

## The Truth About Talent (When Genes Matter and When They Don't)

**M**ANY PEOPLE ARE familiar with Michael Phelps, who is widely considered to be one of the greatest athletes in history. Phelps has won more Olympic medals not only than any swimmer but also more than any Olympian in *any* sport.

Fewer people know the name Hicham El Guerrouj, but he was a fantastic athlete in his own right. El Guerrouj is a Moroccan runner who holds two Olympic gold medals and is one of the greatest middle-distance runners of all time. For many years, he held the world record in the mile, 1,500-meter, and 2,000-meter races. At the Olympic Games in Athens, Greece, in 2004, he won gold in the 1,500-meter and 5,000-meter races.

These two athletes are wildly different in many ways. (For starters, one competed on land and the other in water.) But most notably, they differ significantly in height. El Guerrouj is five feet, nine inches tall. Phelps is six feet, four inches tall. Despite this seven-inch difference in height, the two men are identical in one respect: Michael Phelps and Hicham El Guerrouj wear the same length inseam on their pants.

How is this possible? Phelps has relatively short legs for his height and a very long torso, the perfect build for swimming. El Guerrouj has incredibly long legs and a short upper body, an ideal frame for distance running.

Now, imagine if these world-class athletes were to switch sports. Given his remarkable athleticism, could Michael Phelps become an Olympic-caliber distance runner with enough training? It's unlikely. At peak fitness, Phelps weighed 194 pounds, which is 40 percent heavier than El Guerrouj, who competed at an ultralight 138 pounds. Taller runners are heavier runners, and every extra pound is a curse when it comes to distance running. Against elite competition, Phelps would be doomed from the start.

Similarly, El Guerrouj might be one of the best runners in history, but it's doubtful he would ever qualify for the Olympics as a swimmer. Since 1976, the average height of Olympic gold medalists in the men's 1,500-meter run is five feet, ten inches. In comparison, the average height of Olympic gold medalists in the men's 100-meter freestyle swim is six feet, four inches. Swimmers tend to be tall and have long backs and arms, which are ideal for pulling through the water. El Guerrouj would be at a severe disadvantage before he ever touched the pool.

The secret to maximizing your odds of success is to choose the right field of competition. This is just as true with habit change as it is with sports and business. Habits are easier to perform, and more satisfying to stick with, when they align with your natural inclinations and abilities. Like Michael Phelps in the pool or Hicham El Guerrouj on the track, you want to play a game where the odds are in your favor.

Embracing this strategy requires the acceptance of the simple truth that people are born with different abilities. Some people don't like to discuss this fact. On the surface, your genes seem to be fixed, and it's no fun to talk about things you cannot control. Plus, phrases like *biological*

*determinism* makes it sound like certain individuals are destined for success and others doomed to failure. But this is a shortsighted view of the influence of genes on behavior.

The strength of genetics is also their weakness. Genes cannot be easily changed, which means they provide a powerful advantage in favorable circumstances and a serious disadvantage in unfavorable circumstances. If you want to dunk a basketball, being seven feet tall is very useful. If you want to perform a gymnastics routine, being seven feet tall is a great hindrance. Our environment determines the suitability of our genes and the utility of our natural talents. When our environment changes, so do the qualities that determine success.

This is true not just for physical characteristics but for mental ones as well. I'm smart if you ask me about habits and human behavior; not so much when it comes to knitting, rocket propulsion, or guitar chords. Competence is highly dependent on context.

The people at the top of any competitive field are not only well trained, they are also well suited to the task. And this is why, if you want to be truly great, selecting the right place to focus is crucial.

In short: genes do not determine your destiny. They determine your areas of opportunity. As physician Gabor Mate notes, "Genes can predispose, but they don't predetermine." The areas where you are genetically predisposed to success are the areas where habits are more likely to be satisfying. The key is to direct your effort toward areas that both excite you and match your natural skills, to align your ambition with your ability.

The obvious question is, "How do I figure out where the odds are in my favor? How do I identify the opportunities and habits that are right for me?" The first place we will look for an answer is by understanding your personality.

## HOW YOUR PERSONALITY INFLUENCES YOUR HABITS

Your genes are operating beneath the surface of every habit. Indeed, beneath the surface of every *behavior*. Genes have been shown to influence everything from the number of hours you spend watching television to your likelihood to marry or divorce to your tendency to get addicted to drugs, alcohol, or nicotine. There's a strong genetic component to how obedient or rebellious you are when facing authority, how vulnerable or resistant you are to stressful events, how proactive or reactive you tend to be, and even how captivated or bored you feel during sensory experiences like attending a concert. As Robert Plomin, a behavioral geneticist at King's College in London, told me, "It is now at the point where we have stopped testing to see if traits have a genetic component because we literally can't find a single one that isn't influenced by our genes."

Bundled together, your unique cluster of genetic traits predispose you to a particular personality. Your personality is the set of characteristics that is consistent from situation to situation. The most proven scientific analysis of personality traits is known as the "Big Five," which breaks them down into five spectrums of behavior.

