



HM Prison &
Probation Service



Learning
Together

Keeping connected: introducing ThinkLets

Learning Together builds educational communities that bring together people who live, study and work in universities and criminal justice organisations. Together, we want to use the power of education to improve lives, institutions and communities.

Covid-19 is a major challenge to our health and wellbeing. It means that we cannot physically come together as a community to learn with and from each other. But we can still keep learning and supporting each other to stay hopeful, positive and engaged.

Members of the Learning Together Network have created ThinkLets to help us all keep connected. Each ThinkLet contains resources that will help us to think about new ideas and develop new skills together, even from afar.

Each week, for the next eight weeks, two ThinkLets will be shared across our national community. We hope you enjoy them and find them helpful.

**Keep well. Keep hopeful. Keep connected.
And keep Learning Together.**

Please note:

The following resource was created with love and care by a member of the Learning Together Network. We sincerely hope that the creator's work will be respected by distributors, readers and users, and will not be subject to plagiarism or other forms of academic misconduct. Thank you for your cooperation.

ThinkLet #16

On Friendship in a Time of Separation

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If this were a 'normal' year, the two of us would have convened a Learning Together course on The Good Life and the Good Society, and we would have discussed how human relationality and interdependence is central to ethics and politics. But 2020 has been anything but normal. During the global pandemic, people all over the world have experienced forms of isolation they have never known, and people who are in prison, already separated from loved ones and society, are even further isolated. So, we wondered . . . what could we learn from the sorts of texts we would have been reading in our course now that we are thinking about being apart?

Part One: On Friendship

We usually begin our course with Aristotle; discussions of friendship in Western philosophy also often begin with Aristotle. He wrote that friendship 'is an absolute necessity in life' (VIII.1, 141).¹ Aristotle believed that the people with whom we spend our time have great influence on our habits and character – for good or for ill. To be a person of virtue, or of vice, is not merely a matter of individual, internal decision; character arises from activity in real life with other people. Aristotle said it is difficult for an individual to be virtuous alone 'since it is not easy by oneself continuously to engage in activity; but with others and in relation to them it is easier... a sort of training in virtue emerges from good people's living in each other's company' (IX.9, 175-6).



For philosophers of the ancient West, friendship was one of three kinds of love: *eros* (acquisitive, desirous love); *agape* (the highest, divine love); and *philia* (friendship-love). Aristotle described three types of *philia*: utility (friendship for your benefit or use), pleasure (friendship for enjoyment or fun), and good (friendship for that person's own sake). He said that friendships of utility and pleasure are common but fleeting and friendships of the good are rare but lasting.

Consider the following questions:

- Can you think of friendships (your own or those in things you have read or seen) which fit Aristotle's descriptions of utility, pleasure, and good? What is it about them that means that they fit these categories, and what effects do they have on the people in the relationship?
- Does thinking about your own friendships raise any questions about Aristotle? Have you thought of other kinds of friendship, or do you think that his descriptions of friendship are unfair?

¹ Quotations from Aristotle are from the edition edited by Roger Crisp. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Second ed. 2014. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy. The numbers in brackets cite as follows: the Roman numeral is the Book and the next number is the Chapter in Aristotle, in any edition. The final number is the page in the Crisp edition.

Part Two: Friendship across Distance

When you think of friends, do you think of people who are near to you in some way or ways? People who are nearby in proximity? Close to your age? Similar in views and beliefs? What does friendship mean when any or all of these forms of nearness are absent? What can we say about friendship across differences? Can there be anything like friendship in politics, between people who only have something like citizenship in common? And what is friendship in physical isolation?

A. Friendship and the Distance of Difference

Aristotle believed that friendship of the good usually occurred between people who were equal and similar, and that friendships between people who were different were usually of utility (VIII.8, 151). He did not have much to say about what differences there might be between truly good friends, or how to establish a friendship of the good across difference, and many would identify this as one of the shortcomings in his (and indeed classical) understanding of friendship.

