Evaluation Kills Entry: A Threshold Model of Joy and the Ease Regime

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What is joy?

The core feature is a thoracic pleasure, triggered and modulated by simple stimuli.

It responds strongly to prediction errors: abrupt video cuts, absurd cartoons, music, music videos, and light video games, provided they are not approached competitively. The experience carries a distinct sense of receiving something unearned, like a gift, along with a heightened sense of aliveness. High-salience type visuals like bright or “precious-like” also influence the intensity of the state.

A second mode can coexist: the state of being moved. This one is typically elicited by slow-tempo, low-frequency music, including religious or very simple, almost childish melodies. It is often accompanied by a diffuse, brownish, grain-like visual texture.

Joy is treated as the main subjective expression of the Ease regime, and is defined by the conditions under which these states become accessible.

Is there another subjective expression of the Ease regime?

Yes. The Ease regime may reactivate intensely positive early-life experiential configurations, not as ordinary memory, but as a temporary reopening of a previously inaccessible state.

Highly positive moments in early life are often stored together with rich contextual features such as odors, sounds, and visual atmosphere. Under the Ease regime, these configurations may be reactivated as a coherent whole, in a process resembling **hippocampal pattern** completion.

In this sense, the Ease regime may temporarily restore access to experiential states many people assume are permanently lost.

What is the Ease regime ?

The Ease regime is a permissive, low-evaluation cognitive regime in which the brain temporarily stops judging, optimizing, and trying to improve the moment.

In this condition, joy is not produced by effort or achievement, it simply becomes **possible.**

The Ease framework therefore does not attempt to "create" an automatic mode of cognition (Rebar et al, 2025). Instead, it proposes that evaluative monitoring can accumulate and overlap this default regime.

What is the Monitor?

The monitoring process is the brain's system that continuously checks what is happening against expectations, goals, and standards. It evaluates whether actions are correct, useful, or successful, and whether something should be adjusted.

In practice, it produces thoughts like: "Am I doing this right?", "Is this good?", "Should I change something?", or "What does this mean?". The process constantly compares the current situation with predicted or desired outcomes.

A simple exercise would consist of performing a random movement, like moving shoulders for a few seconds, and notice how fast **evaluation and optimization** catch it up. Noticing is itself a form of optimization, so it will not bypass the monitor. But it makes visible what you are up against.

What is the Optimization Regime?

The optimization regime is a cognitive mode in which the brain continuously tries to improve what is happening. The optimization regime is the broader behavioral mode that emerges when the monitor is active. Therefore, suspension of optimization is a temporary state in which the brain stops trying to improve, correct, or maximize what is happening.

Suspension of optimization is the core condition that allows the Ease regime to appear.

Is joy always fragile ?

Joy may require a transient reduction in evaluative monitoring, which otherwise functions as a barrier to entry. Once a tipping point is crossed, the state becomes more stable, though not invulnerable. However, once the Ease regime has opened, it can return more easily, sometimes even without any deliberate Z-reducing task.

A music video may be especially effective to sustain high joy because it generates dense local prediction errors, facial, temporal, spatial, and expressive, without requiring stable causal reconstruction.

The difficulty is not in finding the activities, they are trivial. The difficulty is preventing them from becoming instrumental.

Does it mean we can't measure joy, ease, or reactivated configurations ?

High-intensity positive affect states may require near-complete suspension of social evaluative monitoring. The mere presence of a **potential** observer, even without interaction, may be sufficient to prevent entry or destabilize the state.

Standard experimental conditions sustain evaluative monitoring through observation, instructions, reporting, and repetition, thereby potentially preventing the positive states they aim to measure.

Does it mean every-day social setting collapses joy ?

Everyday adult social settings tend to block joy. They sustain micro-evaluation and self-monitoring, keeping the threshold high. Joy seems to depend on a state where the experience is not used, not even slightly. Childhood interactions do the opposite: disorganization signals that evaluation is off, lowering the barrier to entry.

How does the Ease regime relate to drug-induced joy ?

Ketamine, opioids, and alcohol can increase positive affect without reliably inducing a stable joy regime. This suggests that simple pharmacological suppression of neural activity is insufficient for threshold entry. These substances produce widespread network perturbations, often accompanied by dissociation, sedation, or noisy predictive dynamics.

The resulting state may transiently approach the regime but remains unstable and subject to tolerance, rather than forming the coherent, self-sustaining shift proposed in the Ease framework.

What are fragments ?

Ease exists as a baseline in children and only as fragments in adults. In adults, music produces a rise, a brief peak, then a collapse misread as boredom. That “boredom” coincides with the return of evaluation. Attempting to switch stimuli to find a better one is itself a form of optimization, and often signals that collapse is approaching. Under Ease, the same stimulus sustains peak intensity without decay. The state is boredom-resistant.

