Talent won’t win any competitions

It is focused and deliberate practice that leads to greatness, not natural ability, says Philip Roscoe.

Peak: Secrets from The New Science of Expertise
By Anders Ericsson and Robert Pool
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It seems strange to call a book about self-improvement Peak. Perhaps the publishers baulked at Uphill Struggle, although that would have been more fitting for a tome in which Anders Ericsson – the psychologist behind Malcolm Gladwell’s “10,000-hour rule” – and science writer Robert Pool channel the Calvinist spirit to insist that greatness is possible for everyone. As long, that is, as we work at it.

We must labour in the right way. Fun is a no go. Knocking numbers, flying fast jets, conducting neurosurgery or composing symphonies, such mental maps are central to Ericsson’s understanding of expertise.

This distillation of Ericsson’s expertise is the nature and content of that expertise itself. What really matters is the nature and content of that expertise itself. What really matters is the nature and content of that expertise itself.

Ericsson comes across as a generous man, happy to correspond with others about their practice and development. He shrugs off crass interpretations of the 10,000-hour rule (hint: it’s not a rule). He insists that high achievement involves lots of hard work, much of it in childhood. He doesn’t do justice to the real complexity of expertise. The book is told in the first person, but doesn’t do justice to the real complexity of expertise – that of the psychologists themselves. Their knowledge and ingenuity in assembling tests, analysing data and documenting evidence are the back story. There are Ericsson’s own careful experiments on number recognition, or his colleagues’ studies of London cabbies in training, mapping the drivers’ bulging hippocampi as they progress through the diabolical Knowledge. This is a pity, for the most interesting thing about expertise is the nature and content of that expertise itself. What really matters is the nature and content of that expertise itself.

Ericsson provides a simple formula – that natural talent is a myth and deliberate practice leads to improved performance – Ericsson and Pool replace one black box with another. Ericsson comes across as a generous man, happy to correspond with others about their practice and development. He shrugs off crass interpretations of the 10,000-hour rule (hint: it’s not a rule). He insists that high achievement involves lots of hard work, much of it in childhood. He doesn’t want to write a manifesto for Tiger Mothers, although the raw materials are here. As we discover in the final pages, his rebuttal of natural talent has a democratising intent, hoping to prevent those identified as talentless from being marginalised or excluded. Those of us always picked last for sport – a prerequisite for academics, surely – must applaud him for this as we draw ourselves, finally, over the finish line.

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