

Negative Capability and Care of the Self

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Bill Abbott worked for over thirty-seven years as a policy advisor and operational prison governor at two UK institutions - Pentonville and then Liverpool. When he retired, he gave a talk at the Tavistock Institute in London in which he shared his personal philosophy of leadership. He said,

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. (Abbott 2000)

Our purpose in quoting this rather strange reflection on death is to draw attention to the greater breadth of concerns than is typically considered a part of the leader's responsibility. We are also hinting at our central claim about caring leadership, which entails an engagement with the transformation of self in the world. This involves a renewed approach to the ways in which we typically understand leadership development and practice.

Through the particular lenses of Negative Capability (Saggurthi and Thakur, 2016) and Care of the Self (Foucault, 1990), we will argue that an aspiration to practice caring leadership involves a commitment to the development of self-knowledge. Following an exploration of our key themes, we will draw upon Abbott's reflections to illustrate how a phenomenological inquiry into one's experience of self may serve to heighten the quality of attention that leaders give in complex situations. In a sector increasingly dominated by systems and driven by targets and performance indicators, we suggest that Abbott's accounts reveal a dedication to re-humanising leadership by challenging his organisation to recognise that *being human matters*. This implies the need to develop a capacity for courage, trust and care in order to make decisions that are not driven by our personal agenda and fear of failure.

Caring and compassionate organisational leadership is often understood as necessary in situations where organisational members are experiencing difficulty, perhaps suffering stress or anxiety. The caring leader might be one who steps in to help out, providing comfort, resolving a problem. Such an understanding of 'care' is aligned with the etymological roots of the term in Old High German *chara* 'grief, lament' and Old Norse *kǫr* 'sickbed'.

We broaden the conception of care here and propose that it includes the development of an attitude of concern. 'Concern' derives etymologically from the Latin *concernere*: *con-* indicating heightened intensity and *cernere*, meaning to sift or discern. This entails a heightened quality of attention. However, we challenge the notion that leaders merely need to learn to 'pay better attention' to what is happening within their organisation and its context. Leaders typically cast themselves as extremely busy and so it is important that we do not merely add to their 'to do' list by demanding that they 'be more caring'. By contrast, we suggest that the poet Keats' enigmatic notion of Negative Capability is a quality of *being*

rather than a way of *thinking, feeling or doing*. As a consequence, it offers a radically different way of understanding care as a heightened quality of attention.

Negative Capability

Over the last two centuries, Negative Capability has influenced numerous fields of study – in literature, psychology, social work and leadership studies. Keats described it as when one is

‘capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.’ (Gittings 1970: 43).

There are two important elements in Keats’ description, both in a sense ‘negative’ but in different ways. The first is ‘negative’ in the sense that it is not a ‘capability’ at all, if by capability is meant that which we *think, feel, or do*. In this first sense, Negative Capability is concerned with *being* in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts. The second meaning of the phrase is ‘negative’ in that it is concerned with *not* feeling, doing or thinking: it is *being without* any irritable reaching after fact and reason. Negative Capability is thus *being* and *being without*. It is concerned with *being* rather than thinking, feeling, and doing, and it is concerned with *being without* the forms of thinking, feeling, and doing that we turn to in a search for the security of the familiar. We suggest that this is a *simple* interpretation of Keats’ description of Negative Capability.

However, at another level there is something complex and inscrutable about this notion, demonstrated, for example, by the many interpretations of the phrase in the literature. Saggurthi and Thakur (2016) provide an interesting and informative review – and it is revealing that the various interpretations differ from one another and from what we argue here. To highlight the *complexity* of Keats’ insight, we need say little more than that the nature of ‘being’ has absorbed the attention of some of the greatest minds since antiquity, from Aristotle to Heidegger, and that the related literature is notoriously difficult to understand. Rather than attempting to explain the nature of being, we seek an understanding of Negative Capability *in practice* through the lens of Keats’ own philosophy ‘on the pulses’ (Gittings 1970: 93), through which he gives attention to the phenomenology of his own experience.

