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Developing leaders to give attention to the common good:

the contribution of Negative Capability

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Thank you.
In this paper we discuss how the development of Negative Capability, as described by the poet Keats (Murry, 1926: 42), can contribute to a quality of attention in leadership practice that might encourage greater consideration of the common good. This is relevant to recent debates on ethical leadership (Ciulla, 2014).

It is our assumption that current societal and organizational realities depend on managerial capacities and capabilities that require more than just knowledge, which tends to be promoted as the central aspect of the development of leaders. Meanwhile, as a society we appear to struggle to utilise the forms of wisdom that keep us in touch with the common good. For example, as we write this the UK news is dominated by a devastating fire in a residential high rise apartment tower and media speculation is focused on a range of political and economic decisions that appear to have insufficiently prioritised the safety and welfare of residents. We refuse to believe that the majority of leaders – political and organizational – lack sufficient compassion in making these judgements but rather suggest that what is lacking is sufficient capacity to manage insightfully some of the complex decision making challenges that are faced. It is our contention that Negative Capability might make a useful contribution but is currently neglected in the leadership development curriculum.

Whilst recognising the need for knowledge to engage with the challenges of leadership, we are concerned with those aspects of the leader's role where the practice of attention outweighs knowledge in importance. In this we build on our previous explorations of attention and Negative Capability (French and Simpson, 2014; Simpson and French, 2006), which echo Ramsey’s call for ‘a scholarship of practice [that] is centred on deliberative attention rather than knowledge’ (2014, p.6). Attention, in contrast to knowledge, is particularly important in situations where leaders are faced with the requirement to make decisions in the face of uncertainty, where knowledge is lacking. In such circumstances, the ability to utilise what Keats referred to as ‘half-knowledge’ is balanced with the ability to inquire into the details of the current state of affairs.

We consider ideas about the practice of attention with which we are already familiar but that tend to be marginalised. For example, Case et al (2012) highlight how the modern use of the term theory, now inextricably linked to knowledge, has lost touch with its ancient roots in forms of attention. The linguistic roots of theory lie in the Greek terms theorein, meaning ‘to look at’, and theoros, ‘spectator’, suggesting there are forms of knowing to be gained from observation in the present moment in contrast to drawing upon knowledge that has been
gained from past experience. In different ways attempts have been made to reconnect with credible alternatives from a range of wisdom literatures (see for example, Case and Gosling, 2007; Gabriel, 2004; Gosling, 1996; Grint, 2007; Ladkin, 2010; Marques, 2012). However, these attempts at a re-turn urgently require further thought and exploration because the power of modernity’s focus on the pre-eminence of a curriculum or body of knowledge is pervasive and resistant to questioning, let alone to change.

Leadership is a complex, multi-faceted process and Negative Capability has many potential areas of application. In this paper, we narrow our focus by choosing to consider the way in which Negative Capability might contribute to leaders giving attention to the common good within a modern capitalist context. In particular, we draw upon Bell's (1996) argument that capitalism may be understood as characterised by three distinct realms that require leaders to engage with a range of inherent contradictions. Our discussion will consider the common good from the perspective of each of these three realms, whilst highlighting some of the issues caused by a tendency within modern society for the techno-economic perspective to take precedence over the cultural and the political. It will be argued that the complexity within and between the three realms can require the leader to exercise practical judgement in the face of multiple uncertainties.

An extended discussion of relevant leadership literature is used to argue for a narrow working definition of Negative Capability as 'being without', which is understood as a letting go or the acceptance of lack. Within the context of capitalism such an interpretation is counter-cultural and tends either to be ignored or reframed, losing touch with the radical simplicity of the notion that we believe Keats intended. We do accept, however, that whilst simple in concept it tends to be extremely difficult to practice in its more developed forms.

Illustrated by an account of leadership within the Prison Service, the core argument of the paper is introduced: that practical judgement that might prioritise the common good requires a high quality of attention and a wider awareness and that Negative Capability can make a significant contribution to this.
Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism

To focus our discussion, we consider leadership within a capitalist context. Bell (1996) provides a framework for the analysis of the difficulties for leaders in taking up their roles caused by the inherent contradictions between the three distinct realms of the techno-economic, the political, and the cultural. This framework suggests that the behaviour of leaders does not arise from a single principle but will function differently in relation to these three realms.

A brief overview of Bell’s distinctions and ‘disjunctions’ (p.xviii) between the three realms is provided in Table 1. In summary, Bell argues that the underlying principles of these three realms are inherently antagonistic. Thus, for example, the axial structure of the techno-economic realm, which requires hierarchy and specialization for enhanced efficiency, conflicts with the cultural impetus for the realization of the ‘whole self’ and the requirement for participation and representation in the political realm.

