and conversion into metrics	Reflective monitoring: <i>how do I rate this?</i>
Meditation (instrumentalized form)	Desired states must be actively induced through technique	Reframes experience as something to produce and track	Induction monitoring: <i>am I entering the state?</i>
Meditation (long-term mastery model)	Access requires years of training and exceptional motivation	Defers access and ties it to progress and qualification	Progress monitoring: <i>am I advanced enough yet?</i>
Pharmacological exclusivity belief	Intense positive states require external substances	Externalizes access and creates dependency on triggers	Access monitoring: <i>do I have the required trigger?</i>
Elsewhere bias / context-switching belief	A better experience is always available in another context	Prevents settling by maintaining counterfactual alternatives	Counterfactual monitoring: <i>would it be better elsewhere?</i>

Table 1: Examples of cognitive and cultural frameworks that may increase evaluative load (Z) by introducing persistent forms of monitoring contexts, or interpretations.

These frameworks converge on a common structural property: they treat affective experience as conditional, whether on outcomes, optimization, correct parameters, future value, or external triggers. This conditionalization introduces persistent forms of monitoring, including anticipatory, comparative, reflective, and counterfactual processes. Within the present framework, these processes correspond to increases in evaluative load (Z), which strengthen the coupling between discrepancy and correction (g), thereby reducing the probability of access to the permissive regime. Here, the concern is not the frameworks themselves, but their simplified uptake, which often converts them into monitoring and optimization heuristics.

24 Appendix B

Dimension	Happiness	Joy
Developmental trajectory	Tends to increase across the lifespan	Often becomes less accessible after adolescence
Compatibility with optimization	Compatible with goal-directed behavior and optimization	Destabilized by goal-directed optimization
Cognitive coupling	Associated with meaning and narrative structure	Destabilized by meaning-making and narrative capture
Measurement compatibility	Measurable under standard conditions	Degraded under standard measurement conditions
Temporal dynamics	Gradual and stable	Abrupt, event-like, and prone to lock-in
Entry conditions	Predictable and broadly stable	Stochastic and metastable
Affective intensity	Moderate, bounded	High to extreme
Structural dependence	Broadly accessible	Access-dependent and regime-gated
Sensitivity to evaluation	Sustained under evaluation	Highly vulnerable to evaluation during entry
Sensitivity to prediction error	Peripheral, with weak influence on intensity	Central, with strong influence on intensity

Table 2: Happiness and joy as distinct regimes with different structural properties. The contrast extends beyond intensity differences to include entry conditions, stability, and sensitivity to evaluation and prediction error.

As shown in Table 2, these two regimes differ not only in intensity, but in their underlying structural constraints. Happiness appears to operate as a broadly accessible, optimization-compatible regime, characterized by gradual dynamics, narrative integration, and robustness to evaluation. By contrast, joy exhibits the signature of a threshold-dependent regime: abrupt onset, high intensity, and strong sensitivity to evaluative interference, particularly during entry. This dissociation suggests that the apparent decline of high-intensity positive experience across development may not reflect a uniform reduction in affective capacity, but a shift toward regimes that remain compatible with continuous evaluation and control.