To appreciate the contribution of Negative Capability to caring leadership requires an understanding that attention has more than one aspect (French and Simpson, 2014: 10ff). We will consider two. The first is the ability to concentrate the resources of all (positive) capabilities (*thinking, feeling and doing*) on an object. This is closely associated with knowledge, both in guiding what to focus upon (the known object) and in determining the nature of the outcome from the practice of attention (learned knowledge). This is particularly relevant to a systemic understanding of organisation underpinning, for example, notions of evaluation, measurement and best practice. Caring leadership involving a heightened quality of *focused* attention will draw upon Negative Capability through a concern for the proper object of attention – *being without* those thoughts, feelings and actions that are a distraction. Negative Capability also contributes to caring leadership through the second - less commonly appreciated - aspect of ‘evenly suspended attention’, Freud’s ‘*gleichschwebende Aufmerksamkeit*’ (*Ibid.* p.1). This implies an engagement with reality in a fuller sense: it does not focus on anything in particular but is open and receptive,

scanning the inner and outer 'environments', mobilising an attitude of inquiry in the pursuit of 'truth'. This is an awareness of being, resting in 'uncertainty, Mystery, doubt', without requiring a sense of direction from existing sense, knowledge or action.

The value of making clear this distinction between focused and evenly suspended attention is that there is a tendency to favour the former, which requires knowledge and aligns with a desire for control. The latter is capable of being without control and involves the continuous letting go of the knowledge, feelings, practices, and habits that have served us well in the past, tempting us to give them their attention through the illusory promise to remove the painful experience of anxiety and doubt.

Negative Capability, as a radical acceptance of *being* and *being without*, thus creates the conditions for giving a heightened quality of attention in all of its multi-dimensional complexity. We will now discuss how the Care of the Self can contribute to the development of Negative Capability, before exploring the implications for the practice of caring leadership.

Care of the Self

The Care of the Self (*heautou epimeleisthai*) is an ancient spiritual and philosophical practice of giving attention to one's own being. Foucault (1990: 49) cites the Stoic philosopher Seneca as asking, 'people to transform their existence into a kind of permanent exercise'. In addition to general prescriptions for the care of the body (diet, health, exercise, etc.), the extensive literatures across many traditions have many common themes. There are a number of related practices that have recently seen something of a renaissance in organisational thinking, including meditation, retreats, various kinds of study, conversation, friendships, and guides (e.g. coaches, consultants and advisers). The shift that is required beyond current practice is from a remedial focus *at the level of need* (e.g. stress management, career development, problem resolution) to the aspiration for a developmental transformation *at the level of being*.

Contrary to the solipsistic concerns of many modern approaches to personal and professional development, Hadot (1995: 82) asserts that by means of spiritual exercises, the individual is re-located 'within the perspective of the Whole'. This has important consequences for caring leadership in that a transformation occurs not only in being but also in the way in which things are seen. This emphasis of a shift in perspective indicates how caring leadership might arise from a change in quality of attention rather than a need to do more.

The development of a heightened quality of attention - referred to as 'vigilance' (*prosochē*) in the Stoic literature - is an exercise in its own right, which contributes to a range of other spiritual exercises. Hadot argues that attention 'is, in a sense, the key to spiritual exercises' (p. 85). Hadot categorises the exercises that comprise the Care of the Self as meditations, 'remembrances of good things', intellectual exercises (e.g. reading, listening, research, and investigation), and more active exercises (e.g. self-mastery, accomplishment of duties, and indifference to indifferent things).

What we are suggesting is that the capacity for Negative Capability is an awareness arising from self-knowledge that can be developed through the Care of the Self: a range of spiritual exercises that 'have as their goal the transformation of our vision of the world, and the metamorphosis of our being.' (*Ibid.* p. 127).

It further helps our understanding of their developmental function to note that these spiritual exercises are often referred to as ascetic exercises. The notion of *spiritual* exercises encourages us to appreciate the development of that capacity of Negative Capability that is *being*. By contrast, we can associate the *ascetic* characteristics of the exercises as concerned with the development of a capacity for *being without*. However, it should be noted that the modern understanding of asceticism needs some refinement if we are to better understand the philosophical traditions of Care of the Self. Modern sensibilities recoil at the perception of asceticism as an austere, disciplined – perhaps even inhuman - process of self-denial. This is an understanding of *being without* as 'abstinence' or 'restriction' and, if left unbalanced, is entirely the wrong emphasis to apply. As the phrase 'Care of the Self' implies, these exercises are practiced as a form of self-care not self-abuse.