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*Table 1: A Summary Overview of Bell’s (1996: xvi-xvii) Three Realms in Capitalist Society*

It is widely recognised that a key feature of pragmatic leadership is the capacity to live with such contradictions, at least in the short- to medium-term. However, there is a danger that such an explanation can become a platitude that results in insufficient attention being given to the complexity of the challenges facing leaders. In general leaders know how to be pragmatic but leaders do not make decisions ‘in general’ – they make them in specific circumstances. It is possible to assume that the rationale of pragmatism is sufficient because the judgements made to support decisions are rarely subject to detailed scrutiny. In general, leaders can get away with making poor decisions. Negative Capability is practiced in relation to the specifics of experience not 'in general'.
Capitalism and the Common Good

The value of Bell’s model for our purposes is not that he favours one realm over another (e.g. ‘cultural leadership increases the common good’) but precisely that his sociological insight indicates that a feature of capitalism is that all three realms are of equal, but differing, significance. In fact, we can consider the ‘common good’ in ways that reflect the defined purposes of each of these three realms. A techno-economic perspective on the common good contrast the merits of self-interested and co-operative activities and favours societal gains over those of the individual. In this realm an emphasis will be placed on mechanisms for wealth creation as essential for achieving the common good. Political theories of the common good tend to be concerned with the benefits to citizens achieved through collective participation, exemplified in features such as social harmony and cohesion in contrast to segregation and social conflict. An emphasis will be placed on mechanisms for the achievement of civic order. Cultural perspectives promote the common good in terms of the achievement of human potential, meaning and purpose. An emphasis will be placed on the provision of education and support for cultural enrichment.

So which one should the leader choose as the starting point for decision making that makes the greater contribution to the common good? One might argue that this depends, perhaps, on the institution within which the leader is employed. For example, should the business leader prioritise the techno-economic, the senior civil servant the political, and the church leader the cultural? It might be that this is what often happens but this seems a little simplistic. For example, do we want the leaders of a global multi-national to prioritise wealth generation when they design and implement an installation that will have a significant ecological impact? Should it be political leaders who are responsible for curbing the negative impact upon the environment through legislative control? Do community leaders need to mobilise influence to protect the working conditions of local inhabitants?

These are precisely the questions that face leaders in all arenas, a situation that is further complicated by the tendency in modern society to prioritise the techno-economic realm:

[C]apitalist society, in its emphasis on accumulation, has made that activity an end in itself. But no moral philosopher, from Aristotle and Aquinas, to John Locke and Adam Smith, divorced economics from a set of moral ends or held the production of
wealth to be an end in itself; rather it was seen as a means to the realization of virtue, a means of leading a civilized life. (Bell, 1996: xii)

Rational-technical knowledge has gained pervasive influence since the Enlightenment, which has contributed to an imbalance that not only tends to prioritise a techno-economic understanding of the common good but also places power in the hands of wealth-focused decision makers who are not trained to consider the common good. Whilst it is beyond most educational institutions and leadership development programmes to tackle an inherent self-interest, it should be possible to remedy an ignorance of the multi-dimensional nature of the common good.

Negative Capability and Practical Judgement

The capacity to balance the competing demands of these three realms requires wise judgement and is the context within which Negative Capability can make an important contribution to the development of leaders. Even for those decision makers concerned with the common good, the question of which perspective to prioritise is a significant challenge because of the inherent contradictions between the three realms. In short, this is a question that can have no definitive answer, it is a question of judgement and not knowledge. Stacey (2012) argues that when lacking knowledge the leader requires a higher quality of attention through wider awareness and practical judgement:

The exercise of practical judgement is highly context related; it is exercised in highly uncertain, unpredictable and unique situations… [It] calls for a wider awareness of the group, organisational and societal patterns within which some issue of importance is being dealt with. This requires a sensitive awareness of more than the focal points in a situation, namely awareness of what is going on at the margins and of what is being taken as the focus. Practical judgement is the experience-based ability to notice more of what is going on and intuit what is most important about a situation. It is the ability to cope with ambiguity and uncertainty as well as the anxiety this generates. (p.108)

We suggest that the development of practical wisdom in the leader requires a combination of knowledge relevant to all three realms: understanding how to effectively engage in the techno-economic realm in order to generate productive wealth, insight into the dynamics of
power and influence, and the capacity to make appropriate value judgements concerning the purpose of creating a moral society. Stacey’s suggestion is that such judgement is ‘experienced-based’, a belief supported by Keats who argued that ‘Axioms in philosophy are not axioms unless they are proved upon our pulses’ (3 May, 18181).

Negative Capability can contribute to the development of practical wisdom by supporting the leader lacking knowledge through the experiential acknowledgement of lack in relation to these three realms. Thus, whilst we might deem knowledge relevant to the techno-economic, political, and cultural as contributing to a positive capability, Keats suggests that Negative Capability is necessary to give attention to the experience of phenomena when knowledge is lacking. It is not the lack of knowledge that comprises the Negative Capability but the capacity to be present without resorting to a body of knowledge for explanation - to practice what Stacey calls a ‘sensitive awareness’ to all aspects of the situation that is faced as it is, in all its uncertainty and confusing complexity.

This suggests that leadership development needs to give sufficient attention to establishing an appreciation of what it means to be a leader when one is lacking in knowledge: uncertain, without power, vulnerable, and without clarity of purpose or a sense of meaning. Leadership within a capitalist context requires attentive observation of these challenging aspects of the current situation and the capacity and patience to allow insight to develop.

