

“There’s metaphysics enough in not thinking about anything”. Language and the Experience of Being in Pessoa-Caeiro

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Abstract According to Alberto Caeiro—one of Fernando Pessoa’s main heteronyms—we must learn to free ourselves from thought and language in order to see reality as it really is and to be in harmony with it. But what does it mean, for Caeiro, to free ourselves from thought and language? And once we are finally liberated from them, what remains? In other words: what does Caeiro see? These are some of the philosophical questions that have stimulated reflections in the philosophical literature on Pessoa-Caeiro’s poetry. As I will argue in this article, Caeiro’s silent mind is fundamentally one that apprehends the naked being or existence of beings. And it is precisely the experience of being that, in Caeiro—but not in Pessoa’s Faust and Campos—constitutes the source of its existential peace.

Keywords: caeiro, pessoa, the experience of being, language, heidegger, hume, locke

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“Senhor Caeiro, are you a materialist?”
“No, I’m neither a materialist, nor a deist or anything else. I am a man who, one day, upon opening a window, discovered this very important thing: that Nature exists. I realized that trees, rivers, and stones are things that really exist. No one had ever thought that before.”
(Pessoa 2020, prose #2)

0. Introduction

Alberto Caeiro, the Master of Pessoa and his principal heteronyms—Campos, Reis, and Mora—is often celebrated as an anti-philosopher: as one who, unlike the rest of us, knows how to strip his soul of the obscuring garment of language and philosophical thought, allowing things themselves, rather than our thoughts about them, to become the sole protagonists of experience. «I have no philosophy: I have senses [...]»¹. «I don’t have theories, I don’t have a philosophy. I see, but I know nothing» (Pessoa 2020, prose #27)

¹ All quotations to Caeiro’s poems are from Pessoa 2020. Quotations to Caeiro’s prose or other authors follow standard quotation-practice.

However seductive this picture might be, we know that it is reductive and, ultimately, false. Pessoa is explicit on this point: «Much as he likes to prove his irrationalism, he is a thinker and a very great thinker» (Zenith 2001: 244). «No Sr. Alberto Caeiro, toda a inspiração, longe de ser dos sentidos, é da inteligência. Ele, propriamente, não é um poeta; é um metafísico à grega, escrevendo em verso teorizações puramente metafísicas» (Ivi: 249). Similar observations are also made by the English heteronym Thomas Crosse: Caeiro's attitude is «eminently intellectual», and his poetry is «poetry and philosophy simultaneously and interpenetratedly» (Ivi: 259).

There is undoubtedly a distinct philosophical dimension that emerges from Caeiro's poetic work. This is one of the many reasons why his oeuvre—like Pessoa's more generally—has inspired a rich array of philosophical investigations (see Blanco 1999 for an overview of the studies on Caeiro). To name just a few of the many ongoing and fruitful lines of inquiry, Caeiro has been placed in dialogue with Merleau-Ponty (e.g., Barbaras 2011, Cândido 2019), Husserl (e.g., Frias 2012, Mariani 2024), Deleuze (Badiou 1998), and Buddhism (e.g., Perrone-Moisés 1982, Zenith 1999, Borges 2016, Ganeri 2020). In this paper, I aim to contribute to the exploration of the philosophical significance of Caeiro's poetry by highlighting what I consider to be a fundamental aspect of his philosophy. In my view, the core of Caeiro's experience is the revelation of the being or existence of things: when discursive reason falls silent, the deepest form of intuitive knowledge—the experience or intuition of being—can awaken in Caeiro (and in us). It is in this experience that the peace we so admire in his poetry is rooted. Viewed from this perspective, the work of Pessoa-Caeiro constitutes a vital—yet still insufficiently explored—contribution to the grand polyphonic project of a phenomenology of being, a project that has inspired some of the greatest thinkers of the twentieth century, foremost among them Heidegger².

The structure of this article is as follows. In §1, I will highlight the factors that hinder the experience of being. In §2, I will examine what remains once these obscuring factors are removed. Here, I will consider a widely accepted interpretation—endorsed by Caeiro and his disciples—according to which what remains are mere sensations. After pointing out some immediately evident limitations of this reading, in §3, I will argue that Caeiro's gaze apprehends the bare and mute existence of things. In §4, drawing on Hume and Heidegger, I will suggest that knowledge of being cannot be reduced to sensory experience (and therefore that Caeiro's experience cannot be reduced to mere sensation). Finally, in §5, I will conclude by showing how the same fact—that beings are—elicits, in other key voices of Pessoa's work, tormented emotional tones such as horror, anguish, and nausea. I will thus end by posing (while postponing the answer to another occasion) the following question: why can the discovery of being lead either to Caeiro's peace or to the suffering of Campos, Soares, or Pessoa's Faust?

