Article

Leadership

Stoicism, philosophy as a way of life and Negative Capability: Developing a capacity for working in radical uncertainty

Leadership
2023, Vol. 19(5) 393–412

DOI: 10.1177/17427150231178092
journals.sagepub.com/home/lea


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Abstract

Philosophy and leadership are not generally held in close association. By contrast, this paper is a call to action for the academy and organisational practitioners to reflect on the potential contribution to leadership of a practice of philosophy as a way of life. In this, we explore what this might entail with an illustrative focus on Stoicism because of its explicit attention to working in radical uncertainty. Recent literature has also identified the potential merits of Negative Capability in this regard, and we discuss how this capacity is closely related to many Stoic practices. We challenge dominant leadership discourses at a fundamental level and argue that there is a need to consider approaches to leadership education and development that go beyond merely gaining new knowledge, skills and techniques. The requirement, which is also an opportunity, is nothing less than a transformation at the level of being and of one's vision of the world. The theoretical contribution of the paper is supported by empirical evidence from a study with ten organizational executives who were introduced to Negative Capability through an arts-based methodology. This study provides insight into the potential contribution of ideas from Stoic philosophy to the development of a capacity to work with uncertainty. However, a core argument of this paper is that working in radical uncertainty requires more than a 'quick fix' and practitioners must learn to develop their own practice of philosophy as a way of life.

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Keywords
Negative Capability, leadership, Stoicism, philosophy, uncertainty, leadership developoment, leadership education

Winston Churchill (1985: 426) once said: 'It is a joke in Britain to say that the War Office is always preparing for the last war.' He was pointing out the folly of looking backwards to understand the present, particularly when that present moment is replete with uncertainty. That is, leaders tend to rely upon accumulated knowledge even though every new situation is in a new environment, with new actors, new challenges, and new possibilities. In such circumstances, we simply *don't yet know* the right strategies. Churchill was suggesting that attention should be directed to the requirements of the current situation, even if, in that present moment, leaders come face-to-face with what they do not know.

A prevailing view is that those who exercise leadership should be 'those who know,' and this expectation can give a sense of needing to create an illusion of knowing, even in situations of uncertainty, both for the individual's sense of competence as well as to inspire confidence in others. One approach is to act in a bold and decisive way (Simpson et al., 2002: 1210), even though such actions are frequently *reactions*, born out of past knowledge. The pressure to act counters the requirement to take time to think more deeply and to reflect on the specific characteristics of the situation.

Is there a way of looking at, and listening to, the present situation beyond the horizon of one's accumulated knowledge? Can leaders find a way of suspending habituated reactions that often block fresh, relevant insight, a way of perceiving that is not constrained by remembrance but is expanded through imaginative possibilities? Several authors have discussed the potential merits of Negative Capability in this regard (see, for example, Bennis, 2009; Bülow and Simpson, 2022; Grint, 2022a, 2022b; Saggurthi and Thakur, 2016). We add to this literature by exploring the relationship between Stoicism, as an example of a philosophy that can be practiced as a way of life (Hadot, 1995), and Negative Capability. In particular, we are concerned with what these ideas and practices can offer to support the development of a capacity to work in uncertainty.

With notable exceptions (for example Case et al., 2011; Cunliffe, 2009; Grint, 2007; Yuan et al., 2022), philosophy and leadership are not generally held in close association. By contrast, we propose that the development of a philosophy as a way of life (Hadot, 1995) can make a significant contribution to leadership and, furthermore, that Stoicism is an example of a philosophy that provides a lens through which leaders may discover new ways of working in uncertainty.

Hadot (1995) describes philosophy as a way of life as an inner attitude of epistemic and ontological inquiry. The idea of philosophy as practice points to an embodied way of being in the world (Reydams-Schils, 2010) with a heightened quality of attention (Bülow and Simpson, 2022). This has links to the ancient Delphic dictum *Know Thyself*, a tradition of thought that spans from Socrates to Descartes and beyond (Hadot, 1995). Stoicism, says Hadot, "[...] will insist on the effort needed to pay attention to oneself, the joyous acceptance of the present moment imposed on us by fate" (p. 69). As such, the idea of adopting a practice of philosophy as a way of life is about developing a lifestyle and, we propose, a leadership style that includes a deliberate practice of attention to self and the world and a commitment to personal transformation at the level of being (Bülow and Simpson, 2022).

Whilst developing the capability to work in uncertainty might have genuine appeal to the organizational leader, particularly in the light of current world affairs, there are some who will still clamour for a quick and simple way of achieving this. However, neither Stoicism, an example of

a practice of philosophy as a way of life, nor Negative Capability offer an expedient route to being certain. They each challenge dominant leadership discourses at a fundamental level, and we argue that there is a need to consider approaches to leadership education and development that go beyond merely gaining new knowledge, skills and techniques. The requirement, which is also an opportunity, is nothing less than a transformation at the level of being and one's vision of the world (Hadot, 1995: 127). This can be achieved with a commitment to the development of a personal leadership philosophy, a way of being in the world (Reydams-Schils, 2010), that is not merely espoused but also practiced (Case et al., 2011).

The theoretical contribution of the paper is supported by empirical evidence from a study with ten organizational executives who were introduced to Negative Capability through an arts-based methodology. This study provides some insight into the potential contribution of Stoic philosophy and Negative Capability to the development of a capacity to work in uncertainty. However, a core argument of this paper is that working in radical uncertainty requires the development of a practice of philosophy as a way of life (Hadot, 1995), which was beyond the scope of the empirical study undertaken.

Working in radical uncertainty

> … life is a warfare and a stranger's sojourn, and after-fame is oblivion. What then is that which is able to conduct a man? One thing and only one, philosophy.
>
> Marcus Aurelius, *Meditations* 2:17

Roman Emperor from AD 161–180, Marcus Aurelius is perhaps the most well-known Stoic. He was at war when he wrote this meditation, expressing his opinion that the whole of human life can be likened to combat. This metaphor has resonances with the 'radical uncertainty' named by Tourish (2020) as characteristic of the challenges facing modern business leaders, for which he argues mainstream leadership theory offers inadequate answers. We can think about and evaluate organisational uncertainty in many ways but for our purposes, Tourish highlights the scale of the challenge for which Stoic philosophy offers appropriate insights.