Illustration Part 1: Contradictions in the Prison Service

In order to illustrate our argument we will draw upon the personal account of a Prison Governor, Bill Abbott, as an example of a leader who gave attention to what he perceived to be lacking. This is not offered as a model of leadership but merely to demonstrate what leadership that gives attention to lack might look like. Various extracts from his talk (Abbott, 2000) will be quoted, which describe his experiences as the Governor at two prisons, one in London (Pentonville), the second in Liverpool.

In this first extract, we gain an insight into how he understood his role in relation to some of the inherent contradictions within the Prison Service. We suggest that this account admirably demonstrates Bell’s (1996) argument, which is that there is nothing that can be done to

1 This and all future references to Keats letters are taken from Houghton (1920).
‘solve’ these ‘tensions’, as Abbott refers to them – they must be lived with and, importantly, given attention.

The Prison Service statement of purpose reads, ‘H.M. Prison Service serves the public by holding in custody those committed by the courts. Our duty is to treat them with humanity and help them to lead law-abiding lives in custody and on release.’ The statement is contradictory in the senses that secure custody and humane treatment do not sit comfortably together. Humane custody is the soft underbelly of security. In one sense it appears that the statement both creates and reflects the tension within the organization.

It leaves the governor to manage the tensions. There is a sense in which as governor you feel you are working in tension, with tension, and by tension. It would be easy to change the word tension to adrenaline. Alternative renderings are in uncertainty, with uncertainty, and by uncertainty; and in stress, with stress, and by stress. Tension is the more objective and conveys the reality of the creative potential. The way in which the role of governor is taken up will condition the outcome.

In this excerpt we see the contradictions in the political (power and control exercised to ensure secure custody) and cultural (humane treatment of the ‘whole person’) realms that the Prison Governor must engage with. Each is important. The tension is created between the two realms by the potentially contradictory outcomes of particular actions. For example, humane treatment might involve offering inmates increasing levels of freedom and discretion, which involves reducing the level of secure incarceration. The Governor must engage with the ‘lack’ that emerges in relation to each priority. Importantly, Abbott concludes the resolution of this tension not as a matter of discovering the answer – the knowledge – but through the realisation of the creative potential of the situation. This suggests that the role of the leader in such circumstances might not be to know but to imagine alternative possibilities.

A Working Definition of Negative Capability

Having outlined a theoretical and practical context, we now discuss the notion of Negative Capability in greater detail. The following excerpt from a letter to his brothers contains Keats’ now famous conceptualisation:
Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason… (28th December 1817)

There have been multiple attempts to explain what was meant by this phrase, which Ridley described as ‘odd and famous’ (quoted in Ou, 2009: 12). There are two broad approaches to definition in the literature: one that seeks to define this phrase precisely, believing that Keats had something specific in mind; and one that sees it as ‘an organic conception that is itself growing all the time.’ (Ou, 2009: 13). We align ourselves with the former, along with Murry (1926: 47) and Bate (1939: 62).

We are not entirely sure what has led more recent interpretations of the phrase to prefer a complex interpretation (summarised in a comprehensive review of relevant literature by Saggurthi and Thakur, 2016). We suggest that a specific interpretation is preferable if it is accepted that Keats, a wordsmith of extraordinary talent, knew what he was trying to say and had the ability to express himself with accuracy. In this sense, we disagree with Ridley and suggest that, albeit radical in nature, Negative Capability is not ‘odd’ at all. In fact, it is a capacity that all human beings are compelled by lack of knowledge to practice regularly. What is unusual, rather than odd, is to find a developed capacity for Negative Capability that can be employed in a disciplined and purposeful manner. Negative Capability is more than ignorance when practiced with skillful intent. We can all throw a ball but few can pitch for a professional baseball team.

Negative Capability has been explored in relation to leadership for nearly three decades (see Bennis, 1989 and Handy, 1989). A prominent focus in the literature has been the capacity to tolerate anxiety applied to leading change in situations of uncertainty (French, 2001; Grint, 2007). Keats addresses this issue explicitly (letter to Reynolds, 3rd May 1818), when he argues that ‘extensive knowledge is needful to thinking people… to ease the burden of Mystery’. This knowledge likewise contributes to the capacity to resist conceptual closure (Chia and Morgan, 1996), remaining, as Keats put it, content with ‘half-knowledge’. The containment of anxiety is, we suggest, a positive capability that is necessary for the practice of, but distinct from, Negative Capability. It is, indeed, ‘extensive knowledge’ but only ‘half-knowledge’ that supports the individual experiencing uncertainty, vulnerability and/or a sense of meaninglessness – a lack of knowledge, influence and / or clarity of purpose in the three realms.
Openness is another prominent theme, both in relation to reality (Cornish, 2011) and as a quality of receptiveness (Simpson et al., 2002). This literature draws attention to the experience of ignorance and uncertainty whilst leading change, which therefore requires a recognition of a lack of knowledge. In one of Keats’ most detailed accounts of his philosophical thinking (letter to Woodhouse, 27th October 1818) this radical openness is seen by Murry as a ‘state of extreme and agonizing receptivity, this passive sensitiveness of the being’ (1926: 53). Again, we suggest that this is a related but distinct capability, which arises from the practice of Negative Capability. The acceptance of lack, which is Negative Capability, precedes openness and heightens sensitivity by leaving the awareness exposed, more open to receiving external stimuli.

