

# There is techne and phronesis in movement: A beautiful combination for health and well-being!

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## Abstract

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Drawing on Aristotle's concepts of techne (art or craft) and phronesis (practical wisdom), the purpose of this concept-based article was to showcase that there is techne and phronesis in movement, including their interrelations for the long-lasting love of movement, and thus health and well-being. The paper is divided into four sections. In the first section, the researcher exemplifies the embodied movement of art (techne) emphasizing skill mastery. Movement is both techne and action – a holistic process encompassing sensations of strength, physicality, and mental clarity. In the second section, the researcher emphasizes how wisdom in decision making (phronesis) can lead to active lifestyles via the use of praxis vs. theoria. The links between techne and phronesis are discussed in the third section, whereby skill mastery (techne) can facilitate phronetic action regarding active and healthy lifestyles. This process is exemplified in performing arts, including dancing, aerial dancing, and physical theater. Lastly, implications for movement programming are offered, emphasizing the importance of a strong physical culture to achieve the techne of movement and thus wisdom in decision making about living the good life. There is techne and phronesis in movement, which is a beautiful and powerful combination for health and well-being.

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## Introduction

Based on the 2021 National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey, US obesity rates increased from 30.5% to 41.9% between 1999 and 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2022). Obesity prevalence across different age groups was as follows: 39.8% among adults between 20 and 39 years old; 44.3% among adults aged 40 to 59 years; and 41.5% among older adults between 60 years old and over (CDC, 2022). Given the severity of obesity-related conditions like heart disease, stroke, type II diabetes and certain types of cancer and the importance of exercise to curb high obesity rates and promote health (CDC, 2022), it is key to examine the complex nature of movement. Clearly, the dominant paradigms in physical activity health promotion, which rely on behavior-change theories and digitization, have not been successful in promoting the health of the public (Kosma, 2021; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a, 2021). Therefore, in this paper a holistic approach

in movement programming will be discussed showcasing how movement is both techne (art) and action, including the importance of a strong physical culture for wisdom in decisions regarding lifestyle choices.

Specifically, the purpose of this concept-based article was to showcase that there is techne and phronesis (practical wisdom) in movement and how the two interact for long-lasting physical activity participation and thus health and well-being. The philosophical framework of the paper is based on Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* and the concepts of techne (art or craft) and phronesis (practical or moral wisdom) regarding living the good life (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E/1999). Both the knowledge of techne and phronesis are practical in nature, encompassing lifelong ever-changing experiences, skill mastery (techne), and deliberations regarding how to live the good life (phronesis) (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E/1999).

This paper comprises four sections. In the first section, the concept of techne in movement is defined including

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the mastery of skills in a holistic way. Contrary to other *technai* like in painting, acquiring and learning movement skills involves a holistic approach because sensations of body awareness, strength, endurance, confidence, and euphoria occur and are visible during movement. These experiences are integral elements of movement execution – not separate ends like a statue; they are incommensurable, making movement an embodied action and *techne*.

In the second section of the paper, the existence of *phronesis* in movement is showcased. Like *techne*, *phronesis* is practical knowledge that stems from people's value systems, which form within one's society, culture, history, and upbringing (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1999; Kosma et al., 2015). When trying to understand human action like being physically active or not *praxis* is key for acquiring wisdom in deciding how to live the good life. This process is distinguished from "pure science" which is the scientific knowledge obtained via the cause-and-effect laws in natural sciences like the orbiting of the planets and the generation of nuclear power.

In the third section of the paper, it is shown how *techne* and *phronesis* link in movement. Mastering movement skills, as exemplified in performing arts, can lead to the long-lasting love of movement, health, and well-being (Kosma, 2024a; Kosma et al., 2024a, 2024b; Kosma et al., 2021a, 2021b). If there is mastery in the *techne* of movement, people can make wise decisions about leading a healthy lifestyle (concept of *phronesis*) (Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a). Communities and neighborhoods that embrace a physical culture can facilitate the promotion and value of the *techne* of movement. People tend to find meaning not only in activities they value, but also in activities that others value (Wolf, 2010). Valuing active and healthy communities can lead to health and well-being, which is part of the good life as Aristotle envisioned it.

In the last section, implications for movement programming are provided by highlighting the importance of promoting a strong physical culture within neighborhoods, communities, schools, parks and recreational settings, health clubs, and rehabilitation. It is critical to emphasize creative and artistic (e.g., bodily expressive) elements in movement education and respect autonomy and free will in decision making about how to live the good life (Kosma, 2024a, 2024b; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a).

## There is *techne* in movement

Based on Aristotle (350 B.C.E./1999), *techne* is art like the technical knowledge of the craftsman. This requires training and practice or experience. Professional training is not necessary to acquire skills; experience alone can lead to skill acquisition (Gadamer, 1975/2012). The ultimate mastery of *techne*, though, is not merely to learn a skill but also to know its importance and be able to teach it (Angier, 2010; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a).