The 'philosopher-king,' a designation by which Marcus Aurelius was known within his lifetime, concludes that such an experience can only be helped by adopting a practice of philosophy as a way of life. His commitment to Stoicism gives us an insight into the way in which he practiced leadership with a sense of duty and respect for others. With its focus not merely upon personal development, but also on our relations with others, society, the wider world, and the environment, these characteristics might also give some insight into 'how businesses can be reconfigured to serve wider stakeholder needs, including those of long-term rather than short-term shareholders,' (Tourish, 2020: 268).

Much of the recent literature that applies Stoicism to leadership practice has a focus on character traits (for example, see Guerin, 2022; Romaneck, 2007), which does little more than re-visit heroic leader narratives and, in our opinion, largely misses what makes Stoicism worthy of study in relation to modern leadership. A more noteworthy literature explores the ethical contribution of this philosophy to leadership practice (Gloyn, 2020; Small, 2013). Marcus Aurelius was – and is - admired for his avoidance of the self-seeking abuse of power that was characteristic of the emperors that followed him. This is an important aspect of the potential relevance of Stoicism in the modern era although this focus is different to our own.

The value of his philosophical practice for our purposes is not in demonstrating how he oversaw exceptional performance in others as is typically measured, but in providing us with an insight into how he developed and maintained a capacity for working in radical uncertainty. In this, we are not implying that organisational performance is unimportant. Rather, we are arguing that leadership decision making cannot merely prioritise a limited range of measures of performance above other outcomes if the intention is to 'serve wider stakeholder needs.' A more complex philosophical reflection is required, which we will argue requires leaders to draw upon Negative Capability.

Our reference to a prominent national leader might provoke a concern that we believe that philosophy as a way of life, in general, and Stoicism, in particular, is only for elites. However, we hope to demonstrate that this is not the case. Such a practice is of relevance to any individuals, not just hierarchical leaders, who might wish to contribute to more effective leadership by giving attention to living in accord with themselves, with others, and with the wider world (Seneca, 2010: xii). Indeed, one of the key Stoic philosophers, Epictetus, was not from an elite class but was born into slavery. He was allowed an education by his owner and after receiving his freedom, founded a Stoic school (Valantasis, 1999; Long, 1974; Adamson, 2015). Epictetus demonstrates that inclination, ability, and aptitude for learning play a vital role in the development and practice of a philosophy as a way of life.

It is worth noting that we are not seeking to promote Stoicism as the answer – it is merely a good example of a philosophy that might be of value in the modern era and, when adopted as a way of life, may lead to experiences of Negative Capability. Moreover, we do not anticipate that many participating in organisational leadership will rush to the practice of philosophy as a way of life – despite Marcus Aurelius' conviction that this is the 'one thing' necessary. We are presenting something that is probably as far as it is possible to get from a 'quick fix' and it is telling that none of the Roman Emperors who followed him would approach the task of leadership in a similar manner.

Negative Capability and Stoicism

The poet, John Keats, described Negative Capability as

> … when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason… (Letter to his two brothers, 28th December 1817 in Gittings, 1970: 43)

Saggurthi and Thakur (2016) have reviewed the various ways in which this notion has been explored in the organization studies literature, favouring a broad definition that follows Ou's (2009: 13) framing of it as an 'an organic conception that is itself growing all the time.' By contrast, we choose to stay close to Keats' own words, arguing that he is drawing attention to the challenge of remaining *capable of being* when assailed by 'uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts' (for a more detailed discussion of this point, see Bülow and Simpson, 2022: 23–27). This connects directly with Hadot's (1995: 127) interpretation of the Stoic practices as concerned with transformation at the level of *being*. In a manner reminiscent of the ascetic dimension of the Stoic disciplines, this also requires developing the capability of *being without* (any 'irritable reaching after fact & reason').

We suggest that this is a more radical understanding of Keats' notion of Negative Capability than those who define it in broad terms, which tends to consist merely of assimilating existing concepts and practices, like the capacity to tolerate anxiety (French, 2001; Grint, 2007), openness and a heightened quality of receptiveness to reality (Bate, 1963; Cornish, 2011). We contend that Negative Capability is not a positive capability expressed in an enigmatic phrase. If, as is generally understood, a capability is a level of competence in thinking, feeling and/or doing, then Negative

Capability is not a capability at all. It is a way of *being in the world* that is not defined in the language of such positive capabilities. As such, Negative Capability is also a way of *being without* – it invites us to shift our attention away from the illusory certainties of knowing and doing.

Within a capitalist society, dominated by discourses that favour a strong work ethic, it is fiercely counter-cultural to accept the validity of 'being in uncertainties' without actively pursuing a performative agenda through forms of doing, thinking, or feeling. We suggest that the literature that tends to prefer Ou's (2009) 'organic conception,' as discussed above, is hiding this radical aspect of Negative Capability amongst a range of more acceptable positive capabilities. These capabilities might well be found in those who draw upon Negative Capability, but they are separate and distinct.

Negative Capability is radical in its acceptance of what is, in the present moment, without recourse to defensive routines. It is to allow oneself to be touched by reality, to feel in oneself the truth of the moment. To appreciate this, we need to understand what Keats meant when he famously cried, 'O for a Life of Sensations rather than Thought!' (Letter to Bailey, 22 November 1817, in Gittings, 1970: 37). Bari (2012) suggests that,

> 'Keats feels… life, phenomenally and affectively, and he expresses it in his poetry, where the feeling of things cultivates a feeling for life, in the sense of an aptitude, sensitivity or susceptibility to all that it entails. The term 'feeling' operated broadly… moving between the distinctions of sensation, emotion, and apprehension. In all three cases, feeling designates something that is non-conceptual, or not 'known' in the properly Kantian sense, but is 'felt' as surely as it were.' (p. xvii)

Through allowing himself to be in touch with his being, Keats was capable of feeling truthfully, authentically and with subtle accuracy. Murry describes the feeling-state that arises from Negative Capability as a 'state of extreme and agonizing receptivity, this passive sensitiveness of the being' (1926: 53).