Saggarthi and Thakur (2016: 185) draw upon their extensive review of the literature to define Negative Capability as ‘the ability to delight in doubt and revel in uncertainty without feeling compelled to rationalize half-knowledge or to reach for facts or fall back on existing knowledge structures, resisting conceptual closure and in a state of diligent indolence and passive receptivity, move toward a knowing with the power of one’s imagination, sensations, and intuition.’ In this they attempt to bring together the various ways of understanding Negative Capability. Unfortunately, whilst comprehensive we believe that it obfuscates rather than clarifies the notion of Negative Capability by failing to differentiate clearly between this and other distinct capabilities. As discussed above, for example, they include in this definition the capacities of conceptual closure and passive receptivity. They helpfully add to the literature a consideration of ‘diligent indolence’, which is a practice discussed by Keats as necessary for the ‘pure poet’. However, this refers to a mindset that is supportive of the practice of Negative Capability but is, again, distinct and moreover, we suggest, not essential. Finally, their definition, to an extent, misrepresents Keats’ understanding as there is no sense in either his letters or poetry that there is ‘delight’ in doubt, or that one should expect to ‘revel in uncertainty’.

By contrast, we argue that it is possible to represent Negative Capability as easy to understand (although difficult to practice purposefully) through faithful attention to the four elements of Keats’ description:

1. ‘capable of being’
2. ‘in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’
3. ‘without’
4. ‘any irritable reaching after fact and reason’

We suggest that the second and fourth elements indicate, respectively, the context within which Negative Capability is important, and the emotional, behavioural and intellectual implications of Negative Capability. The first and third elements provide a working definition: Negative Capability means capable of being without.

Quite simply, it is the capacity to let go of all resource, all pretentions to knowledge. Probably as a consequence of the dominance of the techno-economic within our capitalist society, there is a tendency to focus on Keats’ reference to uncertainty interpreted as a lack of technical knowledge. However, given Keats’ knowledge of the classics, it is possible that his reference to ‘Mysteries’ (capitalised in most authoritative sources) relates to the ‘lesser’ and ‘greater mysteries’ of the love of Beauty, as described by Diotima in Plato’s Symposium (White, 1989: 151). This would then relate to the challenge in the cultural realm of a sense of meaningless (lack of purpose). It is more of a stretch, but possible, that his reference to ‘doubt’ addresses the experience of vulnerability in the political realm when one is without resource (lack of influence). Whatever the precise contexts that Keats has in mind, it is clear that we can legitimately interpret his description of Negative Capability in a straightforward manner as a ‘negative’ capability, that is the acceptance of lack, of being without.

However, Keats is alluding to a capability that is more than merely accepting our inadequacy. This would merely be the sense in which all are compelled to practice a Negative Capability – conscious of our own ignorance and yet powerless to do anything about it. Murry (1926: 47) settles on ‘acceptance’ as a definition of Negative Capability, but helpfully observes that there are reasons to distrust a simplistic understanding of what this might entail if practiced with purposeful discipline:

For this supreme quality there is no familiar name: few people save Keats have even suspected its existence. For the moral quality we can find a word: it is more than tolerance, it is forgiveness. It is that quality which Christ pre-eminently possessed. But for this other kind of forgiveness, a forgiveness which forgives not only men, but life itself, not only the pains which men inflict, but the pains which are knit up in the very nature of existence, we have no word. We have, as yet, scarcely even a sense of the quality itself. Let it be called, though the word cannot fail to be misunderstood, Acceptance.
We suggest that a simple working definition of Negative Capability is most faithful to Keats’ intentions but this is not to forget its radical nature, rare in its more developed forms,. Its practice does, indeed, require ‘extensive knowledge’ in order to provide for the containment of anxiety provoked by the experience of lack (for example, as vulnerability, uncertainty, meaninglessness). It does then offer the possibility of ‘passive receptivity’, undefended openness: the quality of attention that is the undiluted awareness of ‘being’, a particular form of the human condition. As Saggurthi and Thakur (2016: 185) suggest, this then provides a platform for ‘a knowing with the power of one’s imagination, sensations, and intuition.’

This brings into focus two issues of relevance. Firstly, Negative Capability as an acceptance of lack is not concerned with the resourcefulness of ‘doing’, with productivity, and is therefore somewhat out of kilter with the dominant discourses of, particularly, the techno-economic realm. Secondly, Negative Capability is a living state, rather than a ‘not being’ state, and so is characterised by awareness. This is the awareness that is found in those prepared to rest without knowledge but who may be in touch with the wisdom emerging from other sources, such as the imagination, dreams and the unconscious.

