

# Total freedom in physical activity via body schema: being for itself and being in the world

Maria Kosma 

*School of Kinesiology, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA, USA.*

## Abstract

**Received:**  
June 18, 2023

**Accepted:**  
August 27, 2023

**Online Published:**  
September 30, 2023

Although it is well-established that the highest forms of health and well-being are experienced by those who embody the greatest levels of autonomy, the Covid-19 pandemic disrupted autonomy and freedom in decision making, such as leading healthy lifestyles like physical activity, either because of disease-related issues (e.g., battling sickness and/or long covid or fear of catching covid 19) and/or governmentally imposed covid-19 mandates, such as lockdowns, social isolation, excessive screen use, face masks, and vaccines that proved to cause extensive harm and devastation in the health of the public. The paper draws on the philosophical underpinnings of embodied physical consciousness and body schema based on Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2014) existential freedom about decision making for living the good life. Specifically, based on Merleau-Ponty's seminal work, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2014), the purpose of this concept-based paper is to attempt to emphasize the importance of a strong, embodied body schema (motor habit) to freedom in decision making regarding the value of and participation in physical activity. The manuscript is divided into six sections, showcasing that such (total) freedom can be achieved by finding a balance between the body as being for itself (with consciousness and autonomy) and the body as being in the world – influenced by external forces like disease (e.g., Covid 19), disability, socio-economic status, and socio-political systems (e.g., covid-19 mandates). Given the threats to total freedom (because of our being in the world), implications for the field of Kinesiology and movement education are discussed, emphasizing ways to build a healthy physical culture, by for example implementing well-studied, ethical, and humanistic policies/recommendations regarding life challenges (e.g., disease, disability, poverty). In this way, a strong body schema can be formed for health and well-being.

**Keywords:** Being for itself and being in the world, body schema, Merleau-Ponty, physical culture, total freedom in physical activity.

## Introduction

It is well-known that the greatest levels of health and well-being are experienced by those who embody the greatest levels of autonomy (Buchanan, 2016; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023). The Covid-19 pandemic disrupted autonomy and freedom in decision making, such as leading healthy lifestyles like being physically active, either because of

disease-related issues (e.g., battling sickness and/or long covid or fear of catching covid 19) and/or governmentally imposed covid-19 mandates. The Covid-19 pandemic and mandates, such as lockdowns, social isolation, excessive screen use (e.g., online education and employment), face masks, and vaccines, have had devastating effects on the health of the public due to disease and injury, decreased psychosocial health (e.g., increased depression, anxiety,

✉ M. Kosma, e-mail: [mkosma@lsu.edu](mailto:mkosma@lsu.edu)

suicides), exercise levels and healthy diet, financial issues, lack of health care access related to conditions other than covid 19, and the death epidemic in the USA (Bardosh, de Figueiredo, et al., 2022; Bardosh, Krug, et al., 2022; Chew et al., 2021; Dowd, 2022; Gramlich, 2023; Herby et al., 2022; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; McKune et al., 2021; McPhillips, 2022; Swiss Policy Research, 2022, 2023a, 2023b; Turni & Lefringhausen, 2022; Wathelet et al., 2020). Such decrements in the health of the public are especially prominent among countries and US states with prolonged and harsh covid-19 mandates, limiting free will, independent functioning, financial opportunities, and thus health and well-being (Bardosh, de Figueiredo, et al., 2022; Bardosh, Krug, et al., 2022; Herby et al., 2022; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023; Swiss Policy Research, 2023a, 2023b).

Although physical activity participation is key to physical and mental health, including improved immune function and thus decreased severity and progression of covid-19 symptoms (da Silveira et al., 2021; Mohamed et al., 2021), physical activity was restricted due to Covid-19 mandates like lockdowns, social isolation, excessive screen use, and mask use (Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023). The dominant approach in promoting physical activity is based solely on ineffective, cognitive models, such as the links between pre-determined, cut-and-dried survey-based cognitive constructs about physical activity (Kosma, 2021, 2022; Kosma & Buchanan, 2018; Kosma et al., 2015). Contrary to this tactic, in this paper I will showcase the importance of physical culture – which was highly limited during the Covid-19 pandemic – and one's freedom in forming a strong, embodied body schema for increased physical activity participation and well-being. The paper draws on the philosophical underpinnings of embodied physical consciousness and body schema based on Merleau-Ponty's (1945/2014) existential freedom about decision making for living the good life. According to Merleau-Ponty's seminal work, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2014), the purpose of this concept-based paper is to attempt to emphasize the importance of a strong, embodied body schema (motor habit) to freedom in decision making regarding the value of and participation in physical activity. Such freedom can be achieved by finding a balance between the body as being for itself (with consciousness and autonomy) and the body as being in the world – influenced by external forces like disease (e.g., Covid 19), disability, socio-economic

status, and socio-political systems (e.g., covid-19 mandates).