It is evident in Keats' letters as well as his poetry that he was a philosopher (Bari, 2012) as well as a poet. For our purposes, it is significant that his was not an abstract philosophy but rather, a practice of philosophy as a way of life. He was concerned with a transformation at the level of his being and of his vision of the world, which is precisely the emphasis in Hadot's (1995) scholarly exploration of Stoicism. When Keats refers to sensations, he is pointing towards an intense experience of the present moment, and not to feelings or emotions in a simplistic sense. His view was that philosophical axioms need to be 'proved upon our pulses' (Gittings, 1970: 93, letter to Reynolds, 3 May 1818). In this respect, Murry (1926) argues, 'What Keats holds to be true philosophy abstains from all dogmatism, from all self-assertion... It proceeds from a natural submission of the self to all experience.' (p.58).

Again, not dissimilar to the meditation of Marcus Aurelius quoted above, Keats' philosophy was developed through reflection upon often bitter experience. His was a life of relentless uncertainty. Losing both parents early in life, nursing his younger brother in his late teens as he died of tuberculosis, and falling ill himself of the same fatal disease in his early twenties, we surmise that Keats' traumatic life experience was the crucible (Bennis and Thomas, 2002: 39) within which this notion of Negative Capability and his wider philosophy as a way of life emerged.

In Negative Capability, Keats is identifying the importance of being capable of being in uncertainties in the presence of experience. Simpson and French (2006) explored this from a psychodynamic perspective and recommended that 'more work is needed to explore and to describe in detail what enables leaders to go on thinking in the present moment, despite the complexity of conflicting and ambiguous demands and projections they experience in the role' (p. 254). It is our intention in this paper to explore how philosophy as a way of life can offer more details about what is

required to draw upon Negative Capability and retain the ability to think in the present moment when facing radical uncertainty.

The practice of Stoic philosophy as a way of life involves the development of an inner discourse that operationalizes the known whilst actively accepting the unknown (Hadot, 1998: 75–76; Marcus Aurelius, 2003: 45, 61, 102). This is the complex landscape of contemporary leadership practice and we are therefore here concerned with the development of both positive capabilities and Negative Capability through various disciplines that are learned by means of a range of exercises.

In this paper, we focus on three of the Stoic disciplines: of Judgement (phantasia), of Action (hormē), and of Desire (orexis). These disciplines seek to support wise practice by interrupting impulsive, automatic, or involuntary reactions, including the rush to judgement, the rush to act or the rush to respond emotionally (Hadot, 1998: 70; Seneca, 2010: 20). We submit that these disciplines all support the development of the capability of *being without* 'any irritable reaching after fact & reason'. In this manner, these practices help practitioners to be capable of working in uncertainty by opening a space in which it is possible to experience being in the present moment, which may include Negative Capability.

Stoic philosophy

Stoic philosophy is actualized in its disciplines of reflection about one's choices, which serve to create accord with oneself (*ataraxia* or inner peace), which then contributes to the entire world being in accord with itself (Hadot, 1998: 75; Long, 1974: 165). The aim of Stoic practice is to *live* this philosophy, not merely to *think* it, and to carry philosophical rationality into all areas of life to cultivate consistent perception and behaviour (Hadot, 1998: 76–77; Sellars, 2014: 32; Long, 1974: 110). Seneca (2021: 23) argues that it reforms and transforms the person including the relationship between their inner world and the external world (see also Hadot, 2002: 174–176).

Stoicism places importance upon eliminating automatic or habitual judgements and actions, and upon achieving a dispassionate or disinterested lens through which one can observe both internal responses and external events. The specific practices, which we will discuss in some detail, clear away internal detritus to create a space from which it is possible to carefully evaluate a situation before passing judgement or taking action. These practices ideally assist one to reach an 'intellectual lacuna' (Case and Gosling, 2007: 93), the *don't know* space.

In precisely this sense, Socrates, an important influence upon Stoic thought, suggested that he was wiser than the person who claimed knowledge in so far as he knew that he did not know (Farnsworth, 2021: 61, 116–127). For Socrates, the beginning of wisdom is knowledge of one's own ignorance and facing uncertainty instead of defending one's expertise (Fjelland, 2002). From this perspective, wisdom consists in always questioning what one believes to be true, which requires a tolerance of uncertainty.

Seneca, according to Foucault (1986: 46), proclaimed that making oneself 'vacant' is necessary to develop or transform oneself. Stoic practices aim to reach this still space, empty of disruptive emotion, where attention is not harnessed by compelling outward perceptions. When this inner space is quiet, absent of thinking, feeling, or doing, one may remain fully aware, awake, and conscious. In other words, by practicing the disciplines of Stoicism, one may approach a way of being that is Negative Capability.

In the following, we will discuss in detail the three Stoic disciplines of judgement, action, and desire.

*Judgement (*phantasia*)*

> O fret not after knowledge—I have none,
> And yet my song comes native with the warmth.
> […] And he's awake who thinks himself asleep. (Keats in Gittings, 1970: 67)
> The first thing a pretender to philosophy must do is to get rid of their presuppositions; a person is not going to undertake to learn anything that they think they already know. (Epictetus, Discourses, 2.17)

The empty space of not-knowing can create states of intolerable anxiety that can prompt a flight to explanations. Rather than staying with not knowing and being in uncertainties, one can quickly reach for ideas, conclusions, and explanations – and may grasp thoughts that do not align with one's purpose or are even 'anti-purpose' (French and Simpson, 2010: 1862). March (2019) describes this impulse as seeking to 'bring the ambiguity to an end by introducing false certainties' (p. 141).