1. Veiling Factors: Language, Memory, Anticipation

For Caeiro, language is the primary obscuring factor that prevents us from seeing reality as it truly is. Words and concepts organize reality according to structures that, in fact, do

² For an historically informed discussion of the experience of being in western philosophy, see (Arendt 1978: 121-51), (Pareyson 1979, 1992). For recent works on the experience of being, see (Zanetti 2022, 2023, 2025a, 2025b, 2025c, forthcoming 1, forthcoming 2, forthcoming 3), (Billon 2022), (Balaska 2024), (Capobianco 2024).

not exist. There is, for instance, nothing in reality that corresponds to the words “row of trees”.

A single tree multiplied.
A row or the plural trees are not things, but names.
Poor human souls, which like to put everything in order,
To draw lines between one thing and another,
To put signs with names on totally real trees (45)

Similarly, words and concepts group different things together, creating the illusion that things belong to the same category: all trees appear to us, indeed, as trees. But this is a false appearance, because each thing is unique and is only itself: «Certainly never / are there two identical trees, one beside the other» (14). «I understood that things are real and are all different one from the other» (64).

This critique of language at times becomes a critique of philosophy itself. «With philosophy there are no trees: there are only ideas» and therefore, in order to see correctly, «It's also necessary to have no philosophy» (110). However, it is clear that the kind of philosophy being referred to here is not only, or even primarily, what we find in philosophical books, but rather any linguistic-conceptual structure—including even the most fundamental ones, such as space and time, which for many (Kant, for example) are pre-conceptual and constitutive of all possible experience.

Live, you say, in the present;
Live only in the present.
But I don't want the present, I want reality;
I want things that exist, not the time we ascribe to them.
What is the present?
Something relative to the past and to the future.
Something that exists by virtue of other things existing.
I want only reality, things with no present.
I don't want to include the time I have.
I don't want to think about things as being present; I want to think of them as things.
I don't want to separate them from themselves, by treating them as “the present.”
I shouldn't even treat them as real.
I shouldn't treat them in any way at all.
I should see them, just see them;
See them until I can no longer think about them,
See them outside of time and place,
See them and dispense with everything except what I see.
This is the science of seeing, which is no science at all. (105)

In this poem, we see the radical nature of Caeiro's gaze (or at least of the interpretation that Pessoa gives of it): every linguistic-conceptual structure must be set aside so that only things remain, just as they are—prior to and independently of our frameworks.

The obscuring power of language is emphasized not only in Caeiro's poetry but also in the reflections on Caeiro by Pessoa, Reis, Campos, and Mora. To illustrate, according to Mora—the heteronym-philosopher who sought to articulate the paganism he saw as implicit in Caeiro's work—we fail to grasp reality as it truly is because we always think of things in relation to something else that is not, however, given in immediate experience. The Christian sees things as children of God, the pantheist as parts of the whole, the materialist or rationalist as effects of the forces of nature. But God, the whole, and the

forces of nature are not actually given in the immediate experience of a tree or a table, for instance. When there is a table or a tree, there is only and precisely a table or a tree (there is simply *this*, before it is seen as a table or a tree). Mora thus concludes: Christian mystics, pantheist dreamers, materialists, and men of reason: for all of them, the world is nothing more than their own thoughts. Caeiro himself targets the mystic³ to illustrate the same point:

You, the mystic, see meaning in all things.
For you, everything has a veiled significance.
There is a hidden thing in each thing that you see.
What you see, you see always in order to see something else.
As for me, because I only have eyes to see,
I see a lack of meaning in all things;
I see this and I love myself, because to be a thing is to mean nothing.
To be a thing is to be unsusceptible of interpretation. (92) (Compare also with poems 28 and 30)