The paper is divided into six sections. In the first section, a brief summary of Merleau-Ponty's embodied knowledge in movement is described to highlight the corporeal elements of movement, knowledge, and functioning (body as a subject) instead of the Cartesian (ultra cognitive) Cogito ("I think, thus I am"). In the second section, the concept of body schema as motor habit will be defined, including one's capacity to rework and renew their body schema to better understand the world and appreciate movement and a physical culture. In the third section, the concept of body as being for itself will be distinguished from the body as being in itself. Given human existence in and towards the world, absolute freedom is not possible, in that people are influenced by others. However, total freedom in decision making about physical activity can be achieved by finding a balance between being for itself and being in the world (fourth section). Such balance can be disrupted by harsh life circumstances like disease and disability, high poverty levels, limited access to quality education and health care, and poor or lack of effective public health policies (fifth section). In the sixth section of the paper, I will discuss how forming a strong physical consciousness and body schema can facilitate freedom and autonomy in decision making about leading meaningful and healthy lifestyles like valuing and participating in physical activity. Given that physical activity participation is influenced by societal issues, socio-cultural examples in physical activity will be used, including a brief introduction on the way embodied class consciousness is formed. Concluding comments and implications will also be discussed, such as ways to overcome threats to total freedom by emphasizing a strong body schema and effective public health policy, such as well-studied, ethical, and humanistic mitigation measures/recommendations (not mandates) against such pandemics as covid 19.

### ***Merleau-Ponty's embodied knowledge in movement – A brief summary***

In his seminal work, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2014) criticized the Cartesian or Kantian way of understanding human action (e.g., valuing physical activity), whereby the emphasis is on cognition, a Cogito – intention alone is supposed to lead to action. In Cartesian theorizing, the mind is purported to be superior to the body, while the latter (body as

object) supposedly obeys the mind and does not contribute towards human action like being physically active or learning new movement skills (Kosma, 2021, 2022, 2023; Kosma & Buchanan, 2021). Merleau-Ponty criticized this passive, objectified view of the body and instead he elevated the body to a subject, *The Lived Body*, that acts (e.g., dances, climbs, bikes, swims, runs, senses, guides) and informs the mind (Kosma, 2021, 2022, 2023; Kosma & Buchanan, 2021; Kosma et al., 2021; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). Intention does not act on its own, determining movement. It is the body that throws itself into meaningful significations that constitute an action. It is the body that influences intention. Intention is part of body action, in that bodily movement is holistic in nature and it should not be compartmentalized; it is incommensurable (Kosma, 2021, 2022, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014).

Instead of emphasizing the Cartesian Cogito, “I think, thus I am”, Merleau-Ponty (1945/2014) showcased that “I think” is part of “I am” – existence first and then essence. The body generates embodied knowledge or *praktognosia* via its corporeal experiences in the world. This type of embodied knowledge has been studied in sports and movement studies, including running, scuba diving, dancing, aerial dancing, and parkour and freerunning (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011; Clegg & Butryn, 2012; Eddy, 2009; Kosma & Erickson, 2020a, 2020b; Kosma et al., 2021). People first experience love, tension, awe, excitement, and pain before they start thinking about and expecting them (Kosma et al., 2021). Our existence in the world, interactions, and bodily movement play a key role in forming physical consciousness, including sensing, understanding, and learning new motor skills (Kosma, 2021, 2022, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). Based on Merleau-Ponty, embodied movement constitutes the unison of body and mind during action. At times, sensations of “flow” can be experienced, whereby time vanishes, and one can immerse in the task at hand. During these corporeal practices, body, mind, and emotion are one, leading to meaningful and valuable movement experiences:

“...bodily experiences and sensations are integral to mental experience, comprehension, and feelings. At its most basic level, when someone steps on our toe, we experience pain, pull away and say, “Ouch”... well-trained athletes often talk of the experience of “flow,” where time

disappears in the moment of intense focus, concentration and perception, moments devoid of distraction, mind and body totally in sync, acting as one... most people find it fun to dance, go for a swim or bike ride, take a walk in the woods, play tennis, feel the sun on our face and breathe fresh air, immediate yet profound pleasures that we can only experience as corporeal creatures. In embodied action, we enjoy dancing intrinsically, not because it might make us live longer. We also know that we experience greater pleasure as we get better at an activity; we come away more relaxed, happier, a step removed from daily worries, doubts, and frustrations” (Kosma & Buchanan, 2021, p. 6).

