

A Regime Theory of Joy

Ease Is Not Lost, it Is Blocked by Optimization

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A Short Note

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. Instead of action unfolding on its own, 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, comparison, and pressure to take the next action are temporarily suspended. This permissive configuration allows joy, emotion, and imagery to emerge spontaneously, without any effort to produce them. Entry is fragile under evaluative monitoring, but the state becomes more stable once established.

Ease does not disappear because children are taught manners. Rather, repeated recruitment of monitoring may make it increasingly difficult for perception to remain temporarily free of evaluation. As monitoring becomes the default mode, access to the ease regime becomes less frequent, until moments of intensive joy become exceptional rather than ordinary.

Differences Between Monitoring and the Optimization Regime

Dimension	Monitoring	Optimization regime
Scale	A specific operation	A global configuration
Duration	Brief and intermittent	Persistent
Function	Detect or verify	Maximize, improve, or control
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
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Monitoring + performance criterion + repetition + continuous correction = optimization regime.

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 the result.

Z is the global state variable produced and maintained by the optimization loop. Local monitoring raises **Z** only slightly, whereas repeated comparison, correction, 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 and ensure that nothing disrupts my walk” establishes an optimization regime.

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, compare the current team with previous teams, anticipate tactical decisions, judge whether the match is sufficiently entertaining, and notice whether they themselves feel excited. Monitoring occurs within this additional evaluative layer: attention no longer remains entirely 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.

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 currently 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. 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.



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 temporarily giving everything a different atmosphere. This produced an unusually 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 backgrounds, colors, music, clothing, decorations, weather, and small illustrations, creating many perceptual details that could be enjoyed without requiring any particular action.

Unlike contemporary systems built around progress, rewards, rankings, and continuous choice, the special often asked for almost nothing beyond entering its atmosphere. It was temporary, slightly surprising, visually rich, and largely non-instrumental. In that sense, themed specials may have been unusually effective childhood joy environments: the familiar world remained safe and effortless, while briefly becoming strange, richer, and more significant than usual.

A Marble Problem

Most adults assume that children enjoy marbles because they like collecting them. Yet what is remarkable about a marble is how difficult it is to optimize: there is almost nothing to improve, achieve, or accomplish with it. The main way to make marbles optimizable is to turn them into a collection, suggesting that even when confronted with such simple objects, adults find a way to organize them around accumulation. In the regime theory of joy, however, marbles are pleasant to children for more immediate reasons: they are colorful and shiny, and their small, rounded shape fits neatly in the palm of the hand. These qualities generate salience while leaving optimization suspended.

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 or self-presentation is expected from the viewer, monitoring can briefly recede, allowing the affective signal to develop before it is intercepted and evaluated.

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

Why might youthful bodies be especially effective in music videos? Within the present framework, the effect may not depend entirely on age preference or conventional beauty, but partly on perceived status. Youth can signal fewer expectations of expertise. The monitor may therefore relax slightly because the image does not indicate a situation requiring evaluation, deference, competition, or strategic adjustment.

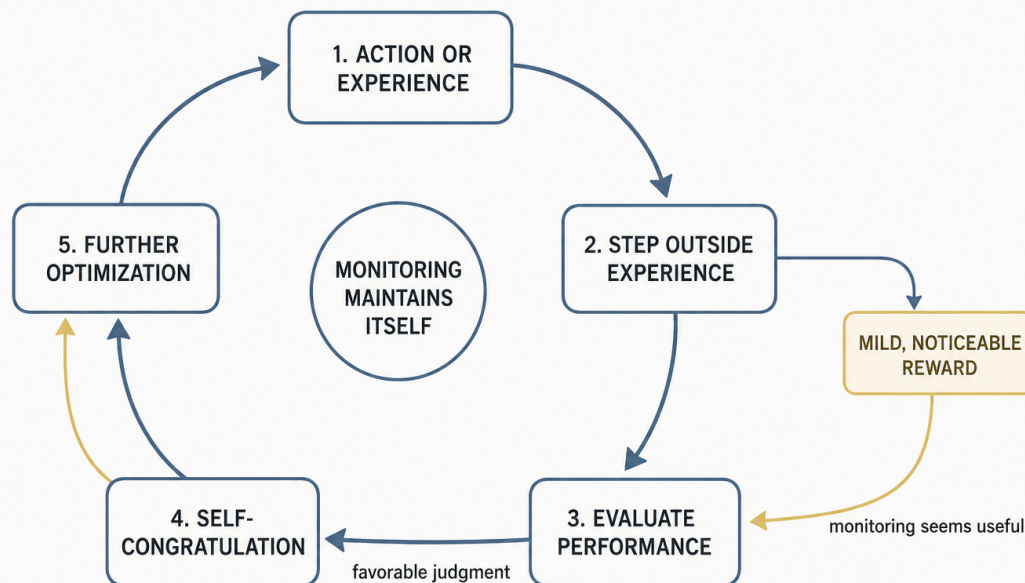
Costumes, playful movements, and deliberately unserious settings may strengthen this signal by marking the scene as socially non-demanding. On this hypothesis, youthful bodies facilitate affective engagement not simply because they are judged more attractive, but because they are more readily presented as belonging to a low-pressure context in which optimization can temporarily recede.

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 and controlled, 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.

THE SELF-CONGRATULATION LOOP

Small rewards justify continued monitoring



People often laugh when imagining someone doing nothing or becoming absorbed in something completely trivial. This laughter 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.

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, qualify the claim, 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 does more than regulate outward behaviour: it 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 personal and social failure.

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 even 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.

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

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