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PLATO

'You can discover more about a person in an hour of play than in a year of conversation.'

Plato (427-347 BC)

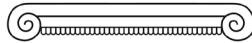
The authorship of this quote, often attributed to Plato, remains controversial, as it does not appear in any of the great Greek philosopher's surviving works. Part of the issue centres on the fact that on the surface, the promotion of 'play' as being more indicative of truth than conversation flies in the face of the dialectic method that Plato held so dear. For Plato and Socrates, truth was the highest ideal and could only be arrived at through the exchange of rational and reasoned arguments. The

purpose of the dialectic method of reasoning is the resolution of disagreement through discussion, with the aim of acquiring knowledge and establishing fact through the examination of assumptions.

Instead, the quote seems to imply that people show their true selves more readily while playing than while conversing. It is certainly true that natural reticence and guardedness drops when one is engaged in pleasurable pursuits. However, the reverse could also be true, as competitiveness in games can drive human beings to behave extremely irrationally, exhibiting passions and motivations that may not be readily discernable in everyday situations. Plato also seems to be saying that people do not always do what they say or, to use a well-worn commonplace, 'practise what they preach'.

Perhaps, though, Plato (assuming, for the sake of argument, the quote is derived from him) is actually using the term 'play' to describe indulging the human imagination? Children play naturally from an early age and learn about the world and the society around them through imaginative play and imitation, while their understanding of play is uninhibited by adult values and constructs. One of the greatest attributes of play is the opportunity it affords for learning to live with not knowing. Human beings learn through trial and error,

and play is a non-threatening way to cope with new learning while still retaining self-esteem. In adulthood, human beings, encumbered with other concerns, forget how to play or indulge their imagination for its own sake. So perhaps Plato is here recommending we rediscover the pure, uncorrupted sense of the self that only play can release and reflect. This doesn't solve the contradiction evident in the quote's seeming rejection of dialectical method, but is a comforting idea nonetheless.



ARISTOTLE

‘Happiness is the
highest good,
being a realization
and perfect practice
of virtue,
which some can attain,
while others have little
or none of it.’

Aristotle (384–322 BC)

The term ‘polymath’ is often used in a somewhat hyperbolic sense to describe a significant figure who excels in several different disciplines. In modern

parlance, for example, a sportsperson who writes a newspaper column, has an interest in current affairs and wins a televised ballroom-dancing competition is often erroneously described as being a polymath. The phrase derives from the Greek word *polumathēs*, meaning 'to have great and varied knowledge'. In this true sense, Aristotle was a polymath.

The sheer range and depth of Aristotle's contribution to Western philosophy cannot be underestimated. Aristotle wrote on subjects as varied as physics, metaphysics, poetry, theatre, music, logic, rhetoric, linguistics, politics, government, ethics, biology and zoology, while still finding the time to study under Plato, found his own academy – the Lyceum – and act as private tutor to the young Alexander the Great. Aristotle's main contribution to philosophy concerns his work on the study of formal logic, collected together in a series of texts known as *The Organon*, and the use of 'syllogisms' in deductive reasoning. In basic terms, a syllogism is a method for arriving at a conclusion through constructing a three-step series of premises, usually a major premise, A, followed by a minor premise, B, via which it is possible to deduce a proposition, C.