*"The master craftsman (technitês) is wiser than the person of experience because he knows the cause, the reasons that things are to be done. The mere artisan (cheirotechnês) acts without this knowledge" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1961, pp. 981a30–b5).*

*"In general, it is a sign of the man who knows, that he can teach, and therefore we think *techne* more truly knowledge than experience is; for craftsmen can teach, and men of mere experience cannot" (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./2016, pp. 981b7–10).*

Technical knowledge is practical and applicable to a certain task. There are a variety of *techne* examples (*technai*), including the builder who is building houses, the artist who is making pottery or paintings, and the surgeon who is operating. Although there are many *technai* (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1999), in this paper, the emphasis will be on the art of learning movement skills like dancing, swimming, climbing, expressing bodily (e.g., in performing arts), and playing different games such as soccer and tennis.

The outcomes of *techne* are supposed to be good, and at times, like in movement skills, *techne* ends are integral to (part of) the action like sensations of strength, endurance, flow, and euphoria during dancing and aerial dancing (Kosma & Erickson, 2020a, 2020b; Kosma et al., 2023a, 2023b; Kosma et al., 2024a, 2024b; Kosma et al., 2021a, 2021b; Parviainen, 2003). Such physical and mental sensations that encompass body schema (motor habit; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014) can be achieved by embracing a physical culture and valuing the art of bodily expression like in physical theater (Kosma, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b; Kosma et al., 2024a, 2024b). Although there are certain criteria regarding the conceptualization of a balanced body schema in movement (e.g., body posture, awareness, confidence, physicality, flow), these holistic

(unity of body-mind-emotion) sensations vary (as expected in the concept of *techne/art*); they are qualitatively distinct and incommensurable (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1999; Gadamer, 1975/2012; Kosma, 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a, 2024b; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a, 2021; Kosma et al., 2024a, 2024b; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). A performer's dance skills are unique and cannot be separated from the performance. This contradicts the common utilitarian approach in the study of bodily movement whereby action is supposed to turn into production with measurable objectifiable outcomes like increased fitness levels and "proper" skill execution (Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a, 2021). Although Aristotle stated that *techne* is production (e.g., the rational production of a painting) and not action (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1999), movement is both *techne* and action whereby the different sensations of strength, balanced physicality, and mental clarity are not products but integral parts of that very action (the art of movement) (Kosma, 2021, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2024a; 2024b; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a). These sensations can be experienced and are visible only during movement/action. They are not products like paintings hanging at an art exhibition. Even though in certain settings like competitive dancing movement is highly objectified and compartmentalized for evaluation purposes, many dancers prefer free bodily expression like in physical theater to overreliance on stringent technical, dance skills. They enjoy freedom in expression and creativity in movement (Kosma et al., 2023a, 2023b, 2024b).

To rephrase it, in certain forms of *techne* (e.g., drawing) the end result (portrait) can be viewed separately from the action; in the *techne* of movement, though, the different skills performed can be viewed and best sensed during action because they are (constitute-embodiment) the action and not a separate outcome like a drawing. If bodily movement does not take place, it is impossible to sense and view the different skills that encompass this very action such as inversion and suspension in aerial silks (Kosma, 2024a; Kosma & Erickson, 2020a, 2020b). The art of movement is holistic; it encompasses action, and its good ends (e.g., physical and mental sensations) are integral (embodied) to this very action and not a separate entity like a statue at a museum.

Although a painter can pick up where he/she left off when they started painting, if movement (e.g., physical activity or exercise) ceases it is difficult to start again

because of time related losses in strength, endurance, and skill, making it physically and mentally challenging to start over. The art of bodily movement requires physical exertion, skill, determination, and mental dedication, which makes the whole process ambitious, meaningful, and inspiring (Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a). It requires energy, time, a proper diet, and the right environment. It can be facilitated in settings conducive to physical culture like safe recreational areas to be active (e.g., bike, swim, jog, play ball games), affordable exercise classes (e.g., dancing, aerobics, and weight training), and existence of bike lanes, walking paths, and pedestrian pavements. Movement can be sustainable if it is part of life, assuming there is policy in place for enough leisure time to partake in the behavior (Kosma, 2023b; Kosma & Buchanan, 2019; Kosma et al., 2015, 2017). People of all ages should be able to have easy, close-to-home access to a variety of physical activity opportunities. Acquiring the *techne* of movement early on can lead to a lifetime of physical activity (Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a, 2018b).