But is friendship possible between people who are different from each other? And might we learn something in that sort of friendship – in Aristotle's terms, can we develop a sort of 'training in virtue' through friendship with people who are different from us? One possible example is the friendship between Derek Black and Matthew Stevenson, who were interviewed by Krista Tippett for the *On Being* podcast in May 2018. Derek was raised as a white supremacist, and this identity was very publicly revealed when he was a university student in Florida. Matthew – one of the only Orthodox Jews on campus, and thus from a group who are profoundly threatened by white supremacist ideology – responded by inviting Derek to his weekly Shabbat dinner. After several years of these dinners Derek renounced his ideology and now campaigns against racism.



In the example of Derek and Matthew, we not only see a friendship which exists despite difference in both ethnicity and ideology – Matthew says that during those years he was 'legitimately friends' with Derek, 'it was not some sabotage project where I was going undercover or something' – but one which leads to real positive change. Derek insists that the friendship, combined with the 'outrage' which his beliefs caused on campus, made it possible for him to see things differently. It enabled him to have slow and careful conversations which transformed his thinking, and it also changed how he thought about the effects of his ideology:

'What changed was feeling that people who were not in my in-group were being negatively impacted by my actions and that I should care about that. And trying to reconcile that I should care about people who are negatively impacted by my actions, and I'm still doing the actions, became very difficult. And it really was empathizing with people who were not "supposed" to be part of my group and increasing the number of people who were in my group. That's the universal thing that I think came out of what I learned from coming through that, because it can – everybody has in-groups' (Derek Black).

Consider the following questions, drawing on the examples given and on your personal experience:

- Do you think Aristotle was right or wrong about friendship of the good requiring similarity and equality? What are the differences which friendship can traverse, and what are the differences which make friendship impossible?
- Before Derek renounced his ideology, were he and Matthew friends?

B. Friendship and the Distance of Politics

Can a political 'community' (an international coalition, a nation, a city) include 'friendship'? Can friendship be a political reality as well as an interpersonal reality? Or are all the various kinds of distance between people in political arrangements too vast to allow for friendship? When we ask these sorts of questions, we enter into long-standing questions about the relationship between love and justice. Some people think love (and therefore friendship) is personal while justice is political – because they think love is not possible in politics, or that justice is not required at the interpersonal level. But others argue that politics needs love and personal relationships require justice.

Aristotle said that 'friendship and justice seem to be concerned with the same things and to be found in the same people. For there seems to be some kind of justice in every community, and some kind of friendship as well.' But he also said that friendship and justice look different in different contexts: 'injustice increases the closer the friends involved. It is more dreadful, for example, to defraud a comrade than a fellow citizen, to fail to aid a brother than a stranger . . .' (VIII.9, 152). According to Aristotle, 'the political community seems originally to have come together and to continue for the sake of what is useful' yet the political community can aim not only for utility, but for flourishing (VIII.9, 152-3). This is more and less possible in different kinds of political communities. Aristotle discussed monarchy, democracy, and tyranny, arguing monarchy was the ideal in terms of justice, tyranny was the worst option and would limit both friendship and justice, but friendship could flourish in democracy due to equality (VIII.11, 154-155).

In her 2013 book *Political Emotions*,² Martha Nussbaum argues that we are emotional beings, and that love is the emotion best able to sustain our political ideals: 'all of the core emotions that sustain a decent society have their roots in, or are forms of, love— by which I mean intense attachments to things outside the control of our will. [...] Love, I shall argue, is what gives respect for humanity its life, making it more than a shell' (15). She thinks that we should love both the nation and the people who make up the nation, but she thinks there are dangers in 'love's inherent particularism and partiality' (385). Unlike Aristotle, she values living in a multicultural and multi-religious democratic state and thinks that it's important for the love on which justice is built to be directed at *everyone* in the nation, not just those who are like us, and not only that which is ideal:



'That's the sort of love this book has tried to describe, embracing imperfection while striving for justice. Just as personal love and friendship are at their best when they are directed not at ideal images of the person, but, instead, at the whole person with flaws and faults (not, of course, without criticizing or arguing), so too with love of a city or country: it gets under one's skin, is undeterred by imperfection, and thus enables diverse people, most of them dissatisfied with reality, but in many different and incompatible ways, to embrace one another and enter a common future' (393).

