Notes on J. Keats’ concept of “Negative Capability”

… at once it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which
Shakespeare possessed so enormously - I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in
uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason […]. This pursued through volumes would perhaps take us no further than this, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.
(Letter to his brothers, George and Thomas Keats, 21 December 1817)

…As to the poetical Character itself, (I mean that sort of which, if I am any thing, I am a Member; (...) it is not itself - it has no self - it is every thing and nothing - It has no character - it enjoys light and shade; it lives in gusto, be it foul or fair, high or low, rich or poor, mean or elevated - It has as much delight in conceiving an Iago as an Imogen. What shocks the virtuous philosopher, delights the camelion Poet. It does no harm from its relish of the dark side of things any more than from its taste for the bright one; because they both end in speculation. A Poet is the most unpoetical of any thing in existence; because he has no Identity - he is continually filling some other Body – the poet has no identity - he is certainly the most unpoetical of all God's Creatures. […] I am sure however that this next sentence is myself. I feel your anxiety, good opinions and friendliness in the highest degree, and am Your’s most sincerely       John Keats
(Letter to Mr Woodhouse, 27 October 1818)
By *negative capability* John Keats meant to describe the artist's receptiveness to the world and its natural marvel. The idea was to critique those who sought to categorize all experience and phenomena and turn them into a theory of knowledge.

Negative capability describes the ability of the individual to
- perceive, think, and operate beyond any conjecture, speculation.
- reach 'a sort of transfusion and transmission of [one’s] consciousness to identify [oneself] with the object'
- reject the constraints of any context
- experience phenomena free from epistemological (logical – scientific knowledge) bounds
- contemplate the world without the desire to close it into rational systems, feeling empathy to reach a deeper understanding of Beauty and Truth
- remove one’s intellectual self while writing (or reading) poetry
- experience the emotion of the language and pass over the half-truths in silence
- live a life 'of sensations rather than of Thoughts!' (letter to Benjamin Bailey, 22 November 1817).
- make the meaning of words less important than their 'feel'. (much thought is sublingual - cf. Kant's principle)
- go beyond the precise definition of words that causes contradiction: they can still be used together to create the right ambience.
- allow the atmosphere of Keats' poems to surround us without picking out individual meanings and inconsistencies.
- Bask (to enjoy sitting or lying in the heat or light of something, especially the sun = crogiolarsi) in the beautiful without questioning it, just taking beauty simply as it is.
- give the world and the human the infinite depth hidden to those who suffer from 'egotistic sublime'