Now, language is undoubtedly the structuring force on which Caeiro and his interpreters have placed the greatest emphasis. However, it is certainly not the only obscuring force discussed in his poetry. Caeiro explicitly mentions at least two others: memory and anticipation. «Remembering is a betrayal of Nature,/ Because yesterday's Nature is not Nature./ What was is nothing, and remembering is not-seeing» (43). Just as the past no longer exists, so too the future does not yet exist, and thus imagining it means failing to see what is real. «As long as I walk just as far as that bend/ I only look at the road as far as that bend,/ Because I can only see the road as far as that bend./ [...] Let us care solely about the place where we are» (59). Memory and anticipation work together to create the illusion that what appears—or will appear—in the field of experience is the same as what has already appeared in the past. Yet, at every moment, the scene is entirely new, and nothing ever repeats itself: «And what I see at each moment/ Is something I've never seen before» (2). «Nothing returns, nothing is repeated, because everything is real» (61). To summarize: language, memory, and anticipation are mental factors that prevent us from grasping reality as it is immediately given. Each of these adds something that the given does not possess. «And I never go beyond immediate reality,/ Beyond immediate reality there is nothing» (68). It is thus a matter of learning to unlearn, that is, learning to shed the illusory garments fashioned by education, culture, and civilization: «I try to divest myself of what I learned,/ I try to forget the way of remembering that I was taught,/ And to scrape off the paint with which they painted my senses» (46). But how does one unlearn? This is something Caeiro never explains. He says that seeing as he does «requires long study,/ An apprenticeship in unlearning» (24), but he never tells us what this apprenticeship consists of. In other words, Caeiro (and with him Pessoa) does not provide us with a practice. One cannot blame him for this: no Western philosopher has ever left us with a practice that is even remotely as detailed and precise as the practice that, as we know, is fundamental and indispensable in Eastern wisdom traditions. Although many interpreters have exalted the supposed Zen—or, more broadly, Buddhist—qualities of Caeiro's poetry, Pessoa's “Master” does not truly know how to teach and transmit his way of seeing—and we know this because, if he had known how

³ Thomas Crosse (Pessoa's heteronym) writes: «a pure and integral sensationist like Caeiro has, logically enough, no religion at all, religion not being among the immediate data of pure and direct sensation» (Pessoa 2012: 303).

to do so, perhaps Pessoa would not have suffered as he did. We shall go back to this issue in the last section of this article.

2. What remains to be seen when discursive reason falls silent?

After briefly illustrating the obstacles that, for Caeiro, prevent us from seeing reality, we must now ask ourselves: what does Caeiro see? In other words, what remains to be seen when all the obscuring factors are removed? If what remains is what Caeiro calls “reality”, what is seen when one sees reality?

At this point, there arises the philosophically naïve, but natural and widespread temptation when reading Caeiro, to believe that what remains is solely sensory experience. According to this interpretation, Caeiro’s mind simply records sounds, colors, shapes, etc., that is, only what “enters” the field of experience through the sensory channels.

Before showing why this interpretation fails to capture Caeiro’s experience, let us first consider some reasons why it might appear plausible. First, this reading aligns broadly with the traditional framework—prevalent at least since Kant—of understanding the relationship between mind and world, language and experience. On one side, there is the contribution of the world as it is given in experience; on the other, the contribution of the subject, who imposes its structures upon the given. If we imagine stripping experience of all possible subjective contributions, it is easy to conceive of what remains as consisting solely of what is assumed to come from the world. And what is assumed to come from the world is, fundamentally, sensory data. In this sense, Caeiro might be seen as adhering, in some way, to what Wilfrid Sellars famously called the “Myth of the Given”.

There are several passages in Caeiro and his disciples that seem to betray adherence to this simplistic view of the relationship between mind and world. To illustrate the point, we can look at the way in which Campos at one point describes the type of experience which, according to him, is the «secret of the Universe» or the «escape route» transmitted to him by his «sensationalist» master.

Happy is the man who manages, even for a moment, to see the table as wood, to feel the table as wood — to see the wood of the table without seeing the table. He may “know” afterwards that it is a table, but he will never again forget that it is wood. And he will love the table, as a table, even more. That was the effect Caeiro had on me. I didn’t stop seeing the appearance of things, their divine or human artificiality, but I also saw the material soul of the material they were made of. I was set free. (Pessoa 2023, prose #14)

The emphasis on sensations is pervasive in Caeiro’s poetry as well: «I have no philosophy: I have senses[...]» (2), «I think with my eyes and my ears/ And with my hands and feet/ And with my nose and mouth» (8), «I am an Argonaut of genuine sensations» (46). Beauty is not in things, but is a human attribution, while things «merely have color and form/ And existence» (46), where color and form are the basic sensory qualities in the realm of sight.

