

## What Makes Someone an Expert?

**10,000 hours!** Easy. Next question. **What makes AI an expert?** Training on the equivalent of millions of hours of reading! But can we call AI an expert even after what seems like more than enough 10,000 hours of training? This playful reference to the famous “10,000-hour rule” hints that human and artificial expertise might not be so easily equated. To dig deeper, we need to ask: What actually qualifies as expertise in humans versus AI? Is it just about clocking hours or processing data? Let’s explore how the concept of expertise has been defined (and misdefined), the origins and critiques of that 10,000-hour benchmark, and how machine learning models are trained and evaluated. Along the way, we’ll look at examples in medicine, law, creative writing, and chess, considering whether an AI can **truly** be called an expert if it lacks self-awareness, lived experience, or intuition.

### The 10,000-Hour Rule: From Research to Pop Culture

The idea that **10,000 hours of practice** makes someone an expert exploded into popular culture after Malcolm Gladwell’s book *Outliers* (2008). Gladwell famously wrote that “ten thousand hours is the magic number of greatness,” claiming that extensive practice is the key to mastering a skill <sup>1</sup>. His examples ranged from the Beatles’ countless hours playing in Hamburg clubs to Bill Gates’ early programming experiences <sup>2</sup>. The rule, in its simplified form, suggests that if you invest roughly 10,000 hours (about 10 years of diligent work) in playing violin, coding, chess, or almost any discipline, you stand a good chance of becoming an **expert** at it <sup>3</sup>.

However, the **origin** of this “magic number” was academic research that wasn’t quite so absolute. Psychologist **Anders Ericsson** and colleagues studied violinists at a music academy in the early 1990s. They found that by age 20, the top-performing violin students had practiced an average of around 10,000 hours – hence the number <sup>4</sup>. But here’s the catch: Gladwell’s take was a bit of an oversimplification. Ericsson noted that Gladwell “misread it a bit” – not every elite violinist had **exactly** 10,000 hours; some had more, some less <sup>4</sup>. The 10k figure was an average, not a hard cutoff where magic suddenly happens. What mattered more in Ericsson’s research was the *quality* of practice. He emphasized **deliberate practice** – focused efforts to improve, often guided by a teacher – rather than just mindlessly logging hours <sup>5</sup>. In other words, **practice isn’t a mere stopwatch number**, and there’s nothing mystical that occurs at hour 10,001.

### Beyond the Magic Number: Talent, Practice, and Other Factors

The 10,000-hour rule is catchy, but real-life expertise is more complex. Even Ericsson himself cautioned that high-level performance involves more than just hitting an hour count <sup>6</sup> <sup>5</sup>. For one, innate differences and **talent** can play a role (though Ericsson’s view was that *most* abilities can be dramatically improved with training) <sup>7</sup>. Additionally, how you practice matters: continuous feedback and challenging yourself yield far more growth than doing the same comfortable routine over and over <sup>5</sup>.

Critics of the 10,000-hour mantra point out that it's an **oversimplification** to say *anyone* can become an expert at *anything* with enough practice. A 2019 analysis by psychologist Brooke Macnamara attempted to replicate the violin study and found that practice, while important, explained only about a quarter of the variation in skill level among musicians <sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup> . In that study, the best violinists had practiced about 11,000 hours by age 20, versus roughly 6,000 hours for less-accomplished players <sup>10</sup> . So more practice **did** correlate with better performance – but it wasn't everything. Some highly practiced individuals still didn't reach the top tier, suggesting that other factors (quality of practice, starting age, mentorship, **even genetics or cognitive abilities**) come into play <sup>11</sup> . As Macnamara put it, "more practice does not necessarily mean you'll be better than someone else with less practice," noting that a combination of genetic factors, environment, motivation, and opportunity all contribute to greatness <sup>9</sup> .

In short, **human expertise** isn't a simple equation. Ten thousand hours can be a useful rule-of-thumb for the kind of commitment required, but it's not a guarantee. The conversation has evolved from "How long does it take?" to "*What kind of practice, under what conditions, and with what innate predispositions?*" The **10,000-hour rule** opened a public conversation about practice and mastery, but experts now emphasize deliberate practice, adaptability, and talent as pieces of a larger puzzle in human skill development <sup>11</sup> .