This state of being is rooted in not knowing, not valuing, not influencing, it is ‘in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts’, aware of reality, immersed in it, experiencing it, but not working to make sense of it. Being without does not express itself in emotion (for example, irritation, as Keats suggests, but we might also add fear and anxiety), taking action (‘reaching’), or building understanding (‘reason’). Purposefully sustaining Negative Capability in the face of high levels of uncertainty is when the practice starts to become particularly challenging.

Some of the difficulty of accepting Keats' description at face value is no doubt caused by modern understandings of phrases like ‘man of achievement’, which tend to be coloured by an overvaluing of work and rationality. It is hard not to assume that he was alluding to some Herculean productive effort in the use of this phrase, but for Keats the basis of ‘achievement’ in the political realm is to experience one’s vulnerability, in the techno-economic realm to appreciate one’s poverty, and in cultural realm to be in touch with the meaninglessness of existence. It is on the foundation of this acceptance that it becomes possible to see more clearly the opportunities for influence, to scrutinise the possibilities for productivity, and to sense the beautiful and the good. Creative endeavour in relation to the three realms then requires imagination and intuition, engaging in the social construction of reality.
Negative Capability and the Three Realms

Whilst we choose to accept Keats’ description at face value and do not extend its reach beyond what is contained within the 23 words quoted above we do, however, agree with others that its use might be extended beyond the original focus, which was:

…what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously… (28th December 1817)

Murry (1926: 10-11) argues that Keats’ primary concern was with ‘pure poetry’ and the nature of the poet:

Keats and Shakespeare are alike, because they are both pure poets, and pure poetry consists in the power so to express a perception that it appears at the same time to reveal a new aspect of beauty and a new aspect of truth... [T]he pure poet is the highest of all poets, not because he turns his face away from life to devote himself to some abstract and ideal perfection, but precisely because he, more than any other kind of poet, submits himself steadily, persistently and unflinchingly to life. He, more than any other poet, has the capacity to see and feel what life is.

Our concern is with the nature of leadership and argue that, as with the poet, Negative Capability plays an important role in the quality of attention – the ‘capacity to see’ – and that this offers creative opportunity in the potential to reveal new aspects of a situation. Murry suggests that for the poet, the primary concern is with ‘beauty and truth’; for the leader, we are reflecting on an engagement with the techno-economic, political, and cultural realms. It is in this way that we build on Keats’ application, but not on his description, of Negative Capability.

In proposing our working definition of Negative Capability, we argue strongly that Keats did not intend it to be an umbrella term for a range of related capabilities. Clarity of definition is important in two respects. Firstly, the tendency to confuse Negative Capability with related capabilities can serve to detract from the radical nature of Keats' proposition. Within a capitalist society, dominated by discourses that favour a work ethic, the passive acceptance of lack of any kind is counter-cultural. The literature that tends to prefer an ‘organic conception’ (Ou, 2009: 13) manage to hide this aspect of Negative Capability amongst a range of more
acceptable positive capabilities, such as the tolerance of anxiety or the creative impulse. These might be found in those who practice Negative Capability but they are separate and distinct.

Secondly, we suggest that a more focused definition is required in order to identify the particular developmental requirements of Negative Capability in contrast to related capabilities. Even in thorough explorations, the discussions of how to develop Negative Capability in leaders are, to date, invariably vague (see, for example, Saggurthi and Thakur, 2016: 189).

*Negative Capability and the Practice of Attention to Lack*

Keats famously shunned a career in medicine and, subsequently, lurched from one financial crisis to another. Whilst forced by the demands of everyday living to engage in the techno-economic and political, his guiding purpose was the cultural realm. This is made clear if we consider further his brief discussion of Negative Capability beyond what is typically quoted:

> ...This, being pursued through volumes, would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.’ (28th December 1817)

Keats identified in Negative Capability the necessary condition for the ‘sense of Beauty’ to be conceived in the poet. Likewise, for the leader, Negative Capability can contribute to the leader’s ability to give attention to the common good. We might even go so far as to suggest that for the ethical leader the sense of the Good overcomes other considerations. Murry suggests that Negative Capability is used purposefully to avoid the misconception that beauty and truth can be obtained by reason. Keats’ insight was that important societal values could through rational thinking,

> ‘that the rational faculty was impotent to achieve truth, that intuitive apprehension was the sole faculty by which an ultimate truth could be known, that this truth could be recognized for what it was only by its beauty, that perceptions of beauty were premonitions of a final reality, that the way towards intuitive knowledge of this reality lay through a reverence for the instinctive impulses, and that somehow in this final knowledge all discords would be reconciled.’ (Murry, 1926: 32)
The purposeful use of Negative Capability is the obliteration of 'consideration'. This means 'being without' the knowledge derived from the rational faculty - laying aside one of the primary resources in modern capitalist society. Perhaps not completely - for Keats suggests that the important thing is to be 'content with half-knowledge' - nor permanently - but at least for a time. This amounts to finding the ethical good by a way of ignorance and trusting to what Keats understood as an intuitive and imaginative faculty. This is not to suggest an undisciplined engagement with reality but, rather, that Negative Capability opens a clearing for beauty to be seen, for truth to be found, and the moral good to be discerned. This form of awareness, which is not mediated by knowledge but is made possible by accepting the lack and not seeking to fill the empty space.