1. Openness to experience: from curious and inventive on one end to cautious and consistent on the other.
2. Conscientiousness: organized and efficient to easygoing and spontaneous.
3. Extroversion: outgoing and energetic to solitary and reserved (you likely know them as extroverts vs. introverts).
4. Agreeableness: friendly and compassionate to challenging and detached.
5. Neuroticism: anxious and sensitive to confident, calm, and stable.

All five characteristics have biological underpinnings. Extroversion, for instance, can be tracked from birth. If scientists play a loud noise in the nursing ward, some babies turn toward it while others turn away. When the researchers tracked these children through life, they found that the babies who turned toward the noise were more likely to grow up to be extroverts. Those who turned away were more likely to become introverts.

People who are high in agreeableness are kind, considerate, and warm. They also tend to have higher natural oxytocin levels, a hormone that plays an important role in social bonding, increases feelings of trust, and can act as a natural antidepressant. You can easily imagine how someone with more oxytocin might be inclined to build habits like writing thank-you notes or organizing social events.

As a third example, consider neuroticism, which is a personality trait all people possess to various degrees. People who are high in neuroticism tend to be anxious and worry more than others. This trait has been linked to hypersensitivity of the amygdala, the portion of the brain responsible for noticing threats. In other words, people who are more sensitive to negative cues in their environment are more likely to score high in neuroticism.

Our habits are not solely determined by our personalities, but there is no doubt that our genes nudge us in a certain direction. Our deeply rooted preferences make certain behaviors easier for some people than for others. You don't have to apologize for these differences or feel guilty about them, but you do have to work with them. A person who scores lower on conscientiousness, for example, will be less likely to be orderly by nature and may need to rely more heavily on environment design to stick with good habits. (As a reminder for the less conscientious readers among us, environment design is a strategy we discussed in Chapters 6 and 12.)

The takeaway is that you should build habits that work for your personality.\* People can get ripped working out like a bodybuilder, but if you prefer rock climbing or cycling or rowing, then shape your exercise habit around your interests. If your friend follows a low-carb diet but you find that low-fat works for you, then more power to you. If you want to read more, don't be embarrassed if you prefer steamy romance novels over nonfiction. Read whatever fascinates you.\* You don't have to build the habits everyone tells you to build. Choose the habit that best suits you, not the one that is most popular.

There is a version of every habit that can bring you joy and satisfaction. Find it. Habits need to be enjoyable if they are going to stick. This is the core idea behind the 4th Law.

Tailoring your habits to your personality is a good start, but this is not the end of the story. Let's turn our attention to finding and designing situations where you're at a natural advantage.

## **HOW TO FIND A GAME WHERE THE ODDS ARE IN YOUR FAVOR**

Learning to play a game where the odds are in your favor is critical for maintaining motivation and feeling successful. In theory, you can enjoy almost anything. In practice, you are more likely to enjoy the things that come easily to you. People who are talented in a particular area tend to be more competent at that task and are then praised for doing a good job. They stay energized because they are making progress where others have failed, and because they get rewarded with better pay and bigger opportunities, which not only makes them happier but also propels them to produce even higher-quality work. It's a virtuous cycle.

Pick the right habit and progress is easy. Pick the wrong habit and life is a struggle.

How do you pick the right habit? The first step is something we covered in the 3rd Law: *make it easy*. In many cases, when people pick the wrong habit, it simply means they picked a habit that was too difficult. When a habit is easy, you are more likely to be successful. When you are successful, you are more likely to feel satisfied. However, there is another level to consider. In the long-run, if you continue to advance and improve, any area can become challenging. At some point, you need to make sure you're playing the right game for your skillset. How do you figure that out?

The most common approach is trial and error. Of course, there's a problem with this strategy: life is short. You don't have time to try every career, date every eligible bachelor, or play every musical instrument. Thankfully, there is an effective way to manage this conundrum, and it is known as the *explore/exploit trade-off*.

In the beginning of a new activity, there should be a period of exploration. In relationships, it's called dating. In college, it's called the liberal arts. In business, it's called split testing. The goal is to try out many possibilities, research a broad range of ideas, and cast a wide net.

After this initial period of exploration, shift your focus to the best solution you've found—but keep experimenting occasionally. The proper balance depends on whether you're winning or losing. If you are currently winning, you exploit, exploit, exploit. If you are currently losing, you continue to explore, explore, explore.

In the long-run it is probably most effective to work on the strategy that seems to deliver the best results about 80 to 90 percent of the time and keep exploring with the remaining 10 to 20 percent. Google famously asks employees to spend 80 percent of the workweek on their official job and 20 percent on projects of their choice, which has led to the creation of blockbuster products like AdWords and Gmail.

The optimal approach also depends on how much time you have. If you have a lot of time—like someone at the beginning of their career—it makes more sense to explore because once you find the right thing, you still have a good amount of time to exploit it. If you're pressed for time—say, as you come up on the deadline for a project—you should implement the best solution you've found so far and get some results.