## Can AI Achieve Expertise the Same Way?

If humans attain expertise through years of experience and practice, how do **AI systems** get good at what they do? The short answer: not in the same way – and often on a vastly different scale. Machine learning models don't "practice" in the human sense; they **train** by processing enormous amounts of data. Modern AI training involves feeding the algorithm millions of examples and adjusting its internal parameters to improve performance, a process loosely inspired by how brain neurons strengthen with experience <sup>12</sup> . In fact, software models are often said to be trained on "*thousands or millions of examples*" and use neural network architectures (like the now-famous *transformer* architecture in natural language processing) to gradually learn patterns and skills <sup>12</sup> .

To appreciate the **scale** of AI training, consider this: *no human could ever read the entire internet*, but advanced AIs essentially do! OpenAI's **GPT-3** language model, for example, was trained on a text corpus of about 45 terabytes – roughly **500 billion words** drawn from books, articles, and websites <sup>13</sup> . (That's the equivalent of reading every book in a large library... multiplied many thousands of times over.) By comparison, even a voracious human reader might only read a few million words in a lifetime. In other words, an AI can consume in hours or days what would take **many lifetimes** for a person to absorb. This is why one might quip that if 10,000 hours makes a human an expert, an AI trained on the whole internet has effectively clocked *millions* of "hours" worth of training data.

But does crunching **big data** equate to expertise? AI developers evaluate their models not by hours practiced, but by performance on specific tasks. They use **testing datasets and benchmarks** to see how well the AI learned. For instance, an AI that's meant to identify diseases from X-ray images will be tested on images it hasn't seen before to check its accuracy. With learning algorithms, progress is measured by metrics (like accuracy, error rates, or game scores) rather than a mentor's approval. In fact, many AIs now undergo something akin to "exams" – standardized tests originally designed for humans – as a way to gauge their prowess. A recent example is GPT-4 (an advanced successor to GPT-3), which **exhibits human-level performance on various professional and academic benchmarks** <sup>14</sup> . OpenAI reported that GPT-4 *passes a simulated bar exam* with a score around the top 10% of human test-takers (whereas its predecessor GPT-3.5 was around the bottom 10%) <sup>14</sup> . Similarly, earlier versions of ChatGPT surprised researchers by

**passing parts of the United States Medical Licensing Exam (USMLE)** for doctors – roughly equivalent to an average new medical graduate. In one study, ChatGPT scored about 60% on the USMLE questions, essentially reaching the passing threshold without any special coaching <sup>15</sup>.

These achievements are astounding: it's as if an AI studied for the bar or medical boards by devouring every textbook and case study ever written – and then managed to answer the questions correctly. So, on paper, we have AIs that can **earn top scores** on difficult exams, churn through scientific literature, or trounce grandmasters in complex games. That certainly *sounds* like expertise. Yet, many of us instinctively feel there's something different about what the AI is doing versus a human expert. Is an AI that aces a test the same as a lawyer who can argue in court, or a doctor who can treat a patient at the bedside? This question gets to the heart of the issue: **what is missing (if anything) in AI's brand of expertise?**

## Intuition, Experience, and Self-Awareness: The Human Edge

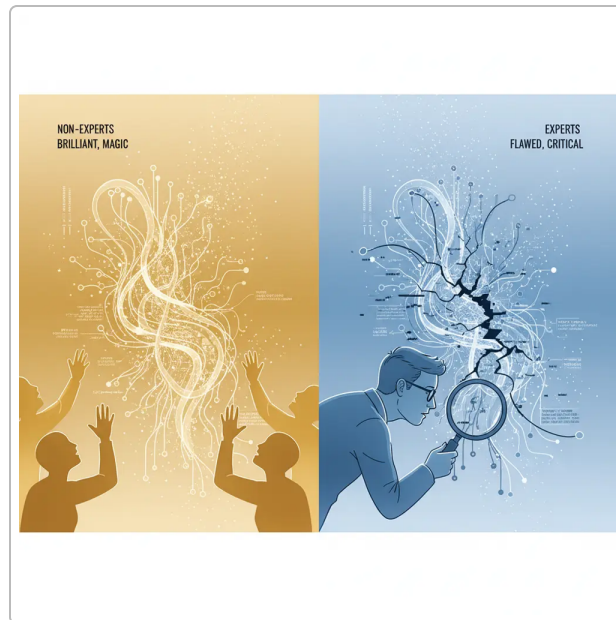
One key difference is that human expertise isn't just about *knowledge* or *pattern recognition* – it's also about **intuition, judgment, and context** earned through real-world experience. Seasoned experts often develop a kind of *sixth sense* in their domain: a master chess player “feels” which move is strong, a skilled doctor has a hunch about a tricky diagnosis, a great novelist senses what a character would truly do next. This intuition comes from a deep internalization of patterns combined with lived experience and reflection. **Artificial intelligence**, by contrast, currently has no genuine *self-awareness* or *experiential understanding*. It processes patterns in data but doesn't truly **understand** what those patterns mean in a human life or a social context.