Although he speaks out against the mystic who turns things into something other than what they are, Caeiro well knows that, in a certain sense, he himself is a mystic (the theme of encountering the real through the suspension of language is notably central in mystical literature). But he clarifies his mysticism like this «I am a mystic, but only with my body./ My soul is simple and doesn’t think» (30). I. I. Crosse (one of Pessoa’s many heteronyms) writes about his mysticism: «The great discovery of Caeiro—the mysticism of objectivity. As mystics see meaning in all things, Caeiro, in his own words sees: “lack of meaning in

all things; See it & I love myself because to be a thing is to mean nothing”» (Pessoa 2020, prose #23). To the extent that a mystic sees meanings in things (e.g., this flower is a sign of God), then Caeiro is not a mystic. (But, as we shall see in a moment, if a mystic is someone who sees directly the most fundamental truth, then Caeiro is a true mystic, for he sees that beings are).

These passages, like many others that could be cited, may lead to a reading of Caeiro’s mind in which this mind only senses what the senses provide. And thus, to the extent that it makes sense to say that such a mind, being merely sensuous, knows something, Caeiro’s knowledge is exclusively sensory knowledge.

But it is clear that there is much more in Caeiro’s gaze (and, especially, that the essential is not the sensory data). The deepest aspect of Caeiro’s seeing is, as I will show shortly, the intuition or experience of the being of things. But before we get to that, we can already notice other forms of knowledge or intuition that are present in Caeiro’s gaze and that cannot be reduced to merely sensory knowledge. We have seen that, for Caeiro, everything is unique, and therefore every moment is new. But this is not only a theoretical *ex post* consideration that Caeiro makes to explain, to himself and to us, why we need to let go of the obscuring factors that prevent us from grasping the uniqueness and novelty that distinguish the real. The fact that every moment is unique is an integral awareness in Caeiro’s experience: «And what I see at each moment/ Is something I’ve never seen before,/ And I’m very good at that [. . .]» (2). If it is true that every single thing is unique, then this is always the case. But we are rarely aware of it (if we ever are). It is something else to look at the world with that gaze that is also silently aware that every instant is unique and new. Only because he has this gaze can Caeiro say: «I feel newborn with every moment/ To the complete newness of the world [...] » (2).

We have also seen that for Caeiro there is a gap between the immediately given reality and the structures imposed by the mind on reality: language groups things together, making the same things (trees) appear as if they are identical when, in fact, they are different, or giving them a name (“a row of trees”), thus creating entities that don’t really exist (a row of trees); memory and anticipation make us believe that what appears has already appeared when, in reality, everything is completely new. But again, these are not just *ex post* considerations that Caeiro makes to explain the obstacles to right vision. These same truths sometimes illuminate, like flashes of intuition, Caeiro’s experience. For example, he intuits that it is illusory to think that there are things endowed with properties, as we ordinarily think.

A butterfly flutters past me
And for the first time in the universe I notice
That butterflies have neither color nor movement,
Just as flowers have neither perfume nor color.
It’s the color on the butterfly’s wings that has color,
In the movement of the butterfly it’s the movement that moves,
It’s the perfume that has perfume in the perfume of the flower.
The butterfly is merely butterfly
And the flower is merely flower. (40)

In another poem, Caeiro laughs as he realizes how absurd it is for someone to think about things, as he becomes aware of the absolute gap between the thought of things and the things themselves:

If I were to think those things,

I would cease to see the trees and the plants
And cease to see the Earth,
To see only my thoughts [...] .
I would grow sad and be left in the dark.
As it is, without thinking, I have Earth and Sky. (34)

Caeiro also realizes that reality is, so to speak, larger than any possible fixation of the human mind, since the human mind itself is part of reality. The mind is stirred by concerns, desires, and preferences, but from a perspective that, so to speak, looks at the mind from the outside, the mind itself appears as a part of reality. This awareness emerges, for example, in the context of the poems collected under the title *The Shepherd in Love*, when Caeiro describes the experience that allows him to overcome the suffering caused by unrequited love.