To appreciate the nature of the form of awareness sustained by Negative Capability requires an understanding that the practice of attention has two elements, not just one (French and Simpson, 2014: 10ff). Firstly, and commonly recognised, is ‘focused attention’ (Goleman, 2014), the ability to concentrate the resources of all capabilities (cognitive, emotive, and behavioural) on a particular object of attention. This form of attention is closely associated with knowledge and the rational faculty - both as guiding what to focus upon (the known object) and the outcome from the practice of attention (learned knowledge).

The second aspect, which is less commonly appreciated, is ‘evenly suspended attention’ Freud’s ‘gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit’ (1912, p. 111), which also translates as ‘evenly distributed’, ‘hovering’, ‘circling’, ‘free-floating’, or ‘poised’ attention. It has been described as ‘the analytic attitude’ (Snell, 2013, p. 39) and Bion (1970) specifically equated this dimension of the psychoanalytic attitude with Negative Capability.

The value of this distinction is that the practice of evenly suspended attention, Negative Capability, involves being without the resources/knowledge that ‘focused attention’ requires and identifies. It therefore involves the continuous letting go of those truths, resources, knowledge, practices, and habits that have served us well in the past and offer to remove the painful experience of anxiety, uncertainty or doubt. Bion famously and controversially described the analytic method as 'being without', an acceptance of a lack of knowledge about possible solutions, and a letting go - ‘eschewing memory and desire’ (Bion, 1970: 31).

Negative Capability, as a radical acceptance of being without, creates the conditions for giving attention to the common good in all of its multi-dimensional complexity. Arising from
the practice of Negative Capability the philosophical act – the love of wisdom – is awakened, not in an abstract sense but ‘on the pulses’. It was this awakening that led Keats to be radical in his acceptance of reality, which was not a conditional assent but rather an acute awareness combined with complete equanimity.

Illustration Part 2: the Prison Governor

We continue the Governor’s story in the early days of his time at Liverpool Prison, when he was seeking to establish the kind of leader that he wanted to be…

In my opening speech to staff I had concluded with a strong commitment to the individual… If there has been a significant but subtle shift in the Service, and perhaps elsewhere in society…it is a move away from the focus on the individual to a range of performance indicators... Within this shift there is a potential change of atmosphere – a less personalised world, a less warm world. The important element of control in prison is the atmosphere. The atmosphere is what conditions the prison and it is difficult to put it into a performance indicator. I put greater emphasis on my emotional antennae than on performance indicators. The key elements in the individualist approach are compassion, listening, and the use of discretion, which prisoners set store by. It re-emphasises that the governor must take up the role using their own personality and focus on being creative for and with individuals. In the new managerial world the governor cannot afford to be just a manager delivering a set of outputs.

By contrasting ‘a strong commitment to the individual’ with a shift in society towards ‘performance indicators’ Abbott is illustrating a tension experienced by leaders arising from the contradictions between the cultural and techno-economic realms. As we will see below, it would not be desirable nor possible for a prison governor to ignore the techno-economic, but he is arguing that an important part of the role of the leader should be to give attention to areas of lack. In this case this practice of attention leads him to want to imagine the possibility of a counter-balancing of the forces within the techno-economic realm with more humane forces within the cultural realm. In taking up his new leadership role in this way he was signalling an intention to give greater attention to a common good in the cultural realm promoting the importance of the realisation of the potential of all individuals. In this we are
not seeing the practice of Negative Capability but rather hearing a leader's self-report that shows him imagining alternative possibilities. We infer from the quality of these imaginings that Abbott has spent time letting go of received and learned certainties in order to give sufficient attention to the cultural alongside the techno-economic realms and - as we shall see later - the political realm as well.

Another way to notice the impact of Negative Capability is by observing the presence of a particular quality of philosophical thinking and this is something of which Abbott was, himself, aware. Later in his talk he addressed directly what he perceived to be a deficiency in the selection processes and development of governors:

_When I first saw the advertisement for prison governor grades in 1964 it asked for men and women of high moral character. Perhaps the Service needs to reconsider that and perhaps moral philosophy needs to be part of the training package. There is a sense in which moral philosophy provides personal support in times of crisis._

Whilst his reference to moral character suggests that his focus was on a lack of attention in the cultural realm within the modern prison service, his suggestion of a training in moral philosophy would support greater consideration of the common good in all three realms. Indeed, Murry suggests that it is evident from his letters that Keats believed such a training was intimately linked to the development of Negative Capability:

_What Keats holds to be true philosophy abstains from all dogmatism, from all self-assertion, from all 'irritable reaching after fact and reason.' True philosophy is precisely that Negative Capability that was so supremely manifested in Shakespeare. It proceeds from a natural submission of the self to all experience._ (1926: 58)

This experiential dimension to the practice of Negative Capability is evident in Abbott’s description of emphasising ‘emotional antennae rather than performance indicators’ and the key elements of an approach involving ‘compassion, listening, and the use of discretion’. This does not exclude the function of his role as ‘a manager delivering a set of outputs’ but draws attention to the dangers of a lack of humanity.