### ***Reworking and renewing body schema/motor habit***

Based on Merleau-Ponty, the body is not an object but a subject that throws itself into meaningful motor significations to “catch” and “understand” movement in a form of habit (Kosma, 2023; Kosma et al., 2021; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). Such habitual movements reflect body schema as motor habit, which can be constantly “reworked and renewed” (Kosma, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, pp. 143-144; Purser, 2018). Habit is not a form of cognitive knowledge like a mental representation of an object we aim at, but it is knowledge “in hand.” It reflects tacit understanding of the action without thinking the objective location of our body as it relates to the objective space of other objects in the world (Kosma, 2022, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014; Tanaka, 2011). In aerial practice, the aerialist can learn new movements and renew their motor habit by adjusting and reworking their already habituated motor skills in dancing and aerial dancing (Kosma & Erickson, 2020a, 2020b; Kosma et al., 2021). Such adjustments in motricity can lead to improved skill and increased body awareness, confidence, and posture – thus leading to an improved body schema/motor habit (Kosma, 2023; Kosma et al., 2021).

The tennis player knows how to return a speedy ball without cogitating or measuring the distance between the ball and her tennis racket. Rather, she knows how to perform the action via motor habit in playing tennis. The body schema/motor habit of the tennis player can be reworked and renewed with practice (Kosma, 2023). At times, she may need to pay attention to and/or sense her body posture (e.g., position of legs and arms, leg and torso movement, way to hold the racket) to perfect her

skill and improve her body schema (Kosma & Erickson, 2020a). An improved body schema should not lead to injury; rather injury should be prevented by correctly habituating oneself to a sport or exercise skill (balanced body schema) (Kosma, 2023; Kosma & Erickson, 2020a).

This corporeal, tacit understanding of motor skills applies not only to sports and exercise settings, but also to other functions in life. The car driver safely passes other cars and habitually enters new lanes without measuring the distance between their car fender and that of the other cars, or the width of the road lanes. This habitual knowledge of driving a car is knowledge “in hand”; it is embodied knowledge that is part of one’s body schema/motor habit and can be improved with practice (Kosma, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). When the blind man is

“habituated to a cane, he tries it out, he touches some objects and, after some time, he has it ‘in hand’: I see which objects are ‘within reach’ or out of reach of my cane. This has nothing to do with a quick estimate or a comparison between the objective length of the cane and the objective distance of the goal to be reached... to habituate oneself to... an automobile, or a cane is to take up residence in them, or inversely, to make them participate within the voluminosity of one’s own body. Habit expresses the power we have of dilating our being in the world, or of altering our existence through incorporating new instruments” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, pp. 144-145).

The typist knows how to type without knowing the location of each letter on the keyboard. He “incorporates the space of the keyboard into his bodily space” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p.146).

Given that the body is a subject, the *living* body can understand the world by throwing itself into important motor significations. In this way, body schema/motor habit is formed, reworked, and renewed (Kosma, 2023). The body has consciousness; thus, it is not *in-itself* like a table or chair (things in the world without consciousness). Rather, the *Lived Body* is *for-itself*; it has purpose in life. Therefore, below the importance of the body as being *for-itself* will be discussed (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014).

### ***Body as being for-itself***

The body is *for-itself* because it throws itself into meaningful significations. It has consciousness and intentionality by participating in different tasks within the world. It sets goals; it approaches others and objects that exist; it genuinely and holistically understands the world via movement (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). The body is not an object like a chair or a table. The body and its movements cannot be compartmentalized or measured (Kosma, 2021, 2022, 2023; Kosma & Buchanan, 2021; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). Only objects like a machine are without consciousness – beings in-themselves – whereas the body and its movement are *for-themselves/with consciousness*.

“Either movement is movement for itself, in which case the ‘stimulus’ is not the cause but rather the intentional object, or movement breaks apart and scatters throughout existence in itself, it becomes an objective process in the body whose phases are successive but unknown to each other... If one concedes even once that the living body is a seat of a third person process, then nothing in behavior can be reserved for consciousness” (Merleau-Ponty, p. 124).

Sensation is also for itself. It is part of perception and soul, and it should not be objectified (McClamrock, 2020; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). We can state that...

“...my eyes see, that my hand touches, and that my foot hurts, but these naïve expressions do not convey my genuine experience. They already present me with an interpretation of it that detaches it from its original subject. Because I know that light strikes my eyes, that contact is made by the skin, and that my shoe hurts my foot, I distribute the perceptions that belong to my soul into my body; I place perception within the perceived. But this is nothing but the spatial and temporal wake of conscious acts. If I consider them from within, I find a single knowledge that has no location, a soul that has no parts, and there is no difference between thinking and perceiving, or between seeing and hearing” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 220).



