

## Negative capability

---

**Negative capability** is a phrase first used by [Romantic poet John Keats](#) in 1817 to explain the capacity of the greatest writers (particularly Shakespeare) to pursue a vision of artistic beauty even when it leads them into intellectual confusion and uncertainty, as opposed to a preference for philosophical certainty over artistic beauty. The term has been used by poets and philosophers to describe the ability to *perceive* and *recognise* truths beyond the reach of consecutive reasoning.

□ Negative capability needs to be understood as just one of a number of moods that may compete in the poet's mind before the poem arrives—i.e. during the phase that may be called prepoetry, after the musical form of the same name which delights in 'uncertainties, mysteries, [and] doubts'

This thesis of *negative capability* is a key component in Unger's theory of [false necessity](#) and [formative context](#). The theory of false necessity claims that our social worlds are the artifact of our own human endeavors. There is no pre-set institutional arrangement that our societies adhere to, and there is no necessary historical mold of development that they will follow. Rather we are free to choose and develop the forms and the paths that our societies will take through a process of conflicts and resolutions. However, there are groups of institutional arrangements that work together to bring out certain institutional forms, liberal democracy, for example. These forms are the basis of a social structure, and which Unger calls formative contexts. In order to explain how we move from one formative context to another without the conventional social theory constraints of historical necessity (e.g. feudalism to capitalism), and to do so while remaining true to the key insight of individual human empowerment and [anti-necessitarian social thought](#), Unger recognized that there are an infinite number of ways of resisting social and institutional constraints, which can lead to an infinite number of outcomes. This variety of forms of resistance and [empowerment](#) (i.e. negative capability) make change possible.<sup>[36]</sup>

This thesis of *negative capability* addresses the problem of [agency](#) in relation to [structure](#). It recognizes the constraints of structure and its molding influence upon the individual, but at the same time finds the individual able to resist, deny, and transcend their context. Unlike other theories of [structure and agency](#), *negative capability* does not reduce the individual to a simple actor possessing only the dual capacity of compliance or rebellion, but rather sees him as able to partake in a variety of activities of self empowerment.<sup>[37]</sup>

The notion of negative capability has been associated with Zen philosophy. Keats' man of negative capability had qualities that enabled him to "lose his self-identity, his 'imaginative identification' with and submission to things, and his power to achieve a unity with life". The Zen concept of [satori](#) is the outcome of passivity and receptivity, culminating in "sudden insight into the character of the real". Satori is reached without deliberate striving. The antecedent stages to satori: quest, search, ripening and explosion. The "quest" stage is accompanied by a strong feeling of uneasiness, resembling the capacity to practice negative capability while the mind is in a state of

"uncertainties, mysteries and doubts". In the explosive stage (akin to Keats' 'chief intensity'), a man of negative capability effects a "fellowship with essence".<sup>[43]</sup>

Keats's concept of negative capability was little known except to scholars, poets, and other careful readers.

Keats coined the term negative capability in a letter he wrote to his brothers George and Tom in 1817. Inspired by Shakespeare's work, he describes it as "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason."

Negative here is not pejorative. Instead, it implies the ability to resist explaining away what we do not understand.

The nineteenth-century English poet John Keats introduced the term "negative capability" (following a heated disquisition with English politician Charles Wentworth Dilke) into the literary world's vernacular as a means to create acceptance in regards to the unknown. Famously, one of the letters of John Keats makes mention of negative capability to his brothers George and Tom Keats, arguing against the pursuit of logic and reason in favor of a sense of beauty and wonder.