Consider the following questions:

- Can you think of a time, either in your personal observation or in history, when love and/or friendship seemed to be at work in some political reality?
- Nussbaum argues that art and education can cultivate the love and justice she discusses. What works of art or forms of education can you think of that might encourage love and/or justice?

² Nussbaum, Martha. *Political Emotions: Why Love Matters for Justice*. 2013. Harvard University Press.

C. Friendship and the Distance of Isolation

Whether we are talking about personal or political friendship, and whether we are talking about friendship with people who are alike or different, what does any of this mean when we are physically isolated from all those whom we would call our friends?

Aristotle had a lot to say about the importance and goodness of being together with friends, both political – ‘For a human is a social being and his nature is to live in the company of others’ (IX.9, 175) – and personal – ‘The very presence of friends is also pleasant, both in good and ill fortune, since pain’s burden is lightened when friends share one’s distress’ (IX.11, 178). But he also said that isolation from our friends does not undo true friendship. ‘For some people find their enjoyment in living in each other’s company, and bestow good things on each other. Others, however, are asleep or separated by distance, and so do not engage in these activities of friendship, but nevertheless have a disposition to do so; for distance does not dissolve friendship without qualification, but it does dissolve its activity’ (VIII.5, 147).

What if, whilst we are separated from friends, we could bring the character of friendship to whatever situations and people are currently present to us? Consider the story of ‘The Three Questions’ by Leo Tolstoy. The story opens with a king who wants to do the right thing: ‘It once occurred to a certain king that if he always knew the right time to begin everything; if he knew who were the right people to listen to, and whom to avoid; and, above all, if he always knew what was the most important thing to do, he would never fail in anything he might undertake.’ After asking wise people throughout his kingdom, he eventually goes into the woods and asks a hermit his three questions: How can I learn to do the right thing at the right time? Who are the people I most need, and to whom should I, therefore, pay more attention than to the rest? And, what affairs are the most important and need my first attention? The hermit repeatedly ignores the king, continuing to dig in his garden, and the king, recognising the hermit’s tiredness, takes the spade and does the work for him. After several hours of hard work, a man suddenly appears and falls, bleeding, at the king’s feet. The king and hermit tend to his wounds. The next day the man wakes and pleads for the king’s forgiveness; he had a vendetta against the king and had been waiting to kill him. While he was waiting, the king’s bodyguards saw him and stabbed him, and he ran away and found the king. The king and his former enemy make peace, and the king asks the hermit once more for an answer to his three questions:

“Do you not see?” replied the hermit. “If you had not pitied my weakness yesterday, and had not dug these beds for me, but had gone your way, that man would have attacked you, and you would have repented of not having stayed with me. So, the most important time was when you were digging the beds; and I was the most important man; and to do me good was your most important business. Afterwards, when that man ran to us, the most important time was when you were attending to him, for if you had not bound up his wounds he would have died without having made peace with you. So, he was the most important man, and what you did for him was your most important business. Remember then: there is only one time that is important – now! It is the most important time because it is the only time when we have any power. The most necessary person is the one with whom you are, for no man knows whether he will ever have dealings with anyone else: and the most important affair is to do that person good, because for that purpose alone was man sent into this life.”

Consider the following questions:

- Think for a moment about what is most difficult about being isolated from friendships. What is it that we miss?
- Is there some way you can bring that thing you miss into your interactions with whomever is the person in front of you at any given time? What might that look like?

For further reflection:

- Look back over the three sets of questions above.
- Write a brief reflection on friendship which incorporates each of your own insights/responses to these questions. This could be a poem where your answers to each set of questions becomes a stanza, or an essay where each set becomes a paragraph or a section.
- Or instead of writing something, you could draw or use whatever creative media are available to you to create a piece about friendship which reflects your responses.