“Sensation is certainly intentional; that is, it does not remain in-itself like a thing, it intends and signifies beyond itself. But the term that it intends is only recognized blindly through the familiarity of my body with it, it is not constituted in full clarity; it is reconstituted or taken up through a knowledge that remains latent and that leaves to it its opacity and its haecceity. Sensation is intentional because I find in the sensible the proposition of a certain existential rhythm – abduction or adduction – and because taking up this proposition, and slipping into the form or existence... I relate myself to an external being... if qualities radiate a certain mode of existence around themselves, if they have a power to enchant... this is because the sensing subject does not posit them as objects, but sympathizes with them, makes them its own, and finds in them his momentary law” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 221).

Given that the body is *for-itself* and involves movement, sensations, perceptions, and intentions, body schema can be reworked and renewed influencing one’s actions and values in the world (Kosma, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014; Purser, 2018). Conferred that the formation and renewal of body schema are influenced by our existence within and participation in the world, freedom in decision making is conditioned and not absolute (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). This conditioned freedom can bring about threats to total freedom in relation to the view of one’s body and formation of body schema. Therefore, balance needs to be established between being for-itself and being in-the-world by resisting the objectification of bodies and embracing a healthy physical culture (e.g., sense of movement) for a balanced body schema and well-being. In this way, healthy lifestyle behaviors like physical activity can be valued.

### ***Conditioned freedom and threats to total freedom***

Merleau-Ponty argues that there is no absolute freedom, in that people do not have complete self-power over their decisions and actions. They are a “historical and psychological structure” via their being in the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 482). They are not in the world like things/objects (being in itself), but they are into the world and toward the world; they have consciousness

(being for itself). There is a dynamic interplay between being for itself and being in the world, in that embodied individual drive is influenced by external forces.

“It is by being what I am at present, without any restrictions and without holding anything back, that I have a chance at progressing; it is by living my time that I can understand other times; it is by plunging into the present and into the world, by resolutely taking up what I am by chance, by willing what I will, and by doing what I do, that I can go farther. The only way I can fail to be free is if I attempt to transcend my natural and social situation by refusing to take it up... Nothing determines me from the outside, not that nothing solicits me, but rather because I am immediately outside of myself and open to the world” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, pp. 482-483).

“The world is always already constituted, but also never completely constituted. In the first relation, we are solicited, in the second we are open to infinity of possibilities... Thus, there is never determinism and never an absolute choice; I am never a mere thing (in itself) and never a bare consciousness. In particular, even our initiatives, and even the situations that we have chosen, once they have been taken up, carry us along as if by a state of grace” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 480; parenthesis added).

“Freedom is always an encounter between the exterior and the interior... The idea of a situation precludes there being an absolute freedom at the origin of our commitments and, for that matter, at their end” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 481).

Given that there is no absolute freedom, (i.e., there is always the influence of others) people tend to objectify their bodies and actions by thinking about how others view them – we are the third person judging ourselves (e.g., as a “hunchback”, “curious”, “jealous”, or “civil servant”). Merleau-Ponty writes:

“Consciousness can never objectify itself as sick-consciousness or a disabled-consciousness; and, even if the elderly man complains of his old age or the disabled person of his disability, they can

only do so when they compare themselves to others or when they see themselves through the eyes of others, that is, when they adopt a statistical or an objective view of themselves” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 458).

During the Covid-19 pandemic, many people might have uncritically followed governmentally imposed Covid-19 mandates because they did not want to be negatively judged by others. Ultimately, though, people should be the ones to critically decide how they want to live their lives based on their embodied experiences, circumstances, and what is good for them; not based on what others think, tell, or demand them to do (existence of human agency; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014; Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2019, 2023). In other words, Merleau-Ponty strengthens the presence of total freedom, in that people are not determined by others, though they are influenced by others. Motives and deliberations do not cause decisions; in fact, decision precedes deliberation supporting the existence of total freedom.

“... it is inconceivable that my freedom could be limited; we cannot be partially free, and if... motivations incline me in a certain direction, then there are only two possibilities: either they have the force to make me act, in which case there is no freedom, or they do not have this force, in which case my freedom is total, as great in the worst tortures as in the peace of my home. We would thus have to renounce not only the idea of causality, but even the idea of motivation. The supposed motive does not weigh on my decision; rather, my decision lends the motivation its force” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 459).

“... the deliberation follows the decision, for my secret decision is what makes the motives appear and we could not even conceive of what the force of a motive might be without a decision that confirms it or counters it. When I have abandoned a project, suddenly the motives that I believed I had in favor of sticking with it fall away, drained of all force... I must make the effort of reopening time and of placing myself back at the moment when a decision had not yet

been made...it is already through some effort... in holding open a situation that I sense is closed by a decision already made and which I am resisting... ‘I wasn’t as committed after all.’ The debate was a mere formality, the deliberation was a parody, I had already decided against the project... Even those things described as obstacles to freedom are in fact deployed by freedom. An unclimbable rock face, a large or small, vertical or diagonal rock face – this only has sense for someone who intends to climb it, for a subject whose projects cut these determinations out of the uniform mass of the in-itself and make an oriented world and a sense of things suddenly appear... All things are within our power or none of them are (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, pp. 460-461).