When he rose up from that hillside and from that false truth, he saw everything:
The great valleys full, as ever, of the same various greens,
The great mountains in the distance, more real than any feeling,
The whole of reality, with the present sky and air and fields.
And once again, albeit painfully, he felt the air opening up a freedom in his heart.
(55)

Caeiro's experience, then, was not based solely on sensation. Central to his life were also moments of intuition or silent awareness. Both expressions refer to a form of experience or knowing that lies somewhere between (or beyond) pure sensation and discursive reasoning. «I understood that things are real and are all different from one another; / I understood this with my eyes, never with my thoughts» (64). There is understanding—so it is not mere sensation—but there is no thought, meaning it is not the ordinary understanding that arises through discursive reasoning and conceptual articulation. Here, we enter a domain of experience or intuitive knowledge that is notoriously difficult to articulate in a philosophically rigorous way: the domain of intuition, mystical knowledge, and the experience of being. This very difficulty has contributed to the formation of the mistaken view that Caeiro's experience is purely sensory. However, the deeper obstacle to a proper appreciation of his experience lies in the failure to recognize the *sui generis* nature of the experience and intuition of being⁴.

3. The Experience of Being in Caeiro

There are numerous passages in which Caeiro directly suggests that what he perceives, when the veiling factors are removed, is precisely the simple being or existence of what is. Consider, for instance, this poem.

Only Nature is divine, and she isn't divine [...] .
If I sometimes speak of her as a living being
It's because to speak of her I have to use human language
Which gives personality to things
And imposes names on things.
But things have neither name nor personality:
They exist (27)

⁴ For further discussion of this point, see Capobianco's work on the experience of Being in Heidegger - particularly Capobianco (forthcoming) - to whom I am especially indebted.

«Yes, this is what my senses learned on their own:—/ Things have no signification: they have existence» (39). In these passages the theme of the gap between thought and reality is revisited. Now the emphasis is no longer on the gap between language and *how the thing really is* (before being a tree, it is just *that*); now the emphasis is on the gap between language and the *sheer being of the thing* (before being a tree, it just *is*). Caeiro's poems thus seem to point to the possibility of a relationship with things in which our attention is no longer directed to the things and their modalities of existence, but to the existence of the things and their modes. To put it in Wittgenstein's terms, Caeiro's awakened mind sees not so much *how* things are, but *that* things are (Wittgenstein 1921).

This interpretation also allows us to explain what Caeiro *feels* in front of reality. For Scheler, that there is something rather than nothing is the source «of the most intense, the ultimate philosophical wonder» (Scheler 1954: 98). For Heidegger, this is the source of the «wonder of all wonders: that beings are» (Heidegger 1943: 234). For Wittgenstein, grasping the inexplicable existence of the world is an inexhaustible source of wonder and a way to see the realm of absolute value (Wittgenstein 1965, Zanetti 2025b, forthcoming 2.). The list of testimonies confirming the connection between the experience of being and the feeling of wonder and awe is long. As it turns out, this enchanted wonder is also the protagonist of many of Caeiro's poems. In one of the most famous, we read:

The astonishing reality of things
Is my daily discovery.
Each thing is what it is,
And it's hard to explain to someone else how much joy this gives me,
And how much that joy suffices me.
To be complete it is enough to exist. (63)

And again: «I know how to feel the profound astonishment/ A child would feel if, on being born,/ He *realized* that he truly had been born . . .» (2.). It should be noted that Caeiro's wonder is not the one that, for Aristotle, is at the origin of philosophy: «My gaze blue as the sky/ Is calm as the water in the sun./ That's how it is, blue and calm,/ Because it neither asks questions nor is it surprised [. . .]» (23). In other words, Caeiro's wonder is not the one that drives investigation and eventually disappears when we believe we have uncovered the causes of phenomena. This type of wonder is related to our current ignorance and disappears when that ignorance disappears. Caeiro's wonder is, instead, to use Wittgenstein's categories, absolute wonder, because it sees the existence of the world as inexplicable in principle (Wittgenstein 1965, Zanetti 2023). This last wonder survives even when we believe we have explained everything, and it survives precisely because when everything has been explained, we still have not explained why everything exists (Zanetti 2023, 2025b, forthcoming 2).