It has been argued above that within a capitalist society the techno-economic realm tends to exercise the greatest influence, which can lead to focusing attention too much on the demands
of this realm and creating lack in the other two. Abbott describes this as one aspect of change in his own role over the course of his career:

*My view is that within the Prison Service the system – the organization, its structures, and line management with a focus on delivery of a set of objectives is most prominent. This is strengthening a managerial, descriptive version of the role of governor and strengthening the authority inherent in the office of governor. In the past and when I was governor... much of the authority was a personal one.*

A capacity for the practice of Negative Capability offers the potential not for a return to ‘the good old days’ but for the possibility of simultaneously holding both a managerial and personal conception of the leader’s role in mind. The contradictory implications of these perspectives offer the potential for a creative engagement with different situations, as will be illustrated below.

Likewise, Abbott’s reflections on his experience indicate that leadership requires explicit attention to the complexities of the political realm, indicating that the Negative Capability is required to work with the inherent contradictions of seeking to provide moral leadership:

*Management is about politics and politics is the exercise of power. As the governor you have to take power, you have to bestow power, and you have to broker power. The playing of power in a closed institution is a difficult task... If you do not play the politics, you do not achieve anything and others control the institution. It is a side of the moral perspective that I spoke of earlier.*

**Illustration Part 3: An Experience of Leadership**

We have suggested that it is difficult to analyse the practice of Negative Capability in the self-report of a leader and that typically its influence must be inferred from the quality and nature of the subsequent imaginative engagement in taking up the leadership role. On this basis, we present the following as an account of a particular experience of leadership that indicates the manner in which Negative Capability and the subsequent quality of attention can contribute to the achievement of the common good in the three realms. In this episode we hear illustrated the exceedingly complex dynamics that can emerge in a crisis situation that require multiple capabilities in the challenge of pursuing the common good. There is a strong
sense in the narrative that Abbot was drawing on extensive knowledge, but in relation to the situation faced this was at best 'half-knowledge': we are given a sometimes brutally honest account of what it can be like to find oneself in a place of responsibility whilst experiencing uncertainty and doubt. The following account began when the Prison Governor’s phone rang…

*I was telephoned at home on a Sunday morning. There was a sit-down protest in a secure exercise yard. Attempts to engage the prisoners in discussion had failed.*

[Political Realm: power and conflict]

*I decided to attend the prison and went to the Emergency Control Room. I instructed that a full unit of Control and Restraint trained staff be got ready and sent a new negotiating team to meet the protesters. As the negotiators approached, the prisoners managed to rip out several iron bar railings and broke through the secure gates and onto the inner roadway of the prison. In the Control Room I was going through several shades of pale. I saw the potential for another Manchester if the prisoners broke away…*

[Techno-Economic Realm: organisational role]

...I refused a staff request to withdraw because I still believed we could hold the day though I admit I was not certain how. It was a matter of faith in the staff. Three prison officers appeared from the wings wearing shirtsleeves. Iron bars were thrown at them but one had the courage to assert his authority and ordered them to put the bars down and return to the wing because they had gone too far. They did just that. It was about staff and prisoners taking up their roles correctly. In Liverpool prison the staff have always been in control and the prisoners have always understood that. On this day this reality came to our rescue. Perhaps my belief was a reflection of that known reality.

[Political Realm: influence and resilience]

*Events began to crowd in on me and there were too many competing pressures. There was a need to meet with the police, with the press, with staff, with a very angry trade union. There were several operational decisions to be made to ensure continual control of the prison and there was a need to decide about visits for the many prisoners who had not*

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2 This is a reference to the Strangeways Prison Riot of 1990 that continued for 25 days. This is a well-documented event that can readily be found in a range of online sources.
been involved. Headquarters decided that the incident was over and closed the incident room. My belief was that we had prevented a major riot and saved a prison...

[Cultural Realm: the ‘whole’ person]

At 18:00 hours a concerned Board of Visitors insisted that I stopped to eat and they produced jam sandwiches and chips from the Mess. The day came to an end and I finally went home...

[Political Realm: conflict and representation]

...only to face a message from a member of the staff care team that everyone was blaming me. There was no respite even at home. It was not until the following afternoon that Headquarters realized what had occurred and part of their concern was to debrief ministers.

[Cultural Realm: self-realization]

There were commendations for the staff and that was very helpful in managing the aftermath. Again it takes weeks to recover from something like this. It is not only the prison that has to recover but also the governor.

[Techno-Economic Realm: financial management]

The next worry was when I realized how much money I had spent when I called in extra staff to support the prison. It was helpful to hear the Director of Finance suggest it could be a learning exercise for new ministers in how quickly the prison service could spend money to contain an operational emergency.