This sense of total freedom that is constantly fluid (I can make different decisions and take different actions; I can learn from my own mistakes) is based on our cyclical bodily functions within “the time of nature with which we co-exist.” Time is generalized because it is the

“perpetual starting over of the series past, present, future... time is continuous: the present that it brings to us is never really present, since it is always past when it appears, and the future has there but the appearance of a goal toward which we are moving, since it soon arrives in the present and since we then turn toward another future” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 479).

These bodily functions – via motricity – within and toward the world constitute our body schema/motor habit. If we choose to objectify our body schema and view our body as a statistic, then our total freedom is threatened. We may not have absolute freedom, but we do have total freedom, which is influenced by our embodied decisions and actions – our body schema (Kosma, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). Having a sense of physical culture by reworking and renewing our body schema can improve the way we communicate with and understand the world, including the type of choices we make regarding lifestyle like participating in physical activity or not during Covid-19 lockdowns. Young adults with a strong body schema questioned lockdowns, social isolation, and mask mandates during the Covid-19

pandemic and they tried to find ways to socialize with family and friends and keep active (Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023). If an overweight person or an older person listens to the negative voices of others and objectifies their bodies as unattractive, weak, or incapable of effective movement, then it would be difficult – if at all possible – to improve an imbalanced body schema. People with an imbalanced body schema, who are also more vulnerable to disease (e.g., Covid 19), will not benefit from ineffective and poor public health policies like Covid-19 mandates (Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023). On the contrary, if they find confidence in sensing and expressing via their bodies, they can renew their body schema and better interact with the world (Kosma, 2023; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023). Performing arts like physical theater can lead to improved body schema, including enhanced body awareness and confidence, body posture and form; freedom in expression (e.g., sharing emotions); and effective interactions with others (Kosma, Erickson, & Gremillion, 2023). Similarly, certain exercises for post-stroke patients or those with chronic pain (e.g., phantom limb pain) can lead to improved body schema, mobility, and decreased pain (Gandhi et al., 2020; Lamont et al., 2011; Wittkopf & Johnson, 2017).

The formation of body schema starts from birth (if not earlier); thus, it is influenced by familial and cultural circumstances (Kosma, 2022, 2023). Movement development is not limited only to such settings as physical education, gyms, and sports-fitness clubs. Movement development takes place constantly within society (Kosma, 2022, 2023). For example, the child will pay attention to the posture of the father and his ability to play outdoors or not. Overreliance on screens for children's daily functions can affect the way they use their leisure time (e.g., playing video games vs. playing soccer with their friends) and the formation (or lack of) a balanced body schema (Kosma, 2021, 2022, 2023). The way physical culture is structured – if existent – will influence the formation and evolution of body schema and thus embodied values and actions like lifestyle choices – being active or not. If total freedom is threatened by compartmentalizing and objectifying bodies and movement (e.g., emphasis on the amount of weight one can lift; the number of laps they complete; the number of calories they burn; their inability to move due to their “aging” or “sick” bodies), then one's body schema

can be out of balance, threatening health, well-being, and the very human existence (Kosma 2021, 2023).

### ***Embodied physical consciousness (like class consciousness), body schema, and freedom in decision***

In the opening of this section, I will briefly discuss Merleau-Ponty's philosophy regarding the embodied formation of class consciousness to understand how physical consciousness comes to life. The formation of strong physical consciousness, and thus strong embodied body schema, depends on the existence of a strong physical culture. Similarly, the formation of class consciousness depends on the lived experiences of the pertinent class within society. Based on Merleau-Ponty, people do not classify themselves as proletariat or bourgeois intellectually (e.g., based on some thought or mental representation) but existentially by the way they live a certain class: by their “way of being in the world within this institutional framework” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 469). Class is not an object; it must be lived to be realized. Although a proletariat may not have a choice of their class, their decision to become revolutionary is based on how they sense their being in the world by sharing common obstacles and sensing changes due to revolution (e.g., having higher salary due to a workers' strike). Revolution starts because people sense that “things must change.” It is not a representation. If revolution was “described and represented in advance, it would frighten the revolutionary” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 470).

“The day laborer... sees the price of manufactured objects increasing, as well as the cost of living, and notices that one can no longer make ends meet. It might happen that, in that moment, he blames the workers of the city, and so class consciousness will not be born. If it is born, this is not because the day-laborer has decided to become a revolutionary and, consequently, to confer a value upon his actual condition, but rather because he perceived concretely the synchronicity between his life and the lives of the workers, and the community of their lot in life... Class is coming into being and we call a situation ‘revolutionary’ when the objectively existing connection between the segments of the proletariat... is finally experienced in the perception of a common

obstacle to each one's existence" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 470).