Sometimes Caeiro's contemplation is visited by a kind of beauty which also finds its source in the apprehension of the being of beings: «A day of rain is just as beautiful as a day of sun./ Both exist; each as it is» (66). Wittgenstein would agree: the source of the most profound aesthetic experience is the miraculous existence of the world and when existence is in view every single thing is worthy of aesthetic contemplation (Zanetti forthcoming 2).

Finally, consider this poem.

Last star to disappear before daybreak,
I place my calm eyes on your tremulous blue-white light,

And I see you independently of me,
I rejoice at the victory of being able to see you
In no particular “state of mind,” except that of seeing you.
For me your beauty lies in you existing.
Your greatness lies in your existing entirely outside of me. (87)

Reading this poem, it is impossible not to think of the famous passage in which Murdoch illustrates the connection between the experience of being, beauty, and *the veiling force of the ego*.

I am looking out of the window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. (Murdoch 1967: 82).

A few lines later, she comments the source of this aesthetic experience as follows: «[...] we take a self-forgetful pleasure in the sheer alien pointless independent existence of animals, birds, stones, and trees. ‘Not how the world is, but that it is, is the mystical’» (Ivi: 83). Murdoch and Caeiro (and Wittgenstein) therefore share the same intuition. Ultimately, the greatness and beauty of things lies in their simple existence. But this is mostly hidden by obscuring factors. Drawing on Freud, Murdoch calls the “ego” that center of centrifugal forces which prevents us from grasping existence.

The chief enemy of excellence in morality (and also in art) is personal fantasy: the tissue of self-aggrandizing and consoling wishes and dreams which prevents one from seeing what is there outside one. Rilke said of Cézanne that he did not paint ‘I like it’, he painted ‘There it is’. This is not easy, and requires, in art or morals, a discipline. [...] We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need⁵. (Murdoch, 1969: 57).

According to Murdoch, the «fat relentless ego» (Ivi: 51) veils reality with its self-centered preferences. For Murdoch, to learn to transcend this veil is the hallmark of moral change and progress. Love is the name of the energy which liberates from the grasp of the ego so that what is real can be seen. This purified vision is for Murdoch fundamental in morality and art. And this purified vision seems to be the same that we find in Caeiro. These simple verses capture the heart of Murdoch’s insight about unselfing as required for objective and compassionate vision⁶: «I look, and things exist./ I think and only I exist» (71). One more still: «Being real means not being inside me» (80).

This brief reference to Murdoch allows us to highlight an important point that went neglected in the analysis of veiling factors so far. As we have seen, Caeiro believes that language is an obstacle to the experience of being. But perhaps the issue is not so much language itself — which, it could be argued, is somehow constitutive of our experience.

⁵ See also Elliott 1993 for a reference to Cézanne in order to illustrate Wittgenstein’s early aesthetics.

⁶ Ricardo Reis says: «He sometimes speaks tenderly of things, but he asks our pardon for doing so, explaining that he only speaks so in consideration of our ‘stupidity of senses,’ to make us feel ‘the absolute real existence’ of things. Left to himself, he has no tenderness for things, he has hardly any tenderness even for his sensations. Here we touch his great originality, his almost inconceivable objectiveness (objectivity)». (Pessoa, 2016: 283-284)

The problem is rather a certain *use* of language or thought — that use which Murdoch calls «personal fantasy»: that messy cloud of thoughts, emotions, and ego-centered desires that traps us in the daydream each of us calls “my life”. Murdoch’s analysis (which we find, *mutatis mutandis*, in Cage - see Zanetti 2022) thus allows us to appreciate the role of what she calls *ego*: the problem is not just the imposition of subjective linguistic structures in experience; the problem is that this very imposition is oriented by self-obsessed forces. This is an important qualification for it allows us to capture aspects of Caeiro’s poem which are crucial but unfortunately we have no space to discuss here: namely his capacity to *accept* and *love* reality as it really is, without reducing it to his interests or subsuming it to his fantasy:

I am the very first poet to have realized that Nature exists. Other poets have sung of Nature, but always subordinated her to themselves, as if they were God; I sing of Nature subordinating myself to her, because I see no evidence that I am superior to her, given that she includes me, and I am born of her. (Pessoa 2020, prose #3)

4. Is the Experience of Being Reducible to Sensory Experience?

At this point, it is useful to briefly consider an objection that, in addressing it, allows us to further clarify our interpretation of Caeiro’s awakened mind. The objection can be formulated as follows: “Yes, Caeiro sees that things are, but if we are to speak of intuition or knowledge, this remains purely sensory. After all, as Caeiro himself says, and as we have seen, things possess only color, form, and existence. Existence, like color and form, is merely one sensation among others, and it is known in the same way one knows the green of the leaves or the hardness of the earth”.

