

“The Inevitable
Dilution of the
Wandering Being”

Eutopia — Certificate of Internationalisation

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VOL.I . . . No.1

JUNE 18, 2025

A JOURNEY OF A JOINT PHD STUDENT

AT THE START OF A PHD

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LISBON, PT

I have been thinking about Luís for many years. But only in the light of these reflections did I see him clearly. I saw him sitting at the desk working on an AI model for Imprensa Nacional - Casa da Moeda (INCM), some years ago, before he started his PhD, in Portugal, wishing to experience both the world outside Portugal and the beautiful, perfect theoretical world of maths. His prior time in Geneva had incited him to see the world, discover and live new lives. After Geneva, returning to Lisbon made him feel small and limited, resulting in all kinds of complaints about Lisbon: “too hot”, “too difficult to travel around”, “too crowded”, “too gentrified”... He wanted (or he needed) to see the world. The joint PhD was an opportunity he found to keep discovering, even if that meant temporarily leaving the comfortable nest he had built for more than 10 years with his girlfriend and his dog. He had his life concentrated... and it felt tiny.

“I will start a joint PhD in Pure Maths!” - Luis said enthusiastically to her. His girlfriend had always stood by him, and this time was no different. She smiled with the kind of fake courage people wear when they sense something life-changing is coming. After all, she was partially responsible for his excitement for the PhD - she planted the seed of a doctoral journey in his mind. She knew this decision would eventually drive him physically away from her, and she also needed support at that time, yet, Luis could almost hear her silently saying it: “You need this. And (deep down) I also need to grow. Everything will be fine.” :’)

It was in Coimbra that he met two

people who would end up supporting him throughout his entire doctoral adventure: another Portuguese student, eerily similar to Luís — same-ish Master’s topic, same supervisor, same region, same PhD advisor, same knee problems...; and a Brazilian student who shared Luís’ taste for weird niche underground knowledge. Despite sharing the Portuguese language, the hours these people spent exchanging knowledge on the differences between Brazilian and Portuguese culture could fill several episodes of a podcast named “Isto sempre é em Português?” — a phrase that, in Portugal, would mean “Is this going to be in Portuguese after all?”, while in Brazil it would be interpreted as “Is this always in Portuguese?” — a subtle difference. Through the eyes of his Brazilian friend, Luís understood that even in a country that speaks the same language as you do, one can feel like a foreigner. Helping his friend feel integrated was a priority, and acknowledging the differences was just part of this heartwarming game of discovering what we shared — despite an ocean of distance and the massive weight of history — but perhaps that is a reflection for another time... For now, let’s return to the main path of our character: the one that took him from Lisbon to Brussels.

A NEW BUBBLE OF LEVEN IN

A SPLIT COUNTRY

BRUSSELS, BE

Leven means *Life* in Dutch. Luís learned that during his intensive Dutch course, the first two weeks in Brussels. He had promptly included a 1-year visit to Brussels when he initially planned his joint PhD. His girlfriend and his dog would stay in Portugal since she had just

finished her own PhD and was looking for a job. But here he was: heading to a new city to not only satiate his cravings (needs, perhaps) of novelty but also to work closely with his supervisor and remote colleagues. During lunch, he and his multi-cultural team more often than not would indulge in long discussions on linguistics: *heft nodig* (Dutch) similarly to *avoir besoin* (French) is a double word expression to express *needing*, which contrasts with the single word formulation in other languages such as *precisar* (Portuguese) — he realised thanks to his previous training in French. (What separates what one needs from what one wants?) Common sounds, grammar, idiomatic expressions, vocabulary, food, politics, music, costumes... In English, Dutch, French, Italian, Portuguese... If well edited, these conversations could be compiled in a 10-episode mini-series named “Over food, in Babel”. Some days, Luís would start the day by learning Dutch in class, speak in English at the University with his colleagues, order dinner in French at the restaurant and go home to tell the whole day in Portuguese to his family on the phone.