"... class is – prior to being conceived – lived as an obsessive presence, as a possibility, as an enigma, and as a myth... the intellectual project and the positing of ends are merely the fulfillment of an existential project. I am the one who gives a sense and future to my life, but this does not mean that I conceive of this sense and this future; rather, they spring forth from my present and from my past, and particularly from my present and past mode of existence" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014, p. 472).

Similarly, the formation of physical consciousness is not intellectual – a mental representation. It does not occur because we think about it. It occurs from the way we live in the world and uptake the experiences offered (Kosma, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014; Moya, 2014). Children who are raised to be active can easily adopt a healthy physical culture (e.g., physical consciousness) and thus a strong body schema/motor habit that influences their future value of and participation in physical activity (Kosma & Buchanan, 2018). Even if life circumstances hinder the continuance of a previous active lifestyle (e.g., job and family responsibilities, lockdowns and social isolation due to Covid-19 mandates), people with strong motor habits may be better able to find ways to maintain a healthy body schema by being active than those without a well-developed body schema (Kosma, 2023; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023). Given the challenges to maintain a strong body schema among those with sedentary lifestyles – either due to lack of physical culture in childhood, socio-economic and political aspects (imposed restrictions to physical culture), or some form of disability or movement difficulty – questions about policy changes are to arise. Is our political system prepared to – or even interested in – provide/ing opportunities for everyone to be active and thus healthy? Is there a policy in place for enjoyable, effective, and accessible exercise opportunities among all people, including those of lower socio-economic status and/or people with movement difficulties or disability? What have we (as people and policy makers) learned from the ineffective, unethical, and harmful governmentally imposed Covid-19 mandates

(Bardosh, de Figueiredo, et al., 2022; Bardosh, Krug, et al., 2022; Dowd, 2022; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023; Swiss Policy Research, 2022, 2023a, 2023b)? How do we help people become autonomous and make wise decisions about their lives (which is the key priority vs. human control, such as telling people what to do – be active or not)? People need to have a variety of viable, safe, and healthy options to be able to make wise decisions about their lifestyles. Socio-economic challenges and political agendas can lead to a lack of physical culture and thus poor body schema and health (Kosma, 2022, 2023; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023).

Freedom in decision/action to form and maintain a strong body schema (thus a strong sense and value of physical consciousness and physical activity) can be challenged by different life circumstances, including sedentary lifestyles due to family responsibilities, disability, overreliance on screen usage and social isolation due to poor political decisions, and limited (if any) effective policy in place to counter such difficult circumstances. Given the threats to total freedom by being in the world and life circumstances, it is prudent for policy makers and public health officials to create policies that support active lifestyles for all. At the same time, people need to find the right balance between being for itself and being in the world. Societal challenges in developing health and well-being will always exist; therefore, it is ultimately *people's choice* to decide on their lifestyles (existence of free will and human agency) – a case which will be easier for some but very difficult for others.

### Concluding Comments and Implications

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's magnum opus, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945/2014), the purpose of this concept-based paper was to showcase the importance of a strong, embodied body schema (motor habit) to total freedom in decision making regarding the value of and participation in physical activity. It is shown in the paper that such freedom can be achieved by finding a balance between the body as being for itself (with consciousness and autonomy) and the body as being in the world – influenced by external forces like disease (e.g., Covid 19), disability, socio-economic status, and socio-political systems and agendas (e.g., Covid-19 mandates). In this section, a brief paper summary will be provided while the emphasis will be on implications regarding ways to overcome threats to total freedom by emphasizing a strong body schema and effective public health policy,



such as implementing well-studied, ethical, and humanistic policies/recommendations regarding life challenges (e.g., disease, disability, poverty).

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014), Merleau-Ponty criticized the Cartesian Cogito and elevated the body from an object to a subject, the *Lived Body*, that walks, runs, climbs, swims, dances, and senses (Allen-Collinson & Hockey, 2011; Clegg & Butryn, 2012; Kosma, 2021, 2022, 2023; Kosma & Buchanan, 2021). In embodied action, the body “catches” and “understands” movement by throwing itself into meaningful motor significations, through which it obtains physical consciousness and forms body schema (Kosma, 2021, 2023; Kosma & Erickson, 2020a; Kosma et al., 2021). Body schema is motor habit (knowledge “in hand”) that can be constantly reworked and renewed (Kosma, 2023; Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014; Purser, 2018). In performing arts, like aerial dancing and physical theater, body schema can become strong via improved body awareness, posture, confidence, and physical and emotional expression (Kosma & Erickson, 2020a, 2020b; Kosma et al., 2021; Kosma, Erickson, et al., 2023). The body is not a thing like a table or a chair (being in itself); rather, it has consciousness, thus it is a being for itself. The body senses, intends, and perceives, thus the decision for an action is embodied, in which case decision precedes deliberation (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). Although there is no absolute freedom – because of our being in the world – people are ultimately the ones who decide how to live their lives – they have total freedom (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/2014). A balanced body schema/motor habit can strengthen physical consciousness, and thus wise decisions regarding physical activity choices. Strong physical consciousness can be achieved in societies that promote strong physical culture, and thus a healthy and balanced body schema/motor habit (Kosma, 2023).