The discipline of judgement interrupts this flight to explanations, a human tendency to find comfort in the illusion of certainty before considering what one does not yet know. The practices of constant, self-reflective vigilance about involuntary, automatic responses or habits can help leaders tolerate the anxiety of not knowing. Through the exercise of discipline, one builds a coherent inner representation of reality that is a guide to everyday (moment by present moment) living. According to Foucault (1986: 62–64), this ongoing exercise of making one's thoughts the subject of inquiry requires vigilance and it 'should have the form of a steady screening of representations: examining them, monitoring them, sorting them out.' Epictetus (2008: 123) likened this activity to a robust form of training to produce a competitor prepared to defend against 'the most formidable of impressions.'

This capacity can help leaders manage their inner state as well as moderate outward actions. To be capable of avoiding being swayed by seductive, and attractive representations, one must learn not to accept an unexamined representation (Hadot, 1998). Adamson (2015: 62) illustrates this concept with an example of questioning one's initial impression from breathing in the aroma of coffee prior to entering the kitchen. One may smell coffee in the kitchen and ask, 'has coffee been brewed, or were coffee grounds spilled on the kitchen floor?' One has a sensory impression, yet it remains to be seen if this impression is true. Mastery of this discipline makes it possible to suspend judgement until a systematic analysis of impressions has been undertaken. This is to adopt a posture of epistemic humility.

Negative Capability, like Stoicism, contributes to the capacity to live with and tolerate ambiguity and paradox, and to 'remain content with half knowledge' (Gittings, 1970: 43). It implies the capacity to accommodate change in a non-defensive way, without being overwhelmed by the ever-present pressure to react. From this perspective leadership involves seeing at every point, day by day, moment by moment, what is actually going on, in contrast with what was planned for, expected or intended.

To assess the present-moment impact of events, and to adapt, shift and adjust as necessary, leaders must practice a constant self-reflective vigilance. The Stoic discipline of judgement enables leaders to tolerate the frightening reality of not knowing by actively letting go of concerns about past and future, external events they cannot control, and the actions and opinions of others. Instead, they direct their attention to examining their own thoughts (Marcus Aurelius, 2003: 32). These exercises support leaders to just 'be' in a situation, to be intentionally receptive, without trying to answer, explain, or solve. For decision-makers, it can be surprisingly difficult to access this Negative Capability, this way of being.

Action (hormē)

The discipline of action interrupts the human tendency to immediately respond to a situation by making an unconsidered or automatic move. It is concerned with developing the capacity to tolerate the discomfort of stillness until the proper move presents itself. This discipline is crucially related to the discipline of judgement since one's representations—thoughts, ideas, conclusions—preside over one's actions (Marcus Aurelius, 2003: 157).

Thus, tolerating stillness and controlling one's actions begins with examining how one responds to others. For example, when angered by the actions of a colleague, can the leader find an inner discourse that will ameliorate the impulse to react and prevent a thoughtless response? Sharpe (2020: 15) suggests that the discourse may shift from 'he has not injured me,' to 'he is my brother.' Seneca (2007: 29) instructed, 'Do battle with yourself: if you have the will to conquer anger, it cannot conquer you.'

There are numerous triggers to thoughtless, impulsive behaviour in addition to anger. The discipline of action requires monitoring all such behaviour by asking, 'Is this the appropriate response in this situation?' Reservation, or stillness, interrupts the impulse to act. Therefore, the Stoic discipline advocates acting with reservation concerning events or circumstances that are beyond one's control; anticipating even the worst outcomes in advance; conducting oneself with justice toward others and in accordance with nature (Sharpe, 2020: 22).

Another impulsive action that besets leaders in volatile and chaotic situations is the desire to flee. For example, Robertson (2019: 206–209) describes Marcus Aurelius' way of resisting the urge to escape when overwhelmed by the uncertainties, pressures, and responsibilities of running the empire. He realized that 'feeling the need to escape from life's stresses in this way was a sign of weakness' and reminded himself that his judgements were still free and that he could achieve peace of mind in 'the chaos of the battlefield' or in 'the clamour of the senate.' He invoked the phrase, 'the universe is change; life is an opinion' to manage his anxiety in the face of stressful situations (Aurelius, 2003: 37).

The discipline of action is related to Negative Capability in that it suppresses 'reaching after' and fosters thoughtful inaction and right timing. In Stoic philosophy, this involves a concern for appropriate and ethical action, ensuring that all acts have the underlying intention of doing good in service of the human community.

Desire (orexis)

Sharpe (2020: 12) argues that the discipline of desire creates the capability 'of stripping events of the emotive and anthropomorphic representations that we project onto them' and to view events with indifference, equanimity, or evenly suspended attention. This is a practice that supports one to view events from a place of non-attachment in adopting the view from above, which offers a broader picture of any situation. Looking down on events that make up human lives helps us re-perceive how small and passing are human affairs in the scale of the Whole, helping put things in their true proportion (Sharpe, 2020: 21–25).

Other practices include imagining objects as if they appeared to you for the first time, focusing intently on the present moment undisturbed by memories of the past or anxieties of the future, and dividing or separating oneself from seductive appearances to strip them of their enchanting power. Marcus Aurelius reminded himself that the 'purple robes of unchallenged power' were merely 'rags dyed in ink' (Adamson, 2015: 96). Stoic writings offer additional examples, such as thinking that wine is only grape juice, or that sex is the rubbing together of two bodies, ending in ejaculation of

slimy fluid. These thought-exercises are designed to cultivate a realistic view of things, 'to see things in their naked physical reality' and look at things disinterestedly (Sharpe, 2020: 23–24).

The discipline of desire is related to Negative Capability in that it suppresses the 'irritable' basis for thought and action, allowing the leader to practice being in uncertainty.

Leaders' experiences of Negative Capability

According to Hadot, the Stoic exercises are fundamentally transformative, offering existential as well as moral value, a 'metamorphosis of our being' (1995: 127). They support one to *be* in full awareness of a situation without flight into thought, action, or emotion. Philosophy as a way of life is more than a development of *thought*. Instead, the principles support a *practice* of constant awareness of habitual thinking, feeling, and doing and to pause before responding with judgement, action or desire. In this way, Stoicism develops a practice that draws upon Negative Capability, capable of being in radical uncertainty 'without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.'