Researchers have pointed out that today's AI **cannot fully replicate the depth of expertise and intuition** that human specialists possess <sup>16</sup>. For example, an AI might analyze thousands of legal documents and output a recommendation on a case, but it lacks “the intricacies of legal operations and nuances” that a seasoned lawyer absorbs through practice <sup>17</sup>. Law isn't just a dataset of rules; it's an evolving construct, filled with ambiguous principles and ethical considerations that require human interpretation <sup>17</sup>. Similarly, AIs don't truly comprehend medical ethics or a patient's emotional needs, no matter how many medical journals they've read. They also don't **experience** the world: an AI doctor has never felt pain or fear, an AI writer has never fallen in love or longed for meaning. Human experts bring a richness of personal experience that influences their judgment – something an AI, which has never had *any* life experiences or consciousness, simply cannot have.

Another oft-cited gap is **creativity**. AI can be extremely *clever* – it can even surprise us with novel moves in chess or turns of phrase in writing – but does it have genuine creative inspiration? One analysis argues that AI lacks “the essential capability of creative thinking, which is crucial for problem-solving” <sup>17</sup>. In other words, an AI might recombine ideas in impressive ways (since it has seen so many examples), but it isn't **innovative** in the way a person can be when breaking completely new ground or responding to unforeseen situations. For instance, AI language models like GPT can write a poem in Shakespearean style or brainstorm business ideas by drawing on vast patterns in text, but if the problem at hand falls outside what's in their training data, they have no *real understanding* to fall back on. They don't have an **imagination** or an intentional creative drive; they generate output based on probabilities, not because they *want* to express something or solve a personally meaningful problem.

Then there's the issue of **self-awareness and metacognition** – the ability to think about one's own thinking. Human experts can reflect on what they know and don't know. A seasoned engineer might say, “I've never seen this type of fault before; I'll need to investigate further,” whereas an AI will forge ahead and

give an answer regardless, because it doesn't truly know when it *doesn't* know something. (In fact, AI models often exhibit *overconfidence*, like when ChatGPT-style systems state incorrect facts with full conviction – a phenomenon sometimes jokingly called “AI hallucination.”) Without self-awareness, AI cannot gauge its own certainty or grasp the implications of being wrong the way a human expert would. An AI radiologist doesn't feel *responsible* for missing a tumor in a scan; a human radiologist does, and that sense of responsibility can drive more careful behavior and continuous learning.



*Figure: Non-experts often view AI systems as “magical” in their capabilities (left), whereas true domain experts scrutinize the same systems and readily spot their flaws (right). This split-screen illustration highlights the gap between the perception of AI’s abilities and the reality discerned by those with deep expertise <sup>18</sup> <sup>19</sup>. It underscores why human intuition and contextual understanding remain vital even as AI grows more powerful.*

In fact, experts in various fields have noted a telling pattern: the more **expertise** you have in a domain, the *less* impressive a fancy AI seems within that domain. If you only have surface knowledge, a slick AI demo can look miraculous; but if you're an old pro, you'll immediately notice when the AI makes a rookie mistake. In one study, junior doctors were enamored by an AI's diagnostic suggestions and often followed them even when they were wrong, whereas senior physicians quickly spotted the AI's errors and chose to ignore them <sup>20</sup>. The novice doctors thought the AI was brilliant; the experienced doctors knew better. In another example, expert radiologists working with an AI tool were very selective about accepting its recommendations – so much so that a human+AI team diagnosed slightly *fewer* cancers than the AI alone would have, because the humans often overrode the AI (sometimes second-guessing correct answers) <sup>21</sup>. These scenarios reveal a paradox: **AI can match or exceed human performance on certain metrics, yet human experts remain indispensable** to judge when and how to use the AI's “advice.”

So, can AI be an expert? If being an expert means **performing at a high level in a narrow task**, then yes – AI can absolutely be an expert in, say, *playing chess* or *sorting images*. But if being an expert implies a broader understanding, an ability to generalize knowledge to new problems, to reason with flexibility, to have insights born of personal experience, or to be accountable for decisions, then current AIs fall short of

the full definition of expertise. They are extremely powerful **tools** created and guided by human experts, rather than independent experts in their own right.