This seems to be, with the necessary adjustments, the position we also find in Locke’s *Essays*. According to Locke, our mind is a *tabula rasa* that receives *all* its ideas from experience. Experience divides into two realms, sensation and reflection, which roughly correspond to outer and inner experience. Ideas divide into simple and complex: a simple idea has “one uniform appearance” and “enter[s] by the senses simple and unmixed” (Locke 1690), whereas a complex idea is made up of several simple ideas combined together (Locke 1690). Existence is a simple idea. This is all he writes about the origin of the idea of existence:

Existence and Unity. - *Existence* and *unity*, are two other *Ideas*, that are suggested to the Understanding, by every Object without, and every *Idea* within. When *Ideas* are in our Minds, we consider them as being actually there, as well as we consider things to be actually without us; which is, that they exist, or have *Existence*: And whether we can consider as one thing, whether a real Being, or *Idea*, suggests to the Understanding, the *Idea* of Unity. (Locke 1690/1979: 2.7.7)

In this perspective, then, the knowledge of the existence of things depends on a sensation or impression. Caeiro’s awakened (and pacified) mind is, therefore, entirely a purely sensory mind.

The problem, as many have pointed out, is that upon closer inspection, the sensation or impression of being or existence cannot be found (for discussion see Zanetti 2025a). The first to explicitly make this observation is perhaps Hume. In his *Treatise*, in the brief, dense, and notoriously obscure section dedicated to the idea of existence, he presents a dilemma—one he considers «the most clear and conclusive that can be imagin’d»—relating to the origin of the knowledge of being. «the idea of existence must either be deriv’d from a distinct impression, conjoin’d with every perception or object of our

thought, or must be the very same with the idea of the perception or object». ((Hume, 1740/2007: 1.2.6). Although Hume presents this as a dilemma, he unhesitatingly accepts the second horn. Hume is categorical in rejecting the existence of a “distinct impression” from which the idea of existence would derive. He writes: «though every impression and idea we remember be considered as existent, the idea of existence is not derived from any particular impression» (Ibidem). And he adds:

Whoever opposes this [the claim according to which there is a difference between thinking about something and thinking about something as existence], must necessarily point out that distinct impression, from which the idea of entity is deriv'd, and must prove, that this impression is inseparable from every perception we believe to be existent. This we may without hesitation conclude to be impossible. (Ibidem).

Hume's phenomenological observation has been repeatedly revisited throughout the history of philosophy. As is well known, we find it in Heidegger, where it plays a crucial role in his thought, as it supports the thesis of the ontological difference—the claim that the being of entities is not itself an entity. This thesis would be implausible if the being of entities were to present itself in experience as a sensory impression, since an impression is an entity. In *Time and Being*, for example, he writes:

«The lecture hall is. This lecture hall is illuminated. We recognize the illuminated lecture hall at once and without reservation as something that is. But where in the whole lecture hall do we find the ‘is’? Nowhere among things do we find Being. [...] Being is not a thing» (Heidegger 1962: 3).

In the *Zollikon Seminars*, in the context of discussing Kant's claim that existence is not a real predicate, Heidegger reiterates the same observation, explicitly contrasting sensory seeing with the seeing of being.

There are two kinds of phenomena.

- a) Perceptible, existing phenomena are ontic phenomena, for example, the table.
- b) Nonsensory, imperceptible phenomena, for example, the existence of something, are ontological phenomena.

Two kinds of evidence must be always kept in view.

- 1) We “see” the existing table. This is ontic evidence.
- 2) We also “see” [phenomenologically] that existence is not a quality of the table as a table; nevertheless, existence is predicated of the table when we say it is. This is ontological evidence.