A more helpful focus for our purposes is found in the ancient roots of the term, which derives etymologically from the Greek adjective *askētikos*, meaning laborious, and the verb *askein*, meaning to exercise or work. *Askēsis* was the term used in Ancient Greece when speaking of the athlete in training and has the connotation of a disciplined exercise regime. We can perhaps better translate 'ascetic exercises' merely as 'exercises' – albeit those with a serious, disciplined intent. It is, perhaps, also worthy of note, in passing, that the etymological roots of the term discipline relate to learning (c.f. disciple as learner) rather than restriction. In ancient philosophy the term was used to refer to spiritual exercises that have not merely a moral, but also an existential value. These are not intended to be isolated practices but form part of an integrated regime: developmental activities not merely leading to improvements in moral conduct, but contributing to a philosophical life designed to achieve a radical transformation in self-knowledge, a fundamental reconstruction of one's being in the world.

An appreciation of the importance of discipline and training in organizational and leadership practice is not entirely absent, but there is a general neglect of the dedication required to become capable of dealing with particularly challenging situations. The ancient philosophical traditions suggest the need for a more disciplined engagement with one's own development in order to become capable of 'being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason'.

Foucault (1990) draws our attention to the range of 'exercise regimes' required for the transformation of existence into a 'permanent exercise', citing care in the political life (pp.81ff), of the body (pp.97ff), the soul (pp.133ff), and all manner of relations with others (pp.145ff). We are thus proposing an approach to caring leadership that emanates from the philosophical life, a developmental path to self-knowledge. Far from our typically modern association of asceticism with the experience of restriction and abstinence, the ancient emphasis was upon the (re-)generative potential of such work. It is possible, therefore, to understand the intention of ascetic practice as fostering a passionate care for whatever is considered to be of the greatest importance. This does not deny that such a practice will sometimes need to draw upon hard, sometimes painful, disciplinary practices in order to prepare for challenging situations – much like athletes must discipline their bodies to

develop a capacity to compete against fierce and determined adversaries. However, as an act of self-care rather than self-denial, any price is deemed to be worth paying, any restriction worth suffering, for a new vision of the world and the capacity to remain true to oneself in the face of uncertainty, Mystery, doubt. Such a training develops a capacity for care, arising from a metamorphosis of our being.

These ideas are alien to common understandings of leadership practice because of the pervasive influences of post-Enlightenment thinking (utilitarianism, rationality and empiricism). We do not engage with our being through the pursuit of usefulness, reason or evidence. The Care of the Self is not concerned with 'philosophizing' in the sense of constructing a system of productive ideas and efficacious knowledge, but is rooted in the ancient traditions of *theoria*, contemplation, which is a receptive form of knowing beyond theory. This is a knowing which is tested and proven by experience 'on the pulses'.

Giving serious consideration to ascetic work as Care of the Self through disciplined exercise opens up the possibility of an understanding of caring leadership as based on attention, awareness and the discernment of reality-oriented thought. From this perspective it is the work of philosophy to uncover this underlying motivation: an intention to establish or perpetuate goodness in the world, beginning with oneself. However, it is important not to let binary thinking dominate our understanding of the practice of Negative Capability and the Care of the Self. We are not suggesting that the leader who has given sufficient attention to self then has the capacity to give to others. The primary purpose of caring leadership is not to act in a caring way towards the other but neither is it to be undertaken as a solipsistic endeavour: these exercises are designed to give a perspective of the world and to develop a capacity for a heightened quality of attention that is always and inherently social: 'the work of oneself on oneself and communication with others are linked together.' (Foucault, 1990: 51).

Foucault is very clear that the tradition of the care of the self 'is not an exercise in solitude, but a true social practice' (1990: 51). In this regard, it is helpful to note the importance of social structures that both support and constitute the Care of the Self, for example, in drawing upon the services of 'the private consultant... a life counsellor, a political adviser, a potential intermediary in a negotiation.... professor, guide, adviser, and personal confidant... kinship, friendship' (p.52).

It is in this sense that developing Negative Capability arises from the philosophical attitude. Through a commitment to living the philosophical life, the love of wisdom is awakened - not in an abstract sense but 'on the pulses' – and the phenomenological inquiry of the Care of the Self leads to the emerging realisation of a deep-seated care for goodness, beauty and truth discovered at the level of being. And this not with a narcissistic focus on the development of self-knowledge, but rather as a social process that fosters a rejuvenated vision of the world. It was such an awakening that led Keats to be radical in his acceptance of the uncertain, mysterious nature of reality.