## Human Experts vs AI in the Real World: Four Domains

To make this comparison more concrete, let's look at several domains where both humans and AIs are now operating at high levels. Each of these fields – medicine, law, creative writing, and chess – highlights different aspects of what it means to have expertise, and how AI's capabilities stack up.

- **Medicine (Diagnosis and Treatment):** Doctors train for years (medical school, residency, specialization) to become medical experts. They not only memorize facts about the body and diseases but also develop bedside manner, ethical judgment, and practical experience by treating thousands of patients. AI systems, on the other hand, are now **assisting in diagnosis** – for example, algorithms that scan radiology images can detect signs of disease (like tumors or fractures) with impressive accuracy. In some cases, AI diagnostic tools have matched or even outperformed average human doctors in specific tasks (such as identifying certain types of cancer on slides). Yet, a doctor's expertise involves more than pattern recognition. Physicians often integrate many contextual clues – a patient's history, symptoms, even intuition about something “not looking right” – which an AI might ignore if it's not explicitly coded in the data. Moreover, trust is a big factor. Many patients (and doctors) are cautious about fully trusting an AI's judgment. Studies have shown that **experienced doctors will override AI recommendations** if they sense something is off, whereas less experienced ones might follow the AI blindly <sup>20</sup>. This underscores that the human expert is currently the final decision-maker. An AI can be like an extraordinarily well-read medical assistant, flagging possibilities, but it's the human expert who has to interpret the suggestion, consider nuances (e.g. “Is this treatment right for *this* patient?”), and take responsibility for the outcome. Also, no AI so far can replicate a doctor's **empathy and communication**, which are key to patient care. Explaining a diagnosis, comforting a patient, understanding their personal values – these remain human territory. In practice, the ideal may be **human-AI collaboration**: AI offers data-driven insights and speed, while human clinicians provide understanding, empathy, and ethical oversight.
- **Law (Legal Analysis and Advice):** We now have AI models that can **pass law school exams and even the bar exam** with flying colors <sup>14</sup>. That's a stunning feat – it means an AI has absorbed vast amounts of legal text (cases, statutes, bar prep material) and can spot the right answers on a test. However, being a practicing lawyer is much more than recalling laws or issue-spotting on a multiple-choice exam. Lawyers must craft arguments, weigh competing interpretations, and persuade judges or juries – often by appealing to uniquely human sensibilities like fairness, intent, or moral values. AI has a hard time with these open-ended aspects. One scholarly review noted that current AI struggles with **“accurately embodying complex legal rules and reasoning”** because law is *“a flexible and evolving construct, subject to varied interpretations”* <sup>17</sup>. An AI can read every court decision ever published, but it doesn't mean it truly understands justice or can predict how a human judge will exercise discretion. There are experimental AI “lawyers” that can draft simple contracts or help prepare a case by sifting through documents (a task known as e-discovery), and these are undoubtedly useful tools. Yet, when it comes to appearing in court or giving nuanced legal counsel, human lawyers aren't obsolete. They draw on common sense, real-world insight, and ethical reasoning that go beyond what's in the written law. Additionally, there's the matter of **accountability**. If a human lawyer gives bad advice, they can be disbarred or sued for malpractice. If an AI gives bad advice, who is responsible? Until AI can truly grasp the *why* behind legal principles

and carry the social responsibilities of legal practice, it's better to think of it as a highly knowledgeable assistant – or a legal **research expert** – rather than a lawyer with judgment. GPT-4 might score in the 90th percentile on the bar exam, but **“expertise” in law means applying those rules to messy human situations**, something AIs are only beginning to tackle in carefully controlled settings.