We affirm the table's existence, and we simultaneously deny that existence is one of its qualities. Insofar as this occurs, we obviously have existence in view. We “see” it. We “see” it, but not like we “see” the table. Yet, we are also unable to immediately say what “existence” means here. “Seeing” has a double meaning: optical, sensory sight, and “seeing” in the sense of “insight” [Einsehen]. (Heidegger 2001: 6-7)

As we saw, Campos, like Heidegger, also takes the example of the table to illustrate his master's liberating experience. But while Campos says that one must learn to see only the wood of the table—that is, more precisely, only the qualities given to the senses, such as color, shape, etc.—Heidegger argues that, at the same time, beyond sensory qualities, there is also the non-sensory “seeing” of the existence of the table. This “seeing” is always present, yet it is also true that, first and foremost, we are usually aware of things and their characteristics rather than their mere existence. Therefore, there must be certain

conditions that inhibit the emergence of the awareness of being within the field of experience. And some of these conditions seem to be precisely the veiling factors thematized by Caeiro. When we look at the world, we do so in light of an interest that, through the self-absorbed use of language, memory, and anticipation, carves out the world, showing us the aspects that, in the broadest sense, are useful to us (useful to the ego). If I desire a sunny day, when I open the window in the morning, I do not simply see the existence of the sky; rather, I see what it looks like, whether it threatens rain, and so on. If this functions as an obstacle to the experience of being, then removing the obstacle facilitates—though certainly does not guarantee—that the ever-present “seeing” of being also becomes an awareness of the being of what is seen. And this seems to be precisely what happens to Caeiro: by loosening the grip of the ordinary egoic-discursive mind, what remains is the immediately given reality—the things themselves. And it is precisely when things seem to no longer tell us anything—because we no longer impose any meaning upon them—that they can “say” their most important truth: that they are, that they exist. As Heidegger argues in *What Is Metaphysics?*, when every predication falls silent, then the awareness of the being of things can break through. And this is what happens to Caeiro—and that can happen to us, since Pessoa-Caeiro’s words have the power to bring us close to the same experience.

5. Concluding remarks

Referring to the poetic work of his beloved creature, Pessoa writes: «A quiet note in the margin of all history, stating, more clearly than a hundred long odes and a hundred poets, the eternal vacuity of human action» (Pessoa 2020, prose #19). For Caeiro this vacuity extends over everything: there is no meaning, no God, no grand finale, no majestic overture, just beings and the light that allows them to say their secret, namely that they are.

Now, this experience is, for Caeiro, the source of the most profound peace. Not so for most of the voices that live in Pessoa’s pantheon. In a poignant poem about his beloved Master, Campos writes: «You gave me your calm, which for me became disquiet» (Pessoa 2023, *poems* #48). Indeed, in Campos, we find several poems⁷ in which the being of beings is encountered in tones of terror, horror, and nausea.

Ah, that there should be things!
Ah, that there should be beings!
Ah, that there should be a way of there being beings,
That there should be a should be,
That there should be a way of there being a should be [...]
That there should be [...]
Ah, that the phenomenon of abstraction should exist — exist,
That there should be consciousness and reality,
Whatever that is [...]
How can I express the horror all this arouses in me?
How can I put into words what this feels like?
Where is the soul of that should-be?
Ah, the terrifying mystery of the existence of the tiniest thing
Because it is a terrifying mystery that there should be anything
Because it is a terrifying mystery that there should be [...] (Pessoa 2024, *poems* #49)

⁷ The most important one is untitled (Pessoa 2023, *poems* #57). For an insightful commentary of this crucial poem, see (Borges 2016: 71-9).

Countless passages of the same nature can be found in Pessoa's *Fausto* (see Zanetti forthcoming 3), in his static drama *O Marinheiro* (see Zanetti 2025c), in Soares' *Livro do Desassossego*, and indeed throughout Pessoa's entire oeuvre. But how is it possible that the intuition of being brings peace to Caeiro, while it evokes horror and madness in Fausto, Campos, and Soares? What is the connection between Caeiro's experience of being and his serenity? More broadly, what is the relationship between the experience of being and existential suffering—or peace? And does a certain use of language and thought - as Caeiro seems to suggest - play any role in explaining why the experience of being can evoke peace or horror?

These are decisive questions that emerge with full clarity and force only when we emphasize the role of the experience of being in Caeiro's poetry. And they are decisive not only for understanding Pessoa's work but, more fundamentally, for understanding ourselves. For suffering in the face of the emptiness of existence is our deepest suffering. Can Caeiro teach us how to free ourselves from it?

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