Why do children not report Ease, whereas adults immediately do?

In childhood, because it is frequently present, it is experienced as normal rather than exceptional. Articulating ‘I am happy’ may already signal a shift. The child’s relative immunity to such self-questioning is therefore a structural condition that allows Ease to persist as a background regime.

Even if a child briefly notices it, they are unlikely to report it. First, they assume that everyone, children and adults alike, experiences the same thing. Second, adults are often seen as belonging to a different world, so there is no reason to describe the experience to them.

Thus, the disappearance of Ease is masked twice: first by its cultural reframing as “maturity,” and second by its unremarkable nature in childhood.

In contrast, when an adult accesses Ease, the reaction is typically immediate communication. The surprise comes from a stabilized internal model that assumes intense positive states are no longer accessible, so when they occur, they register as anomalies. As it triggers spontaneous reporting, this provides a direct behavioral marker, avoiding the need for retrospective surveys.

Development is thus best understood as a gradual regime shift, from permissive to evaluative.

In that sense, many idealized memories are not special because of their external composition. They are moments during which a specific regime was active. Once that regime is gone, we reconstruct the explanation using biographical elements, even though those elements were likely secondary.

What makes Ease a metastable regime?

Some positive states can be understood as metastable regimes, temporary and somewhat fragile patterns of brain activity in which monitoring and optimization are reduced, but not completely absent.

These states are stable enough to support a clear and coherent experience, yet they remain delicate. In the case of Ease, the regime persists because control mechanisms are not actively engaged. However, control can re-enter at any moment. This constant possibility of re-engagement is what makes the state metastable rather than fully stable.

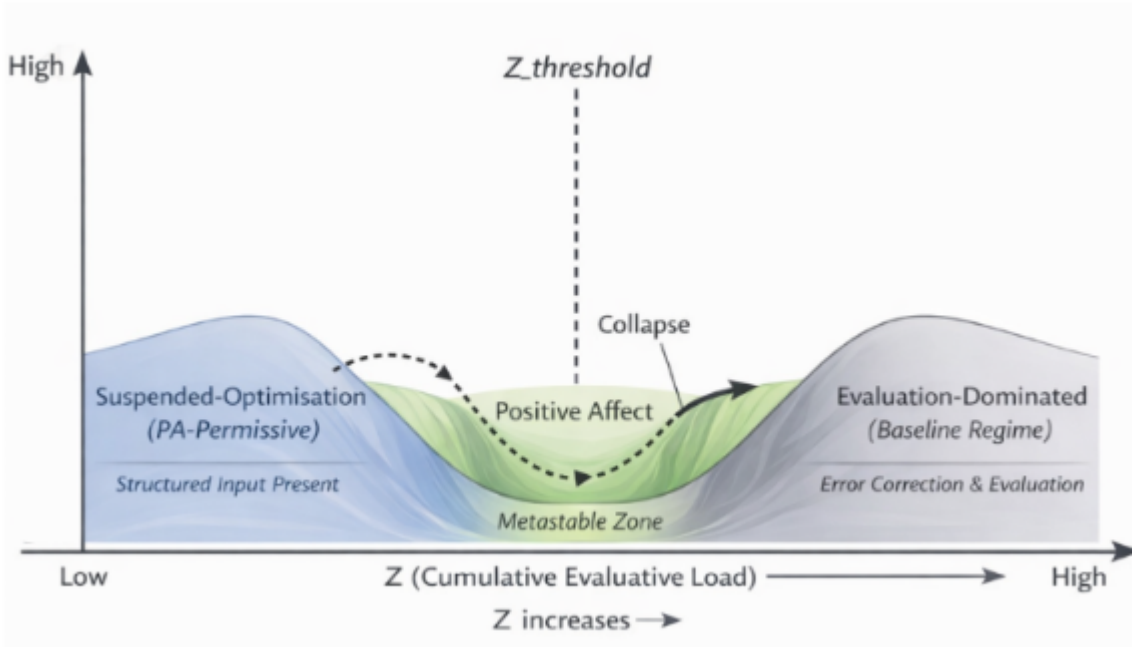

Figure 1. Threshold model of Ease. The horizontal axis represents cumulative evaluative load, Z, increasing from left to right. At low Z, a suspended-optimization regime dominates, permissive to positive affect under structured input. As Z rises toward a critical threshold, the system enters a metastable zone where high-intensity positive affect can transiently emerge. Beyond the Z threshold, evaluative monitoring reasserts control, producing collapse into an evaluation-dominated baseline regime characterized by error correction and performance tracking.

How do Z_acc, Z_shift, and Z_ctx jointly block access to joy?

In this framework, a child is typically Z-low, meaning the system carries fewer accumulated constraints.