- **Creative Writing (Stories and Artistry):** Could an AI write the next great novel or a prize-winning poem? It's a question both technologists and artists are pondering. We've seen AIs generate everything from news articles to song lyrics. In one notable case, a short novel co-written by an AI – titled *“The Day a Computer Writes a Novel”* – **made it through the first round of a Japanese literary competition**, competing anonymously against human-written works <sup>22</sup>. Judges were surprised by how well-structured and coherent the AI-assisted story was <sup>23</sup>. This suggests that, at least on a technical level, an algorithm can learn the patterns of storytelling (plot structure, grammar, pacing) and produce something that reads like a story. However, the same judges also noted deficiencies: the novel lacked compelling character development and original creativity <sup>23</sup>. In fact, the AI's human co-authors had a heavy hand in the process – they essentially provided an outline and parameters, and the AI filled in the blanks by remixing elements from its training data <sup>24</sup>. The end result was impressively coherent, but not truly *invented* from scratch by the AI. Creative expertise involves more than past pattern analysis; it draws on imagination, personal voice, and often the expression of authentic experiences or emotions. At present, AI can mimic styles – you can ask a model to “Write a poem in the style of Emily Dickinson” and get a decent pastiche – but it doesn't *mean* anything to the AI itself. It has no message or insight it's burning to communicate. Human writers often pour a lifetime of experience or a unique worldview into their work. An AI has no worldview; it only has data. So while we'll likely see more AI-generated content (and even some superficial “expertise” in churning out formulaic plotlines or articles), most experts would argue that **AI hasn't achieved the kind of creative genius or deep storytelling expertise that a human can**. The process tends to be more *collaborative* – humans and AI together might produce interesting art – rather than the AI being an autonomous creative expert.

- **Chess (and Other Strategy Games):** Chess was once considered a pinnacle of human intellectual expertise – the product of deep strategy, experience, and intuition. Decades ago, people wondered if a computer could ever beat a world chess champion, since playing chess well was seen as a uniquely human cognitive skill. That question was answered definitively in 1997 when IBM's Deep Blue defeated Garry Kasparov. And yet, what's happened in recent years is even more astonishing: **AI systems not only beat the best humans, they reinvented how the game could be played**. Google DeepMind's **AlphaGo** program defeated one of the world's top Go players in 2016, a milestone many thought was a decade away because Go is even more complex than chess and was believed to require intense intuition <sup>25</sup>. Shortly after, DeepMind introduced **AlphaZero**, a generalized game-playing AI that taught itself chess (and Go, and Shogi) from scratch. In a matter of hours, without any human tutoring beyond the basic rules, AlphaZero reached superhuman levels of play. It famously absorbed “all of humanity's chess knowledge – and beyond – in about as long as it takes to drive from New York to Washington, D.C.” <sup>26</sup>. In fact, after just four hours of self-play training, AlphaZero decisively defeated Stockfish, the world-champion chess software (which in turn was far stronger than any human grandmaster) <sup>26</sup>. By any measure of game performance, **the AI is the ultimate chess expert** – it never gets tired, it can calculate with brute-force speed, and it even developed innovative strategies that surprised grandmasters (moves that looked almost alien or “creative,” because they broke conventional human strategic wisdom) <sup>27</sup> <sup>28</sup>. So here, AI doesn't

just match human experts; it vastly surpasses them in a *narrow* domain. However, it's a narrow domain indeed. Chess has formal rules, a clear goal, and no hidden information – a perfect playground for AI. The “expertise” AlphaZero has in chess doesn't translate to anything outside chess; it cannot suddenly decide to apply strategic thinking to, say, business negotiations or military conflicts, because it doesn't actually **understand** what chess strategy represents in a broader sense. It's simply extremely optimized for that one task. Human chess masters, in contrast, often bring their personality and life experience into how they play (and they can carry lessons from chess into life and vice versa – an AI cannot). The chess example shows that if we define expertise purely as **performance** in a well-defined task, AI can not only be an expert but even a *super-expert*. Yet, such prowess comes without **consciousness or generality**. Outside the chessboard, AlphaZero has no opinions, goals or awareness. It's an idiot savant – brilliant at chess, clueless about everything else.

## Redefining Expertise in the Age of AI

The rise of AI has prompted us to rethink what it means to be an expert. Traditionally, **expertise** implied a combination of knowledge, skill, and often a recognition by others of one's authority in a field. Experts aren't just walking encyclopedias; they are valued for their judgment – their ability to apply knowledge wisely in novel situations. They also often have to **explain and justify** their decisions (a doctor explaining a diagnosis, an engineer proving a design's safety, a teacher guiding students). With AI, we have entities that can *store* more knowledge than any human, and execute certain skills with superhuman precision. But they operate as opaque black boxes, without the **transparent reasoning** or accountability we expect from human experts.

One philosophical question is whether **self-awareness** is a prerequisite for true expertise. Does one need to *know* what one knows (and what one doesn't know) to be an expert? Human experts have this self-reflective quality; current AIs do not. If an AI radiologist identifies 100 images with tumors flawlessly, but cannot tell when an image is outside its expertise (say, a type of scan it wasn't trained on), a human rookie might actually outperform it by saying, “I'm not sure, let me ask for help” in that edge case. In this sense, **the partnership of human and AI might be the real expert** team of the future – each compensating for the other's weaknesses. The AI contributes data-crunching, speed, and consistency; the human contributes adaptability, ethical judgment, and the “big picture” understanding.