As you explore different options, there are a series of questions you can ask yourself to continually narrow in on the habits and areas that will be most satisfying to you:

**What feels like fun to me, but work to others?** The mark of whether you are made for a task is not whether you love it but whether you can handle the pain of the task easier than most people. When are you enjoying yourself while other people are complaining? The work that hurts you less than it hurts others is the work you were made to do.

**What makes me lose track of time?** Flow is the mental state you enter when you are so focused on the task at hand that the rest of the world fades away. This blend of happiness and peak performance is what athletes and performers experience when they are “in the zone.” It is nearly impossible to experience a flow state and not find the task satisfying at least to some degree.

**Where do I get greater returns than the average person?** We are continually comparing ourselves to those around us, and a behavior is more likely to be satisfying when the comparison is in our favor. When I started writing at jamesclear.com, my email list grew very quickly. I wasn't quite sure what I was doing well,



but I knew that results seemed to be coming faster for me than for some of my colleagues, which motivated me to keep writing.

**What comes naturally to me?** For just a moment, ignore what you have been taught. Ignore what society has told you. Ignore what others expect of you. Look inside yourself and ask, “What feels natural to me? When have I felt alive? When have I felt like the real me?” No internal judgments or people-pleasing. No second-guessing or self-criticism. Just feelings of engagement and enjoyment. Whenever you feel authentic and genuine, you are headed in the right direction.

To be honest, some of this process is just luck. Michael Phelps and Hicham El Guerrouj were lucky to be born with a rare set of abilities that are highly valued by society and to be placed in the ideal environment for those abilities. We all have limited time on this planet, and the truly great among us are the ones who not only work hard but also have the good fortune to be exposed to opportunities that favor us.

But what if you don't want to leave it up to luck?

If you can't find a game where the odds are stacked in your favor, create one. Scott Adams, the cartoonist behind *Dilbert*, says, “Everyone has at least a few areas in which they could be in the top 25% with some effort. In my case, I can draw better than most people, but I'm hardly an artist. And I'm not any funnier than the average standup comedian who never makes it big, but I'm funnier than most people. The magic is that few people can draw well and write jokes. It's the combination of the two that makes what I do so rare. And when you add in my business

background, suddenly I had a topic that few cartoonists could hope to understand without living it.”

When you can't win by being better, you can win by being different. By combining your skills, you reduce the level of competition, which makes it easier to stand out. You can shortcut the need for a genetic advantage (or for years of practice) by rewriting the rules. A good player works hard to win the game everyone else is playing. A great player creates a new game that favors their strengths and avoids their weaknesses.

In college, I designed my own major, biomechanics, which was a combination of physics, chemistry, biology, and anatomy. I wasn't smart enough to stand out among the top physics or biology majors, so I created my own game. And because it suited me—I was only taking the courses I was interested in—studying felt like less of a chore. It was also easier to avoid the trap of comparing myself to everyone else. After all, nobody else was taking the same combination of classes, so who could say if they were better or worse?

Specialization is a powerful way to overcome the “accident” of bad genetics. The more you master a specific skill, the harder it becomes for others to compete with you. Many bodybuilders are stronger than the average arm wrestler, but even a massive bodybuilder may lose at arm wrestling because the arm wrestling champ has very specific strength. Even if you're not the most naturally gifted, you can often win by being the best in a very narrow category.

Boiling water will soften a potato but harden an egg. You can't control whether you're a potato or an egg, but you can decide to play a game where it's better to be hard or soft. If you can find a more favorable environment, you can transform the situation from one where the odds are against you to one where they are in your favor.

## HOW TO GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR GENES

Our genes do not eliminate the need for hard work. They clarify it. They tell us *what* to work hard on. Once we realize our strengths, we know where to spend our time and energy. We know which types of opportunities to look for and which types of challenges to avoid. The better we understand our nature, the better our strategy can be.

Biological differences matter. Even so, it's more productive to focus on whether you are fulfilling your own potential than comparing yourself to someone else. The fact that you have a natural limit to any specific ability has nothing to do with whether you are reaching the ceiling of your capabilities. People get so caught up in the fact that they *have* limits that they rarely exert the effort required to get close to them.

Furthermore, genes can't make you successful if you're not doing the work. Yes, it's possible that the ripped trainer at the gym has better genes, but if you haven't put in the same reps, it's impossible to say if you have been dealt a better or worse genetic hand. Until you work as hard as those you admire, don't explain away their success as luck.

In summary, one of the best ways to ensure your habits remain satisfying over the long-run is to pick behaviors that align with your personality and skills. Work hard on the things that come easy.

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### Chapter Summary

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- Pick the right habit and progress is easy. Pick the wrong habit and life is a struggle.
- Genes cannot be easily changed, which means they provide a powerful advantage in favorable

circumstances and a serious disadvantage in unfavorable circumstances.

- Habits are easier when they align with your natural abilities. Choose the habits that best suit you.
- Play a game that favors your strengths. If you can't find a game that favors you, create one.
- Genes do not eliminate the need for hard work. They clarify it. They tell us *what* to work hard on.