These insights informed a research study that explored what might enable leaders to use Negative Capability in intense, complex, and uncertain situations. The project engaged ten organizational leaders from fields of business and law enforcement. Using a qualitative methodological approach, the activities chosen for this study were progressive relaxation, viewing movie clips, clay molding, and encouraged somatic awareness in an atmosphere of play (Bernstein et al., 2000; Braud and Anderson, 1998; Denzin and Lincoln, 2018; Schuster, 2013; March 2019; see also Hirsch, 2021: 12–13; 133–156).

The participants engaged with an expressive arts approach and reflexive dialogues designed to encourage the suspension of habitual patterns of thinking. Suspending habits, or 'being without,' before an action or activity is an unusual and challenging thing to do in a high-pressure situation, especially for those typically selected for their action-oriented leadership abilities. The study probed how *emptying* approximates Keats' description of 'being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact & reason.' Underlying this design was the assumption that creating an experience of *emptiness* (suspending habitual thinking, letting go of habitual patterns of doing, submitting to not knowing), would enable business leaders to experience drawing upon Negative Capability. Because the term 'Negative Capability' was unlikely to be understood by the participants, the term 'emptying' was used until the last meeting when the term Negative Capability was introduced and explained in relation to their experience.

In this study, the activities were designed to encourage participants to 'drop their tools' (Weick, 1996, 1999, 2007) and their habitual way of being. The researcher led participants in a progressive relaxation to transition to a more receptive frame of mind. Next, the participants viewed three film clips that dramatize the states of 'no mind', 'letting go of the conscious self', and 'not thinking', which were considered states correlated with Negative Capability (The Last Samurai, 2003; Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope, 1977; The Legend of Bagger Vance, 2000; specific details are provided in Hirsch, 2021: 147–149). Each character in the film first engages in their habitual way of being during a stressful or contentious situation, which included the way they typically apply their knowledge, skills, and abilities. Next, each character in the film transitions to a new way of being in the same situation, emptying themselves of emotions, knowledge, and habitual responses.

After watching the film clips, each participant was asked to relinquish their own identity and imagine that they were one of the characters in the movie scenes (Harper, 2002; Lapenta, 2011; Steger et al., 2013). To capture and render their response, participants were given some clay and asked to model it into two

forms. One form represented the 'before-state,' the habitual behaviour that has worked in the past. The second form represented the 'after-state,' a response from a place of emptiness.

Molding clay was conceived as a way of disrupting the routines of familiar identity and to engage the participants with a tactile exercise that activated their embodied experience. According to Bathurst et al. (2010: 311), sense perception prompts holistic present moment awareness which complements narrower rational ways of knowing. In a similar vein, Ladkin (2013: 328), drawing upon the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty, argues that perception is a full-bodied activity. Staying with the felt sense of the experience allows new knowledge to emerge rather than the more expedient route, in which decisions are based on familiar knowledge (Springborg, 2010: 243). Küpers (2013: 348) advocates embodied responsiveness as a significant aspect of generating the knowledge that effective leaders need.

Working with clay is a sensate way to access a state of awareness that blends the mental and physical. Through molding clay, the hands overtake the thinking head, which introduces uncertainty and unpredictability (March 2019: 141). In fact, some participants expressed mild discomfort about the use of clay. For example, Harrison, a former CEO of a Fortune 100 company, admitted that it is 'not something I normally do so it's not very comfortable for me… I am as unartistic a person as you will ever find on this earth'. His resistance exemplified a disorienting dilemma (Mezirow, 1994, 1996, 1997), which causes people to examine some underlying assumptions that they hold about themselves. The resistance and disorientation added to this participant's uncertainty. March notes that the ability to tolerate such an experience of uncertainty requires Negative Capability (2019: 139–141).

Finally, the participants were asked to keep a research journal of their experiences of encountering stressful situations at work (Bartlett and Milligan, 2015; Jacelon and Imperio, 2005; Rausch, 2014). At such times, they were invited to see if they could experience emptying, the term substituted for Negative Capability. In subsequent research meetings the participants described their experiences and critical moments were explored. The research was conducted over a six-week period consisting of three meetings, conducted and recorded using Zoom videoconference software (Deakin and Wakefiled, 2014; Glassmeyer and Dibbs, 2012; Irani, 2019). The findings were determined using a manual approach of thematic analysis of the transcripts of the participants' recorded reflections of their lived experiences during the study (Clarke et al., 2015; Terry et al., 2017; Riger and Sigurvinsdottir, 2016).

The reports of the participants' experiences throughout the study produced several key insights. In summary, leaders who intentionally relinquish habitual thought and behaviour and draw upon Negative Capability discover emergent ideas and new ways of being. First, seasoned leaders wanting to exercise Negative Capability must risk the sensation of humiliation evoked by an acceptance of not knowing and of not relying upon habitual ways of responding to what are unique and complex problems. Second, when solution-oriented leaders utilize artistic expression to represent their individual experience of Negative Capability, it can produce the kind of reassurance, comfort, and inspiration that a personal mentor instils. Third, a leader's ability to observe themselves and others as actors in a shared field from a neutral, non-judgmental, and meta-standpoint can facilitate the ability to draw upon Negative Capability. Finally, when one uses proprioception to track their somatic state, especially physical tension caused by anxious thoughts, intense emotions, or stressful situations, it can become easier to engage Negative Capability. This research study therefore supports the notion that leaders can enlarge their repertoire of professional skills through a counter-intuitive way of being that is not typically taught in traditional management education.

Of course, these summary insights did not apply to all leaders. Some participants resisted the concept of Negative Capability. For example, after viewing the clips and making his clay forms, Harrison admitted, 'I did not agree with a lot of the philosophy in the three videos… My brain

doesn't want to be emptied. It likes being full, so it keeps on trying'. For many leaders like him, the correct response to uncertainty is not Negative Capability - it is filling the mind with several possible solutions. However, some of the other research participants had different perspectives that will be explored in the following.