Care of the Self and Negative Capability in Practice

Keats had been schooled in philosophy from a young age and it can be observed that he had developed his own practice of Care of the Self. He is recognised as much for his letters as for

his poetry and in these it is possible to discern the unsystematic development of a personal philosophy. These letters comprise meditations on his life and practice, personal reflections, the recollection of truths, revelations of the state of his soul, and requests for and gifts of advice. Whilst he lived only to the age of 25, there survive over 240 of his letters to family and friends. From these we know that he was in the habit of taking a regular retreat within himself and that his approach was to conduct an ongoing phenomenological inquiry into his own experience. This is one modern understanding of the ancient practice of Care of the Self.

We will now reflect on some aspects of the leadership practice of Bill Abbott, the prison governor who provided us with a tantalising reflection on death in our introduction. We will suggest that, like Keats, Abbott demonstrates a capacity for an ongoing phenomenological inquiry into his own experience. Importantly, in our view, both Keats and Abbott also demonstrate a capacity to develop their own approach to Care of the Self. It is our assumption that if ascetic/spiritual exercises are going to contribute to a developing practice of care then it is important that they are freely chosen and not experienced as an externally imposed regime of discipline and restriction. Moreover, the uniqueness of each person, role and circumstance means that every individual must take up the freedom to determine their own regime for the Care of the Self. This is obvious when one considers that the development of self-knowledge and the nature of the philosophical life will vary considerably between the ‘philosopher’ *qua* philosopher, poet, or organisational leader. However, this is not to say that everyone is left to work it out for themselves: we are illustrating in the philosophical traditions of Care of the Self that there are many resources upon which to draw – ancient and modern. We know that Abbott drew on the Tavistock tradition, rooted in psychoanalysis rather than philosophy, and was supported by a coach from the Tavistock Institute (see Armstrong, 2005).

Hadot argues that the Care of the Self is exemplified in Socrates who was an educational leader, who had no interest in best practice, ‘had no system to teach. Throughout, his philosophy was a spiritual exercise, an invitation to a new way of life, active reflection, and living consciousness.’ (Hadot, 1995: 157). We can see echoes of this in Abbott’s practice, which consistently shuns a reliance upon ‘best practice’ and the demands of the system but demonstrates an attention to the present moment by means of a very human inquiry. In the following discussion, we select excerpts from Abbott’s (2000) account that describe his own phenomenological inquiry, which is central to Care of the Self. We do not attempt a systematic analysis of his behaviour in relation to the practices of Negative Capability and Care of the Self. Rather, we present an illustrative narrative that might be considered a modern example of someone for whom these ideas have meaning. Further, we invite the reader to decide whether this presents a picture of something that might reasonably be thought of as caring leadership.

In the early days of his time at Liverpool Prison, Abbott argues that his approach to organisational leadership was less focused on the legitimacy of the managerial role and more an issue of being human...

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.

...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.

One of the attractions of managerialism of the kind that Abbott eschews is that it provides a safety net of certainty for the leader who is day by day facing uncertain occurrences. This safety is a defensive reliance on the collective knowledge of 'best practice', encouraging leaders to follow patterns of organisation that are prevalent in similar institutions. This fearful, anxiety-laden response to the challenge of leadership is precisely what Keats is alluding to in his phrase 'irritable reaching after fact & reason'. In taking up a 'personal authority', Abbott is accepting the responsibility and accountability of his role to himself. This is not to neglect existing knowledge, and the importance of learning from good practice, but it is to recognise that authentic behaviour will entail a recognition that it is particular and not general knowledge that will be most important in a specific situation. This approach to caring leadership demands a practice not merely of giving focused attention to the presenting issues, but also to practice evenly suspended attention, with a vision emanating from one's whole being, 'on the pulses' and not 'by the book'. This involves remaining in touch with being human, and it is this, which time and again in his talk, Abbott says, '...returns me to the central theme of individuality and the importance of understanding... person, role and system.'