Technically, as AI engineers work on these problems, there's also a push for AIs to be able to explain their reasoning (so-called “explainable AI”). If we could open the hood and see *why* an AI reached a conclusion, it would start to resemble a knowledgeable assistant that can reason out loud, rather than a mysterious oracle. This might also inch AIs closer to what we consider expert-like behavior, because part of **expertise is teaching others** and articulating reasons, not just spitting out answers.

From a practical standpoint, we're already seeing a **blend of AI and human expertise** in action. In medicine, AI tools assist doctors in making diagnoses, but the doctors interpret and validate the results. In law, AI might draft a contract or summarize case law, and then lawyers refine it and make the strategic calls. In creative fields, artists use AI as a new kind of instrument or muse, but their human sense of story or aesthetics guides the final product. Even in chess, the best “freestyle” teams were once human+computer pairs, where a good human player using an AI could beat either one alone. This synergy hints that the greatest expert of all might be a well-designed **human-AI hybrid** system.

Yet, there are cautionary notes too. Over-reliance on AI without understanding its limits can be dangerous. An AI could make a mistake outside its training data and a non-expert user might not catch it – leading to bad decisions. This is why experts often emphasize that **AI is a tool, not a colleague** (at least for now). The responsibility lies with the human experts to use the tool wisely. In domains like healthcare or law, ethical and legal accountability currently can only reside with humans, which means AI's role is inherently limited by what *we are willing to delegate*.

In conclusion, calling AI an “expert” really depends on how we define the term. If expertise is just **optimal performance in a constrained task**, AI can be an expert – and indeed, exceed human experts in many such tasks. But if expertise is a **holistic, human quality**, bound up with understanding, conscience, and adaptability, then AI as it exists today is not an expert in the full sense. Perhaps in the future, if AIs develop some form of general intelligence or consciousness, we'll revisit this question. For now, the safest approach is to regard AI as **augmented intelligence** – a powerful extension of human capability. Just as having a calculator doesn't make someone a math expert (it's the human who knows when and how to use the calculator that is the expert), having AI does not automatically make the AI a true expert on its own.

What makes someone (or something) an expert, it turns out, isn't so easy to pin down. It's a mix of hours of practice *and* the intangible qualities of judgment, creativity, and experience. We've learned that **10,000 hours** of the right kind of practice can cultivate those qualities in a person <sup>5</sup> <sup>9</sup>. We've also learned that **millions of examples** can train an AI to do astonishing things, but that raw training doesn't confer the deeper understanding that humans possess <sup>16</sup>. As AI continues to advance, our hope is that it will **complement** human experts, not replace them – handling the heavy lifting of data and computation, while we humans focus on the insight, wisdom, and ethical thinking that have always defined true expertise.

**References:** The insights and examples in this discussion draw from a range of sources on expert performance and AI development. Key references include Anders Ericsson's research on deliberate practice and expertise <sup>6</sup> <sup>4</sup>, Malcolm Gladwell's popularization of the 10,000-hour rule <sup>1</sup>, and critiques of that rule highlighting the role of quality of practice and individual differences <sup>9</sup>. In examining AI, we cited OpenAI's reports on GPT-4's exam performances <sup>14</sup> and studies of ChatGPT's success on medical licensing exams <sup>15</sup>. We also referenced analyses of AI's limitations in replicating human-like intuition and contextual understanding <sup>16</sup>. Examples from specific fields – a Japanese AI-written novel testing the waters of literary creativity <sup>22</sup> <sup>23</sup>, and DeepMind's AlphaZero mastering chess in mere hours <sup>26</sup> – illustrate the breadth of AI's feats and the nuances of comparing them to human expertise. These sources (and the experiences of professionals in medicine, law, and other fields) collectively inform the evolving conversation about expertise in the age of AI. The journey to expertise, whether human or artificial, is an ongoing story – one that we are all watching (and shaping) with great interest. <sup>4</sup> <sup>17</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <sup>2</sup> <sup>3</sup> <sup>8</sup> <sup>9</sup> <sup>10</sup> <sup>11</sup> Malcolm Gladwell, Anders Ericsson 10,000 Hour Rule Isn't Replicating - Business Insider

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