In his free time, he felt free and light. In the beginning, he had no hobbies. He would wander around and see what the city was and what it had to offer. He could decide things on the fly — after all, no one was counting on him :) Yet, at the same time, no one was counting on him :(Alone, he learned to understand what he wanted (even though he could never discern from what he needed) as well as what he liked and what he wished to further explore. Subscribing to a gym helped him make friends. Although, what truly eased the loneliness was two old school friends who moved to Brussels around the same time. It felt good to have someone he could call to say, “I need to vent —

let's grab a beer," without compromising his independence and choice. Those friends taught him a lot about his past self – about his privilege for having a teacher for a mom, and how his actions were seen as eccentric by his high school peers. He liked that tag – *eccentric* – and saw no reason to fight it. So he embraced it. He understood that even in a city where many people had lived and kept living, there were still combinations of random things that no one had ever lived. He almost could taste several lives in one single day, all inside this new “bubble of life” he created in Brussels, with (re)new(ed) friends and new possibilities.

He would also visit Portugal from time to time. Christmas, birthdays and special events would bring him back to Portugal frequently, usually in very intense visits that included not only an overbooked schedule with friends but also going to his hometown to visit family. He would drown in his schedule and regularly become socially tired – but it was worth it. “Something can happen meanwhile”, “This can be the last time I see them” – were common lines in his subconscious feed when sitting inside the plane. Sometimes he would even feel guilty for living so much while leaving people behind. But the alternative was to waste his life and reject opportunities just so he wouldn't feel guilty. And that, too, would come at a price. He knew he would not like to secretly blame people he loved for things they never did. Choosing to stay just to avoid guilt would be a betrayal dressed as loyalty — and he feared that kind of quiet resentment more than distance. Be that as it may, he still remembers this particular time when he was returning to Brussels, and he felt genuinely happy, for he was coming from home, but still heading home – a home in a different place! It felt great having two homes.

A PRIOR BUBBLE OF VIDA IN THE HOME COUNTRY

LISBON, PT

After his time in Brussels, coming back to his old Lisbon *Vida* (*Life* in Portuguese) felt weird. Things were different.

His girlfriend had a new job and less time to be with him. Friends had new routines and less time to schedule things with him. He left new and important friends in Brussels. Lisbon was familiar but lonely. It felt like coming home, but the people who once lived there and used to fill the place with joy were not there as often as they used to. A city flooded with tourists, swept by great traffic tides, and soaked in a strong brine of gentrification — yet somehow, it felt empty, still, and muted. The only way to enjoy it had become pretending to “be a tourist in the place you live” — which could also be the title of a photo series he started, capturing glimpses of a city he was learning to see again, in search of a new beauty in a place that had once lost his interest.

Luís didn't feel as annoyed by the city anymore – except for the public transport, which continued to grind his gears. Instead, he felt the city was just a bit sadder. But somehow, sometimes, he felt ok with that sadness. It was a melancholic sadness he associated with Fernando Pessoa – a kind of old, poetic sorrow, like an old friend who kept him company. He felt that it was part of life, and it meant that, at least, there were things that weighed on him. It was nice for a change to feel some weight. But feeling that sadness was obviously not sustainable in the long term. He had to make new friends and find new hobbies. He decided to join a box of callisthenics – that would provide him with physical challenges that would build up and help him get new physical skills – and an LGBTQ+ choir – which offered the perfect place for him to explore his identity, learn and reconnect with his creative self. The choir provided a lot of friends. Callisthenics, not so much. Despite everything, he felt more like a foreigner in the city where he had lived for ten years than in the one where he had stayed just ten months.

His girlfriend could see him — she always did. Thus, she proposed another period in Brussels – again with that smile of someone who is hurt but doesn't want to say. He loved her, and understood all she did for him, all she did to support him. She had hidden her pain and always had suggested what she thought was the best for him. Luís always heard her suggestions; they were too wise to dismiss.

Not only full of the loud kind of wisdom, but the quiet kind as well — the kind that comes from knowing someone better than they know themselves. That kind of wisdom. The one that sees ahead without rushing. That replenishing, anchoring kind. Hence, Luís decided to make a new period abroad happen, since he had funds for that, and he believed that in Brussels he could work better. He planned it, requested the change in his work plan and scheduled it months in advance.

BACK TO THE BUBBLE OF LEVEN IN THE OTHER COUNTRY BRUSSELS, BE

This time, he had prepared everything. He wouldn't make the same mistake of coming back to an empty home that was not that new. He knew Brussels – packed with multiculturalism and garbage on the floor – so he had planned it all: CrossFit, musical theatre classes, joining a choir, and even enrolling in acrobatic circus training. He was determined to improve his French and finish his thesis. Focused on self-growth and committed to enjoying life along the way, Luís built a routine filled with meaning and movement.