The discipline of judgement: risking humiliation

The practices associated with the discipline of judgement interrupt the human tendency to immediately and confidently answer a question or explain a situation. Instead, a Stoic practice considers what is not yet known (Hankinson, 2016: 60; Adamson, 2015: 60–63).

Being with the feeling of uncertainty is uncomfortable, especially for leaders who are expected to have the answers. The Stoic mental exercises seek to develop a practice of attention (Bülow, 2020), being designed to generate greater attentional self-control and, as a result, attentional freedom. They wean the mind from the opinions of others, which are beyond one's control, and help the leader to avoid responding emotionally or egotistically to external events (Hadot, 1998: 105–108; Marcus Aurelius, 2003: 41, 101, 151; Seneca, 2010: 6–9). They are designed to generate an internal freedom from the passions that cause disturbances in one's mind.

The research study revealed that seasoned leaders who want to embrace Negative Capability are likely to experience the sensation of humiliation that can arise from not knowing and from suspending their habitual responses to complex problems. It requires a willingness to divest themselves of their previously comfortable ways of being in which they are used to being unchallenged, dominating figures.

One participant, Charles, a CEO, described an imagined outcome in a meeting with the chairman of his board: 'If I sat there and paused more than 3 seconds, he would be asking me, 'What's your answer?' If I sat there for 10 seconds and said, 'That's a good question. Let me think about it,' that wouldn't be acceptable.' Challenged by the idea of emptying his mind, he reflected, 'It's hard to just not think. It's my job to think all day long'. For some, entering Negative Capability feels like avoiding their responsibility as a leader—and being without certainty or without an answer would be unacceptable to their superiors.

For others, Negative Capability felt incongruent with their usual ways of being. Amelia said that giving up what she knew would feel intimidating and foreign. 'You have to let go of believing you can control everything. It's just giving up the way you've done it before'. Eliot said, 'If you have any thought that 'I know better' or 'I know everything' or 'I've been down this path before, you've got to set all that aside. Your ego's got to take a backseat to allow the transformation to happen authentically'. Aside from these inhibitors, some leaders found they could relinquish commanding, and successfully be without immediate insights, answers, or solutions. However, to do so, they had to risk the sensation of humiliation.

The discipline of desire: rising above

The Stoic practices associated with the discipline of desire promote disinterestedness or non-attachment. According to Marcus Aurelius, 'We need to steer clear of desire in any form' (2003: 157). He defines disinterested as meaning 'that the intelligence should rise above the movements of the flesh—the rough and smooth alike' (2003: 134). Disinterestedness or indifference in Stoicism is associated with self-observation, which Foucault (1984: 368) highlights:

> Let me take as an example the walking exercise recommended by Epictetus. Each morning, while taking a walk in the city, one should try to determine with respect to each thing (a public official or an attractive woman) one's motives, whether one is impressed by or drawn to it, or whether one has sufficient self-mastery so as to be indifferent.

Becoming the observer of oneself and of situations allows one to trade the human affectations and distractions for what Hadot has called 'the view from above,' looking 'upon earthly things below as if from some place above them' (1995: 244). By achieving a state of non-attachment or disinterestedness of mind, one is capable of dwelling in uncertainties.

In the study, we found that a leader's ability to observe themselves and others as actors in a shared field from a neutral standpoint could help to develop the ability to draw upon Negative Capability. For example, during stressful, uncertain situations at work, participants were asked to imagine looking down on a situation from above, adopting a meta-perspective. Metaphors that participants described using to support this shift included imagining themselves as a camera drone or as hovering above the landscape. During such situations, when 'our deeply held beliefs are challenged, when the values that made us successful become less relevant, and when legitimate yet competing perspectives emerge,' Heifetz and Laurie (2001: 132–133) say it is time to become open to novelty instead of relying upon past knowledge or expertise. They advocate 'getting on the balcony' to avoid being 'swept up in the field of action' and having one's attention captivated by the rapid succession of events or the pressure to execute (see also Heifetz et al., 2009). French and Simpson (2015: 2) liken this to the difference between 'evenly suspended attention,' and 'focused attention'. By gaining a broad perspective, leaders can avoid becoming trapped in historical or ongoing patterns.

One of the research participants, Daniel, stated that putting himself in the observer mode was one of the most helpful exercises from the study. For him, this was like 'stepping out of [his] body' and seeing a 'ghost-version' of himself. He added, 'it's not just stepping out mentally and emotionally, but it's physically stepping out,' which enabled him 'to envision this other - almost a ghost-like Daniel.' Once he inhabited the role of the observer, he was able to 'watch some of my interactions and see patterns and habits in the way I do things.' The new perspective changed some of his managerial habits and he reported that he is not the same CEO he once was. For example, 'I've watched myself walk through a room and talk to people, or not talk to people is probably more accurate, and just thought about how that felt to them.' Now he steps back, watching his posture and noticing 'how welcome I'm making them feel.' Another participant, Henry, noticed that self-observation works well 'when I'm having a strong emotional response' to a situation. 'Just being aware of it alone is some separation from it. It's like triangulating something'. He also noted that he had fewer regrets when he 'observed as a somewhat disinterested third party… You can actually change the behaviour rather than regretting the behaviour.'

A leader's ability to observe themselves and others as actors in a shared field from a neutral, non-judgmental, and even meta-standpoint—above, beyond, or external to the situation—can support drawing upon Negative Capability. When participants in the study assumed the neutral observer role, the reported shifts in their own perspectives impacted their own performance as well as the performance of those around them. Through their involvement in this study, participants felt able to give themselves permission to experiment with another way of being. This neutral state, sometimes referred to as witnessing consciousness, depends upon relaxing the body and achieving a calm, quiet, open, and undistracted mind (Dhiman, 2019).