Implications for the Leadership Curriculum

Our discussion of the potential contribution of Negative Capability to leadership practice that gives attention to the common good has suggested a range of areas that merit greater levels of emphasis within the education and development of leaders. Some of these merit immediate consideration by educators - others require further research in order to clarify the appropriate educational methods as well as to determine likely outcomes.
We have interpreted Ramsey's (2014) call for a scholarship of practice centred on attention rather than knowledge as directly relevant to the potential contribution of Negative Capability to leadership practice, including the pursuit of the common good. Whilst we believe that care needs to be taken to differentiate the relative merits of the two forms of attention ('focused' and 'evenly suspended'), a great deal is known about the development of these capabilities. One example provided by Ramsey that is relevant to the development of Negative Capability is mindfulness. This is already emerging as a feature in various leadership programmes throughout the world although we believe that traditional Buddhist approaches to 'right mindfulness' (Purser and Milillo, 2015) are most relevant to the development of Negative Capability and its role in the development of awareness and equanimity (Hart, 1987).

In a knowledge economy, any consideration of 'lack' tends to have primarily negative connotations. However, within an educational context, it might be possible to encourage an understanding of giving attention to lack (as poverty, vulnerability, and meaninglessness) as central to the creation of learning opportunities. A corollary of this shift in attention from possession (of resourcefulness, power, and purpose) onto lack is that learning and development emerges not, primarily, as sure and certain knowledge but rather as the imaginative creation of possibilities. Framed in this way, it is possible that experiential learning processes might be used purposefully to develop not just Negative Capability but also the cluster of related capabilities that we have argued tend to be confused or conflated with Negative Capability in most of the leadership literature.

Our specific focus of modern capitalism is a particular example of the potential relevance of Negative Capability. We believe that Bell's (1996) analysis would be of value in any leadership curriculum, whether related to Negative Capability or not. This would benefit from attention to the distinctiveness of all three realms and an emphasis on the sometimes irresolvable contradictory relationships between the realms.

Throughout our discussion we have alluded to various difficulties with the practice of Negative Capability by leaders within a capitalist context and, as a consequence, any educator as well as leadership practitioner would do well to give the following list of issues further consideration:

- In a knowledge economy, practices of letting go of resource and an active acknowledgement of lack are sensitive issues - personally, interpersonally, and
organisationally. Managing the expectations we have of ourselves, let alone those of others, is complex in a context where the leader is typically seen as ‘the one who is supposed to know’ (Lacan, 1977: 232). Others may not wish to exercise Negative Capability, preferring the security of certainty and invulnerability. Wisdom and courage may be required to manage the challenges and conflicts that arise.

- The security of certainty and resource, even as fantasy, is typically more appealing than engaging with lack and acknowledging ignorance. Actively letting go of resource, in any form, can appear to common sense as an act of irresponsibility, if not folly. An explicit engagement with lack and not-knowing runs the risk of becoming an act of political suicide.

- The philosophical attitude requires a commitment to development and change that cannot be assumed. For example, in his acclaimed study of experiences in groups, Bion (1961) observed ‘the hatred of a process of development … a hatred of having to learn by experience at all, and lack of faith in the worth of such a kind of learning.’ (p.89)

Post-script: The Prison Governor’s legacy

We have focused on the potential contribution of Negative Capability to some specific organizational and leadership dynamics within a capitalist society. Inevitably, this focus has been limited and, to a degree, restrictive. The Prison Governor’s reflections on his legacy suggest the possibility of a more expansive consideration of the leader’s role and suggest further areas of direct relevance to the potential contribution of Negative Capability that might form part of a more fully rounded education.

When I debriefed myself on retiring from the Service, I was surprised to understand how big a part death had played in the events of prison life. When the Chief Inspector offered me feedback in Liverpool from the staff it was to say that I was good at funeral speeches. I had spoken at three staff funerals. He did not offer feedback on whether they had said I was any good as governor. It is always interesting to know what matters in leadership and the professional training rarely prepares you for it.

Suicide is a big concern in prison. Prison staff do care and do hurt from suicide. Liverpool had the worst record of suicide and there had been four deaths in each of the previous years when I arrived. At the end of three years as governor the figure
had reduced to one in two years. Still too many... The personal attention I paid to staff deaths may also have contributed to developing staff concern about death... The continual reiteration of the message that we cared may have reached them. A prison in a dramatic process of change sent a message of care. Making a lot of noise about suicide and about care was important... Perhaps the respect the staff and unions came to have for a governor that respected them was reflected in their greater respect for prisoners. Because I cared passionately rather than managerially the institution which represented me came also to care.

We are reminded that Plato famously called philosophy a preparation for death. This is the kind of experiential philosophy that Keats developed 'on the pulses' and it seems to us that nothing demonstrates the importance of Negative Capability more than when we dare to remember that organisational life includes many moments of death - literal and figurative. As Abbott illustrates with such eloquence, those who develop a high level of capability in 'being without' are able to provide a remarkable quality of leadership at such testing moments.

References