### **There is phronesis in movement: Importance of praxis vs. theoria**

Like *techne*, *phronesis* is practical knowledge that is learned – subconsciously and/or consciously – throughout ever-changing, context and time-dependent life experiences (i.e., *praxis*) during one's upbringing, culture, and history (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1999; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a; Kosma et al., 2015). *Phronesis* is an intellectual and ethical virtue that can lead to wise decisions about living the good life (Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a). Wisdom in decision making is based on value systems that are formed during one's lifetime, so people can decide how to occupy their lives, including choice of profession, creation of family, and leisure time. Do they have the energy to cook a healthy meal after a long day at work? Can they be physically active together with their children at various recreational venues? Such activities require personal interest, time management, energy, access to settings conducive to movement, and knowledge of relevant movement skills (*techne*) via *praxis*.

The notion that *praxis* – the varied life experiences – can lead to the knowledge of *phronesis* (practical or moral wisdom/reasoning) was coined by Aristotle in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 350 B.C.E./1999). Aristotle distinguished between *praxis* and *theoria* in that *praxis* can result in *phronesis*, which is applicable to unstable human actions like deciding on the when, what, and how

of physical activity (Aristotle, 1999/350 B.C.E; Kosma et al., 2015). Practical wisdom requires deliberation to achieve a good end, which is the action itself. “In general, a man of practical wisdom is he who has the ability to deliberate” (Aristotle, 1999/350 BCE, p. 152, 1140c30). “Practical wisdom is not pure science because matters of action admit of being other than they are” (Aristotle, 1999/350 BCE, p. 153, 1110b35). Pure science is the knowledge derived from the stable cause-and effect laws of nature (theoria). These natural laws are universal, and they cannot be deliberated (Aristotle, 1999/350 BCE). For example, there is no question that objects fall to earth because of the pull of gravity. Strep throat can be treated with penicillin, and Earth orbits the Sun. Nuclear power can be produced with extreme precision due to the laws of physics. Although pure science is still a process and its laws may change (e.g., Einstein disproved the Newtonian laws of gravity), a well-proven law of nature is not deliberated (e.g., how hurricanes and tornadoes form).

Fortunately, when studying unstable human affairs in social sciences like understanding reasons to be physically active or not there are no precise mathematical models to determine and predict human behavior. When attempting to understand human behavior, researchers need to rely on the methods used in the Humanities (literature, arts, philosophy, history), which is the examination of praxis and thus phronesis. The purpose of a humanistic approach in movement education is to *understand* – not to control – human action like being physically active or not (Kosma, 2023b; Kosma et al., 2015). The main concept of phronesis is the acceptance of free will and human agency. The best health is experienced by those who exercise autonomy in decision making (Buchanan, 2016; Kosma, 2023b; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023). People need to be able to make their own decisions about how to live the good life based on their practical wisdom and well-studied, ethical, and humanistic recommendations by public health agents (Kosma, 2023b).

To summarize, human action like physical activity cannot be predicted by the laws of nature or some mathematical model because it relies on phronesis and thus personal deliberation regarding how to act or not to act. Human affairs depend on free will and human agency. The value of physical activity can be sensed and appreciated only via praxis (e.g., exercise training and experiences) to achieve the techne of movement and make wise decisions about incorporating exercise into one’s

lifestyle or not. To be phronimos (wise) about lifestyle decisions, such as staying active and eating healthy, requires deliberation regarding ways to manage one’s time and daily responsibilities without adopting unhealthy habits. It is unfortunate that in this globalized technological era fallible and unethical human-control models are enforced, including reliance on digitization and pre-determined cut-and-dried cognitive constructs used in behavior-change theories (Kosma, 2021, 2023b; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a, 2021; Kosma et al., 2015). Not only are such models unsuccessful in promoting healthy lifestyles but also, they lead to ill health, including inability to make critical decisions in life and excessive screen use with associated physical and mental health issues (Kosma, 2021, 2023b; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a, 2021). Given that human behavior like physical activity participation tends to be habitual in nature based on praxis (e.g., upbringing, history, and life experiences) and the importance of techne within a holistic and embodied movement process, it will be showcased below how movement experiences (praxis) via the techne of movement can assist with making wise decisions regarding physical activity choices (phronesis).

### **The link between techne and phronesis in movement**

Although techne is not the same as phronesis, the two types of knowledge link in movement. Movement-central skills obtained during different activities (e.g., learning how to swim, play tennis, dance, climb, and bodily express) can have a significant impact on one’s lifestyle decisions (e.g., being physically active or not at leisure), which encompasses the concept of phronesis (Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a). Practical wisdom involves deliberations regarding how to live the good life (Aristotle, 1999/350 B.C.E). The acquisition of movement skills (techne) plays a key role in decisions about the if, what, when, and how of physical activity (i.e., phronesis) (Kosma, 2024b; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a). The ultimate mastery of art movement involves the ability to recognize its importance and ideally teach it to others. Mastering different movement skills and expressing them artistically can bring sensations of play, joy, accomplishment, confidence, and release; thus, art movement can become exciting, meaningful, and long-lasting (Kosma, 2024b; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018a).