Abbott's understanding of personal authority is not a narcissistic insistence on one's own ideas but is enacted through a commitment to taking responsibility for making discerning judgements, and not falling back on what the system dictates the leader should do. An overreliance on procedures and protocols in leadership constitutes a barrier to the development of a philosophical attitude. When leaders rely on externally determined factors, like performance indicators, attention is captured by predetermined outcomes in a way that can prevent the leader from paying attention and being receptive to what matters. Caring leadership requires the exercise of personal responsibility, courage and risk taking in the face of a systemic expectation to impose controls predicated upon standardisation, generalisation and an adherence to prescribed norms of practice.

In the following excerpt, Abbott describes attending to systems in a humanising way by taking up a personal authority, suggesting a resonance with a Care of the Self in the 'intellectual exercises' of listening and investigation (discernment):

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 created by *being without*. In this case this practice of attention leads him to want to imagine the possibility of counterbalancing the demands of performance indicators with a more humane sensibility, recognising that people want to be seen for who they are, and treated with appropriate compassion and understanding. In taking up his leadership role in this way he was signalling an intention to give a heightened quality of attention to what he refers to as the ‘personal’. In this he is undertaking, with Negative Capability, the work of attending to the emotional ‘data’, sensitised to a wider array of factors than are typically contained within the systemic indicators of effective organisational performance.

We infer that Abbott has learned the importance of *being without* received certainties (e.g. guidelines for best practice) in order to give sufficient evenly suspended attention to a wider range of ‘indicators’ within his institution. In alluding to his ‘emotional antennae’ he is signalling a high level of confidence in his self-knowledge. This experiential dimension to the practice of Negative Capability – being in uncertainty and without imposing pre-existing, known solutions - is evident in Abbott’s description 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 demonstrates a commitment to avoiding the dangers of giving insufficient attention to the foundational reality of *being human* in an institution like a prison, for all the uncertainties of that reality and the systemic and societal encouragement to objectify and stereotype prisoners as something less than human.

Providing a specific example of the nature of caring leadership through heightened attention to the emotional atmosphere of the institution, Abbott talks about his practice of ‘walking the landings’ of the prison, illustrating the importance merely of ‘being there’:

Above all else it provides the opportunity to feel the institution and having felt it to work with and on the feeling. The task is to absorb the emotion and thus allow people to take up their role free of negative emotion, which detracts from their performance. Often just being there will remove the emotion. Often just listening to the anger will move it.

We see this form of caring leadership described by Abbott when he makes reference to the ‘personal attention’ that he paid to staff, as well as the assertion that he ‘cared passionately rather than managerially’:

Liverpool was proud of being the biggest prison. I used this and issued mugs, keyrings, pens with the logo ‘Security and Care in the Biggest Prison’. It got the word care into the language of the prison. The personal attention I paid to staff deaths [in my funeral speeches] may also have contributed to developing staff concerns about death. This returns us to the complex relationship between staff and prisoners. Those who attempt suicide are looking to be cared for at one level. The prison was changing and prisoners themselves acknowledged this.

The decision to allow them to wear their own trainers was a significant indication of change and care. The continual reiteration of the message that we cared may have reached them. A prison in a process of dramatic change sent a message of care. Making a lot of noise about suicide and about care was important. This is about organisational dynamics and about how the psyche of an organisation can affect

individuals within them. It is also about the governor consciously holding the issues and working with them in the subconscious of the organisation. 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.

This is an example of how the Care of the Self can underpin a discerning and heightened quality of attention not solely towards individuals in need but also to the organisation as a whole. By using some very basic psychology – putting the word ‘care’ on the prison mugs – Abbott worked attentively with the organisational subconscious. Working intuitively in this way is one thing – working on these levels consciously requires a vigilant commitment to the development of self-knowledge.

And, again, Abbott returns to the theme of death. This is symptomatic of an experiential philosophy developed 'on the pulses' of an uncertain and precarious institution like a prison 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. Hadot (1995: 95) makes clear that Care of the Self is a ‘training to die to *one’s individuality and passions*, in order to look at things from the perspective of universality and objectivity’ (italics in the original). This is a social and not selfish practice. It is also concerned with a renewed vision of the world, for all its limitations, imperfections and difficulties. As Abbott illustrates with such eloquence, those who develop a high level of capability in *being* and *being without* are better able to provide a heightened quality of attention in their leadership in such testing conditions.

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