It is worth noting that experimentation was more difficult when the participant was under pressure to perform. This highlights the importance of developing such a philosophical practice as a way of life, rather than as a set of techniques to draw upon at specific times. Developing a capacity for

working in situations of radical uncertainty must be achieved as a way of being in the world and not merely in response to a challenging situation.

The discipline of action: sensory awareness

The Stoic practices associated with the discipline of action interrupt the human tendency to immediately respond to a situation by making an unconsidered or automatic move. The Stoics considered passions to be choices of how to view the world after reaching a cognitive decision about how to react to bodily impulses. To interrupt an immediate action, one must be aware of the impulses that can trigger action (Graver, 2007: 24–34; Brennan, 2005: 102–103; Seneca, 2010: 6–11; Hadot, 1998: 69–70).

For example, one responds to a sudden assault with instinctive, natural reactions that Seneca calls 'first motions.' These include such outward physical symptoms as flushed cheeks, rapid breathing, and contorted facial expressions that reflect one's inner state. Next, one moves beyond the first motion and makes a judgement (e.g., concludes that harm was inflicted). This is a 'second motion.' The second motion may be followed by a 'third motion,' which is to give in to anger (e.g., lose control), or not. In Seneca's words, 'we hold that anger dares nothing on its own; rather, it comes about with the mind giving its approval' (Graver, 2007: 94).

Another example is Seneca's (2010: 71) advice to care for one's physical state because when compromised, it can impair one's rational abilities. The more our bodily impulses associated with emotions, sensations and drives are known to us, the more they are under our control. According to Seneca, a person must not only confront that which is external to us, but, above all, look within oneself and consider one's condition and to contemplate how to be in accordance with Nature (Seneca, 2010; Graver, 2007: 15–34; Long, 1982: 34–57; Nussbuam, 1993: 106).

Reydams-Schils (2010) discusses this connection between the body and mind and argues that the goal of Stoicism is to 'interiorize' and 'digest' the philosophy such that it is completely embodied and becomes one's natural way of being in the world: 'The knowledge and training acquired through education has to be portable' (p. 571). According to Foucault (1997), the 'discourses' are key to maintaining control in the face of unforeseen events and, to be most useful, these discourses must exist within us, something like instincts. Cultivated through embodied practice, they are more immediately accessible than ideas, which one must purposefully recall from memory. The more these repetitions occur, the less cognitive effort it takes to overcome the temptations of emotion. For these reasons, the Stoics placed great importance on developing an awareness of bodily sensations since they can influence action.

Sensory awareness, or proprioception, attention to one's somatic state in the present moment, was a key theme in the experience of our research participants. When participants were able to notice tension caused by anxious thoughts, intense emotions, or stressful situations, they found it easier to draw upon Negative Capability. Achieving the emptiness associated with Negative Capability requires prior recognition of an embodied state of fullness. Such fullness is often uncomfortable. For instance, it is often produced by anxious thoughts with physiological consequences that can manifest in muscular tension, rigidity, edginess, or shallow breathing. Half of the participants noted that becoming self-aware—not just of their thoughts but of their emotional and physical state—prompted an intentional somatic response, such as a long blink or deep breathing.

The following accounts describe the participants who were capable of proprioception and, in some cases, used the observations as a valuable source of information to draw upon Negative Capability. For example, Amelia had a keen awareness of differing bodily sensations and described moving from a felt sense of 'tightness' to a feeling of 'expansiveness', 'Like my muscles are tighter. . . Kind of achy' to

a feeling 'like standing on a hilltop buffeted by a breeze and fresh air.' She reported that the latter was helpful in accessing Negative Capability as a way of being in the situation.

Glenda was also accustomed to noting embodied sensations and emotions. In her research journal she described a disconcerting situation at work and how she used proprioception to gain objectivity:

> I learned yesterday that I was not included on all the organizational structure changes happening in one of the businesses I support. I was immediately triggered. I could feel it in my head, my throat, my gut and in my hands. It was red and hot. I went straight to the assumption that I was being left out on purpose. I wanted to go on the attack. I then took a few deep breaths, and I heard my belly ask me 'what if you were left out by accident?' 'What do you want to do here?' 'What is the best approach?' I could feel my red-hot anger start to diffuse and the red started turning to purple. I took more deep breaths. . . I was feeling like I had not been there for the team in a way I wanted to be. . . I decided to sit with me and observe whatever else wanted to come up.

Glenda described first recognising the experience 'in my head,' but when she 'can really listen to that [defensiveness] and hear it,' she can 'take it down into my belly… [and] work with it.' To draw upon Negative Capability, Glenda said, 'I have to be able to breathe and open up, like move my shoulders back, open up my chest and my heart space' first. Glenda attributes her skill to working with somatic counsellors (for a description of somatic psychotherapy see Kurtz, 2007). Recalling that she 'hated' that work, nonetheless she recognised that she had learned how to 'tune into' where the tension is being held in her body. Ultimately, she knows that identifying 'where I am feeling it' while 'still holding the conversation' showed her that she 'was able to do both at the same time'.

Charles, like other participants, has extensive experience with many different types of corporate training designed to increase performance. The trainings, however, typically involve cognitive approaches: 'We talk, they show some little diagrams.' Participating in this study was different and 'interesting' for him because it was kinaesthetic as well as visual. 'It's something I haven't done before, really.' He reflected that to draw upon Negative Capability it is essential to have 'the mind and body connected' as well as the skill to notice the responses of the body and the mind to a given situation. 'I think it's the practice in recognising when that's happening. If your pulse is up, if your shoulders are tensing, that's a physical reaction to the stimulus.' He said,

> It's been helpful to utilize these techniques to try to get myself back to centred and be able to draw upon all my faculties and try to communicate, not react. I asked, 'Am I reacting viscerally from my body, or am I really using my brain?' It's about drawing upon all my faculties and being calm and centred rather than reactive.

He talked about sometimes being able to 'name' his reaction 'in the moment', and 'if I can do that and name it, then I can say, okay, I can choose to react that way or not.' For Charles, 'just being aware' of his physical state is a form of intelligence. When he chooses to become 'that calm spot' in 'the eye of the storm,' he notices that 'it helps everybody else calm down and be productive too.'