There are many threats to total freedom by being in the world, including disease (e.g., Covid 19), disability, family and work responsibilities, socio-economic challenges (e.g., poverty), and sociopolitical systems and/or agendas like limited (if any) policies for access to quality education and health care and poor policy decisions, such as governmentally imposed, unethical, and harmful Covid-19 mandates (Bardosh, de Figueiredo, et al., 2022; Bardosh, Krug, et al., 2022; Dowd, 2022; Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023; McKune et al., 2021; Swiss

Policy Research, 2023b; Turni & Lefringhausen, 2022). Given the threats to total freedom, it is very challenging for the body to be able to freely act for its own well-being and quality of life. Therefore, implications for Kinesiology and public health should be about ways to find a balance between body as being for itself and body as being in the world.

Movement educators in Kinesiology and other areas (e.g., performing arts) should emphasize a healthy physical culture for a strong and balanced body schema (Kosma, 2022, 2023). A healthy physical culture incorporates enjoyable, safe, and multiple physical activity choices in a variety of settings, such as schools, gyms, health clubs, recreational parks, therapeutic facilities, and neighborhoods (Kosma 2021, 2022, 2023). People of different socio-economic strata, ability levels, and ethnicities should be able to have access to such exercise settings (Kosma & Buchanan, 2019). Public health policies should be safe, ethical, effective, well-studied, and allow human agency and free will. “Free” public education is irrelevant – even harmful – if it lacks quality. Policies to counter pandemics, like Covid 19, should not restrict human freedom and free will. They should not limit physical culture, thus increasing unhealthy lifestyles like poor diet and decreased – if any – physical activity (Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023). During the Covid-19 pandemic, people should have been able to exercise their free will and human agency to make wise choices regarding their lifestyle, such as where, what, how, and with whom to be physically active. Those who were at low risk of Covid-19 serious reinfection, hospitalization, and death either because of their age group, health status, and/or high natural immunity due to previous Covid-19 infection/s (see e.g., Abu-Raddad et al., 2021; Gazit et al., 2022; Haveri et al., 2021; Kang et al., 2022) should have been able to live their lives freely and decide on their lifestyle choices (Kosma, Kim, et al., 2023). Those individuals who were at high risk of Covid-19 severity, such as older and/or immunocompromised people, should also have been protected by effective policy in place, including early treatment (if needed), which tremendously cuts Covid-19 mortality rate (Alexander et al., 2021; Bryant et al., 2021; Kory et al., 2021; McCullough et al., 2020; Procter et al., 2020; Santin et al., 2021). It is people’s choice to decide if they want to visit with relatives and friends; it is their choice to decide on the type of medical intervention they want to receive;

and certainly, it is their choice to decide on their physical activity levels. Strengthening one's body schema by finding a balance between being for itself (e.g., healthy and wise lifestyle choices) and being in the world (ethical, safe, well-studied, and effective public health policies) can increase total freedom in decision making, and thus health and well-being.