The artistic and thus playful element of movement is exemplified in performing arts like dancing, aerial



dancing, and physical theater (Kosma, 2024b). Not only does the performer learn the pertinent movement skills but also, he/she creates arty pieces and shares a story with an audience – a highly enjoyable endeavor (Kosma, 2024a, 2024b). Artistic elements in movement are playful in nature and valued; thus, they lead to the love of movement for a lifetime, health, and well-being (Kosma, 2024b; Kosma & Erickson, 2020a, 2020b; Kosma et al., 2023a, 2023b; Kosma et al., 2021a, 2021b). When people engage in the *techne* of movement – within and/or outside performing arts – they can find wisdom in continuing with those activities, especially if such endeavors are also highly valued in society. People tend to find meaning and participate in activities that they value and others value as well (Wolf, 2010).

Value systems are formed based on cultural and societal habitus (Bourdieu, 1977; Kosma, 2022). Societies within which physical culture is embraced allow opportunities for physical activity participation among all age groups and ability levels (Kosma, 2022; Kosma, 2023b). Active communities should develop early on during childhood when children start playing in the alleys, parks, schools, and sports clubs. Given that work and family obligations during adulthood may hinder active lifestyles, it is key to involve families and neighborhoods in different activity options at recreational parks, quads, and playgrounds. *The techne of movement is a process and it should NOT be forced*. Rather, it is supposed to be freely chosen (exercise of autonomy) assuming there is policy for ample options and opportunities to be and stay active (Kosma, 2023b).

If the art of movement is reachable to community members, then habitually (a process that involves subconscious and conscious actions) people will exercise wisdom in their autonomy regarding how to live the good life (Kosma, 2022, 2023b). They may decide to spend some of their leisure time being active outdoors, which is key to health and well-being. Based on this *beautiful and powerful* combination of *techne* and *phronesis* in movement, detailed implications for programming will be provided below.

### **Implications for movement programming and conclusion**

The purpose of this concept-based article was to showcase that there is *techne* and *phronesis* in movement and how the two link for long-lasting physical activity participation and thus health and well-being. Both the knowledge of

*techne* and *phronesis* are practical in nature, encompassing lifelong practical experiences (*praxis*), skill learning (*techne*), and deliberations regarding how to live the good life (*phronesis*). Although the ideality of *techne* in movement is exemplified in performing arts – a highly playful and enjoyable endeavor – the acquisition of movement skills applies to a variety of settings, such as parks, alleys, sports clubs, and rehabilitation. Mastering movement skills can facilitate wisdom in decision making regarding leading active lifestyles and following a healthy diet. The *techne* of movement can be achieved in communities that embrace a strong physical culture, inspiring important implications for movement programming.

Societal habitus is key to lifestyle decisions (Bourdieu, 1977; Kosma, 2022). Habitual learning starts early in life; thus, encouraging active lifestyles among children and adolescents is an important starting point. Family members, neighborhoods, municipalities, and school boards can promote outdoor playing with peers and family members, participation in recreational sport settings, and creative and bodily expressive artistic elements in movement like dancing, theater, and physical theater (Berkeley, 2005; Kosma, 2024a, 2024b). Similarly, ample, accessible, and affordable activity opportunities should be provided for adults and older adults within colleges, sports clubs, fitness centers, and recreational venues. The *techne* of movement is not an individualistic endeavor; it involves friends, neighbors, peers, and community members. Different ball games and artistic events can be organized for community and family members so people of different age groups can be active together. In rehabilitation, an embodied and holistic approach in movement learning and execution can be promoted emphasizing a balanced body schema (e.g., unison of body-mind-emotion) for the ultimate mastery of *techne* in movement (Kosma, 2023a, 2023b; Kosma et al., 2024a, 2024b). Borrowing from performing arts, it is critical to reinforce creative and artistic (e.g., bodily expressive) approaches in movement programming for the love of movement, health, and well-being (Kosma, 2024a, 2024b; Kosma & Erickson, 2020a, 2020b; Kosma et al., 2023a, 2023b; Kosma et al., 2021a, 2021b).

In conclusion, public health can be achieved via respect for free will and human agency, which is a cornerstone of *phronesis*. The highest levels of health are experienced by those who exercise the highest levels of autonomy; those

who can make wise decisions about living the good life as Aristotle envisioned. The embodied *techné* of movement is key to this process and can be strengthened in communities with strong physical culture. There is *techné* and *phronesis* in movement, which is a beautiful and powerful combination for health and well-being.

### Authors' Contribution

Study Design: MK; Manuscript Preparation: MK.

### Ethical Approval

This is a concept-based paper. Data were not collected; thus, there is no need for an ethics committee approval.

### Conflicts of interest and other issues

The author declares that this article was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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