He acknowledged the tension between head and body: 'If I'm trying to think about what I'm supposed to do, then it's hard to *be* what I'm supposed to do.' To achieve the calm, empty after-state associated with Negative Capability, he said that 'I needed to get out of my head and get into my body' and let 'all of the things that are inside of me. . . be what guides [me] rather than making the head tell the body what to do.' As one who is required 'to think, think, think, think, think all day long,' how is it possible to let the body lead? Charles found that closing his eyes 'for a long blink,' taking 'a deep breath,' and visualizing his clay form helped him 'quiet the other voices'.

Eliot, when asked what enabled him to draw upon Negative Capability, said, 'I think it takes self-awareness and understanding if I am caught up in my head too much.' He journaled his process during his interaction with an attorney: 'my body tensed. . . I paused for a moment and observed the experience, how my body was feeling and what my mind was thinking.' He stated that this study's activities were 'different enough that it made me think slightly differently' and 'that was really good'.

Cognitive solutions are so habitual that it is hard to let go of thinking. As noted from the participants' comments above, the training they received as leaders in their organizations, even in emotional intelligence that emphasizes self-awareness, usually did not focus on embodiment. Rather, the training emphasized cognitive analyses and solutions. The notion that the body has a reliable store of wisdom for professional crises is absent and aberrant. Charles remarked, 'It's something I haven't done before, really. It's interesting what your hands will tell you if you let them.' Charles considers himself to be 'more of a thinker,' so the opportunity to 'think with [his] hands' was 'pretty cool.' 'Just looking at the clay' forms he created made Charles wonder 'where did that stuff come from? I don't know.'

The systems of thought within which people operate, often unconsciously, are not merely intellectual: they are emotional and physical as well. Although participants were curious about unconscious behaviours that inhibited their ability to draw upon Negative Capability, they found it difficult to give up the focused thinking mind, so often a leader's premier skill. Those participants who practiced sensory awareness found it helped.

Summary conclusion

In this paper we have explored the potential contribution of Stoicism and Negative Capability to the challenge of developing a capacity to work in radical uncertainty. This exploration has focused on the three Stoic disciplines of Judgement, Action, and Desire and the way their practice can interrupt the rush to impulsive, automatic, and involuntary actions and reactions. It is in this sense that these disciplines can support the development of Negative Capability in *being without* 'any irritable reaching after fact & reason,' helping practitioners to be capable of *being in uncertainty*, attending to the realities of the present moment.

Central to this contribution is the insight that in situations where knowledge is not available, a core positive capability is the practice of attention (Bülow, 2020; Bülow and Simpson, 2022). Hadot (1995: 84) informs us that, 'Attention (*prosoche*) is the fundamental Stoic spiritual attitude. It is a continuous vigilance and presence of mind, self-consciousness which never sleeps, and a constant tension of the spirit.'

Negative Capability is required to avoid the capture of our attention in the multiple distractions of inappropriate and unhelpful thoughts, emotions, and actions. We have summarised research findings that illustrate ways in which the Stoic exercises might be adapted and used to develop the ability to draw upon Negative Capability and to avoid a flight into thought, action, or emotion, thereby maintaining a high quality of attention in the present moment.

We have demonstrated how Stoicism suggests a range of developmental exercises to build a personal philosophy as a way of being in the world (Reydams-Schils, 2010). This is not merely a question of learning techniques and is not an easy practice that can be picked up merely when the need arrives. The practitioner must be prepared to match the complex challenges of the leadership task with a disciplined practice that has been developed as a way of life (Hadot, 1995).

Keats is a good example of someone who did not take an 'off-the-shelf' philosophy and merely seek to learn it. Drawing upon a range of ideas and sources, he developed his own philosophy as

a way of life by observing his own experience with a high quality of attention. Indeed, in their depth of experiential and philosophical reflection, his extensive letters to friends and family share some similarities with the Meditations of Marcus Aurelius and the journals of the research participants.

When engaging with the experiences that were evoked by the research process, the research participants offered positive accounts of learning to draw upon Negative Capability. They described how the limiting aspects of their old habits or perceptions were released, generating opportunities for newly developed capacities, relief, and curiosity. Among these was a willingness to utilize their imaginative capacities as a bridge to enter an alternative way of being, maybe feeling less in control but more in touch with the complexities of their situations.

As a starting point in learning to develop these new capabilities, it was encouraging that when the enabling conditions were activated (for example, remembering the second clay form), the participants sometimes reported being able to draw upon Negative Capability with relative ease. This was an encouraging finding, given the emphasis that we have placed on this approach to leadership practice being far from a quick fix. It was noted, however, that participants found it more difficult to draw upon Negative Capability in high pressure situations. Of course, this is to be expected at the relatively early stage of conscious awareness and development of this capacity in most, if not all, of the participants.

This is also not surprising given the emphasis placed on knowledge and positive capabilities in most educational experiences. This is our call to action in the academy. Can we begin to develop forms of leadership education and development that make more accessible an understanding of the role and significance of Negative Capability in the tasks of leadership? Can we find approaches to learning, like Stoic philosophy, that develop leaders with the depth of capability required to work in radical uncertainty? Can we also make progress in serving wider stakeholder interests, giving attention to living in accord with ourselves, with others, and with the wider world?

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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Dr Charlotte von Bülow is Senior Lecturer in Leadership at Bristol Business School, University of the West of England, and founder of Crossfields Institute. After 20 years in the private sector as an entrepreneur, CEO, educator, coach, consultant and governor, her research and publications are anchored in lived experience and practice. Charlotte has held a range of senior leadership positions and her global consulting practice has focused primarily on the USA, Scandinavia and the UK. Her doctorate was on 'The Practice of Attention in Workplace Experience.' Her most recent publication is *Negative Capability in Leadership Practice. Implications for Working in Uncertainty*(Palgrave Macmillan, 2022; with Peter Simpson).

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