Things had changed. His childhood friends had moved away from Brussels to pursue new opportunities. And since he didn't go back to his old gym, he no longer saw his former gym buddies as often. So, despite a packed weekly schedule – Monday at circus school, Tuesday CrossFit, Wednesday choir, Thursday back to circus, Friday parties or D&D, Saturday CrossFit again, and Sunday musical theatre – a routine so intense it could have inspired a short film titled “Busy Enough to Barely Feel” – he sometimes still felt lonely. Some weekends were spent in solitude. So, the time to create new connections took place one more time. Eventually, he made new and close friends at the circus and the choir. But once again, this just happened towards the end of his time there, since he was already preparing to move one more time.

This move was a bit different. Ever since the beginning of his PhD, Luís knew about this program – Vulcanus in Japan. Yet, at this point, he didn't know if he wanted (needed?) more... He was tired of creating bubbles of life. Despite this feeling, his girlfriend still suggested he should apply to the program, since, in fact, "It is a unique opportunity!". He knows she was proud of him and that she was right once again. This new program will take him to Japan for 8 months. That takes us to the current moment. Luís is leaving Brussels and returning to Lisbon to prepare for his trip to Tokyo. A new challenge. He's saying goodbye and having farewells again. Yet, this goodbye from Brussels is a bit more serious; he doesn't know if he's gonna return. After all, he's heading towards the end of the PhD, and the funding to stay abroad is almost over. Japan looks like the final test, and he hopes this time the new currents won't erode him any further, but rather polish him like a river stone that can live a long time in a river's bed. Yet, he doesn't totally believe it.



Figure 1: Luís and colleagues, Brussels



Figure 2: Luís and friends, Brussels

TIME DOESN'T WAIT FOR THE ONES WHO WANDER IN SPACE ?

Luís' PhD research is developing in a mixed mist of confidence and impostor syndrome. His formalisation focused on exploring one of Boden's kinds of creativity, namely transformational creativity. He explored how there are experiences that trigger transformation, that change how we classify things, but also how they can transform how people value things. He believes that creativity is the capacity to create things that can transform one's mind. At the same time, he reflected on how his thesis formalised his own experience; how all the things he saw and experienced in all these places, all the things he created during his exploration of his thesis topic, all of those transformed his own conceptual models of the world and what he valued.

Now, he is reading the "Unbearable Lightness of Being" by Milan Kundera and has just decided to write his EUTOPIA report in the same style. He can finally understand the lightness Milan refers to, and, at the same time, he understands the character he writes about: himself. He left pieces of himself all around, and feels that there's no way to collect them all together again. He thinks "there is no place like home" – not because there is no place that compares, but because that home has dissipated and no longer exists. He has become too light... He writes the words:

*"His life is finally
diluted."*

ON CONCENTRATION AND DILLUTION ME

I never believed in homoeopathy. The idea that diluting a solution makes it stronger always sounded preposterous. "The water can remember the memory of a substance long after it disappeared" ?! Always sounded ridiculous to me. Is the memory of the substance lost if we have too much of it – lost in a sea of sameness? Is the "memory" of a molecule more powerful in a sea of solvent or among plenty of similar molecules? Would I rather see someone for a single, unforgettable moment, or dilute their memory over a blur of good and bad? I don't know. Like cures like — homoeopathy's motto. But then, if I don't believe it, why do I keep diluting myself? The like doesn't seem to help here. My decision to concentrate memories into bubbles of life ended up diluting myself across them. Now, I feel I'll never be the complete self I once was. (Was I ever?) My memory — my self — is not only diluted across places, but also within my own recollections, and in the scattered memories others hold of me. An exhausted puzzle in the shape of a human, with changing pieces, always a few missing — that is my new self. Life is a series of choices: what to concentrate? what to let dissolve? And this constant dissolution no longer feels like a solution. After all, I still ask myself: How many more times will I see all those characters mentioned here? All those whom I love? And I still feel the weight of that number's finiteness. Perhaps it's time to concentrate. I hope this next life-bubble will help me learn where — and how — I want to live more concentrated. I challenge my future self to do just that: to concentrate life a bit more – in time, and space.