In the Z model, Z is not just one single factor. It is made up of three different parts, and each of them can block the permissive state that allows joy.

The first part is Z_acc, the accumulated evaluative load. This is the slow, long-term component. It builds up over time through repeated exposure to monitoring, comparison, performance pressure, and optimization. For example, growing up in highly supervised environments, having little unstructured free time, or learning to define yourself through achievement can all increase Z_acc.

The second part is Z_shift, a discrete structural change. Instead of letting experience unfold, the person begins checking whether a desired state is happening. For example, you remember joy, you want it back, you start looking for it, and that checking becomes constant. The brain encodes *actions* or *contexts* as causes, even when they were coincidental. Partial satisfaction is enough to keep the loop alive.

The third part is Z_ctx, contextual evaluative load. This is the immediate, situational component. It comes from the environment. Things like ratings, questionnaires, performance instructions, time pressure, comparison, or being observed can raise Z_ctx.

The probability of regime collapse depends on the combined effect of Z_acc, Z_shift, and Z_ctx.

Within this framework, cumulative evaluative load (Z) is proposed as a unifying variable that modulates the experiential properties of these regimes. When evaluative monitoring becomes dense, entry into the Ease regime becomes unlikely even if behavior remains automatic.

Why does higher Z feel like maturity ?

Within this framework, the monitor can be described as a self-reinforcing evaluative system that defends its own presence indirectly. It reshapes what feels valuable.

When optimization increases, when the one refines or anticipates outcomes, subtle positive signals like feelings of competence, seriousness, or coherence surge. These function as micro-rewards. When evaluation relaxes, the system can generate mild destabilizers such as slight embarrassment, ironic self-commentary, or a sense that the activity is “not serious.”

The asymmetry is central: higher Z feels valuable, lower Z risks feeling illegitimate. The monitor therefore protects the optimization regime not by prohibition, but by making evaluation intrinsically rewarding, and relaxation subtly discrediting.

What is the aim of the Morin Z-reduction task ?

The aim of the Morin Z reduction-task is to **temporarily disrupt the processes that maintain high Z**.

More precisely, it tries to:

- **Interrupt evaluative monitoring** (the automatic "am I doing this right, what's the point" loop)
- **Break optimization dynamics** (goal-seeking, improvement, repetition)
- **Prevent narrative capture** (turning the moment into meaning, memory, or progress)

Many Z-reduction exercises reproduce structural features of spontaneous childhood play: widened exploration, interruption of action closure, fluid salience assignment, and decoupling between action and instrumental outcomes. Once Z is low enough, a shift can happen, an entry into the ease regime as described in question 1.

Classical psychology tries to reduce suffering, while this model targets Z, making suffering unlikely and reopening access to ease. Z is the underlying load on the system, and what we call suffering is simply how that load becomes consciously felt.

Why does joy cease to be a sufficient reason to act?

During maturation, cognitive architecture shifts toward narrative continuity, goal maintenance, and temporal projection. Joy ceases to function as a sufficient reason to act because actions are now justified through goals, meaning, and coherence with an ongoing personal storyline. However, joy is not compatible with instrumentality and simply fades away. This is **Z_shift, Z_acc** contributes by stabilizing and reinforcing this shift over time.

Nostalgia

Z helps explain why nostalgia fails to recreate the original feeling. Nostalgia works through comparison and recognition. It points back to a past state and measures the present against it.

By doing that, it brings back monitoring and narrative framing. The mind is no longer simply experiencing. It is evaluating, remembering, and comparing. Those are the same processes that tend to block the formation of the original regime.

In the framework, nostalgia is not a biased reconstruction of the past, but a low-intensity reactivation of states that were originally far more intense and largely unremarked at the time.

Has civilization accidentally suppressed what matters most?

Civilization has been extraordinarily effective at expanding predictability, safety, lifespan, and control over the external world. What it has never truly learned to do is raise the upper bound of lived subjective quality. Adult civilization systematically converts everything into a trajectory. Playing becomes getting good. Reading becomes self improvement. Travel becomes doing something meaningful. Even rest becomes a task to execute correctly.

It means it was never designed for that axis.

What can science do to re-open access to joy?

The limitation is architectural rather than quantitative: joy cannot be linearly scaled if its emergence requires a reduction in monitoring load. It cannot be made compatible with instrumentality. Nevertheless, science can help re-open the regime.

But this logic is neither about amplification nor simple inhibition. It depends on a reduction of monitoring load (Z), while preserving a structure capable of marking certain inputs as important, that is, generating salience.

DBS and other interventions may reduce negative mood, but intense positive affect appear to remain vulnerable to tolerance (Yuan et al., 2025). Therefore, the only apparent path is to properly open the Ease regime.

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