## References

- Abu-Raddad, L. J., Chemaitelly, H., & Bertollini, R. (2021). National study group for COVID-19 epidemiology: Severity of SARS-CoV-2 reinfections as compared with primary infections. *N Engl J Med*, *385*(26), 2487-2489.
- Alexander, P. E., Armstrong, R., Fareed, G., Lotus, J., Oskoui, R., Prodromos, C., ... Gill, K. K. (2021). Early multidrug treatment of SARS-CoV-2 infection (COVID-19) and reduced mortality among nursing home (or outpatient/ambulatory) residents. *Med Hypotheses*, *153*, 110622.
- Allen-Collinson, J., & Hockey, J. (2011). Feeling the way: Notes toward a haptic phenomenology of scuba diving and distance running. *Int Rev Sociol Sport*, *46*(3), 330-345.
- Bardosh, K., de Figueiredo, A., Gur-Arie, R., Jamrozik, E., Doidge, J., Lemmens, T., ... Baral, S. (2022). The unintended consequences of COVID-19 vaccine policy: Why mandates, passports and restrictions may cause more harm than good. *BMJ Global Health*, *7*(5), e008684.
- Bardosh, K., Krug, A., Jamrozik, E., Lemmens, T., Keshavjee, S., Prasad, V., Makary, M. A., Baral, S., & Høeg, T. B. (2022). COVID-19 vaccine boosters for young adults: a risk benefit assessment and ethical analysis of mandate policies at universities. *J Med Ethics*, 1-13.
- Bryant, A., Lawrie, T. A., Dowswell, T., Fordham, E. J., Mitchell, S., Hill, S. R., & Tham, T. C. (2021). Ivermectin for prevention and treatment of COVID-19 infection: A systematic review, meta-analysis, and trial sequential analysis to inform clinical guidelines. *Am J Ther*, *28*(4), e434-e460.
- Buchanan, D. R. (2016). Promoting dignity: The ethical dimension of health. *Community Health Equity Res Policy*, *36*(2), 99-104.
- Chew, M. S., Blixt, P. J., Åhman, R., Engerström, L., Andersson, H., Berggren, R. K., ... McIntyre, S. (2021). National outcomes and characteristics of patients admitted to Swedish intensive care units for COVID-19: A registry-based cohort study. *Eur J Anaesthesiol*, *38*(4), 335-343.
- Clegg, J. L., & Butryn, T. M. (2012). An existential phenomenological examination of parkour and freerunning. *Qual Res Sport Exerc*, *4*, 320-340.
- da Silveira, M. P., da Silva Fagundes, K. K., Bizuti, M. R., Starck, É., Rossi, R. C., de Resende e Silva, D. T. (2021). Physical exercise as a tool to help the immune system against COVID-19: An integrative review of the current literature. *Clin Exp Med*, *21*, 15-28.
- Dowd, E. (2022). "Cause unknown": The epidemic of sudden deaths in 2021 & 2022. Skyhorse.
- Eddy, M. (2009). A brief history of somatic practices and dance: historical development of the field of somatic education and its relationship to dance. *J Dance Somat Pract*, *1*, 5-27.
- Gandhi, D. B., Sterba, A., Khatter, H., & Pandian, J. D. (2020). Mirror therapy in stroke rehabilitation: Current perspectives. *Ther Clin Risk Manag*, *16*, 75-85.
- Gazit, S., Shlezinger, R., Perez, G., Lotan, R., Peretz, A., Ben-Tov, A., ... Patalon, T. (2022). Severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) naturally acquired immunity versus vaccine-induced immunity, reinfections versus breakthrough infections: A Retrospective cohort study. *Clin Infect Dis*, *75*(1), e545-e551.
- Gramlich, J. (2023, March 2). *Mental health and the pandemic: What U.S. surveys have found*. Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/02/mental-health-and-the-pandemic-what-u-s-surveys-have-found/>
- Haveri, A., Ekström, N., Solastie, A., Virta, C., Österlund, P., Isosaari, E., ... Melin, M. (2021). Persistence of neutralizing antibodies a year after SARS-CoV-2 infection in humans. *Eur J Immunol*, *51*(12), 3202-3213.
- Herby, J., Jonung, L., & Hanke, S. H. (2022). A literature review and meta-analysis of the effects of lockdowns on COVID-19 mortality. In Johns Hopkins Institute for Applied Economics, Global Health, and the Study of Business Enterprise. *Studies in Applied Economics*, 1-61.
- Kang, C. K., Shin, H. M., Park, W. B., & Kim, H. R. (2022). Why are children less affected than adults by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 infection? *Cell Mol Immunol*, *19*(5), 555-557.
- Kory, P., Meduri, G. U., Varon, J., Iglesias, J., & Marik, P. E. (2021). Review of the emerging evidence demonstrating the efficacy of Ivermectin in the prophylaxis and treatment of COVID-19. *Am J Ther*, *28*(3), e299-e318.
- Kosma, M. (2021). Play vs exergaming: A conceptual analysis as to why exergaming is not play. *Turk J Kinesiol*, *7*, 141-151.

- Kosma, M. (2022). Breaking away from dualisms: Exercise habitus and reflexivity are embodied. *Int J Appl Sports Sci*, 34(1), 35-49.
- Kosma, M. (2023). Phenomenological body schema as motor habit in skill acquisition – Intentionality is in action. *Athens J Sports*, 10(2), 83-94.
- Kosma, M., & Buchanan, D. R. (2018). “Connect,” log it, track it, go! *Techne*—not technology—and embodiment to achieve *phronesis* in exercise promotion. *Quest*, 70, 100-113.
- Kosma, M., & Buchanan, D. R. (2019). Aspects of depression among socio-economically disadvantaged African American young adults. *Community Health Equity Res Policy*, 39, 199-207.
- Kosma, M., & Buchanan, D. R. (2021). Reconsidering the push for digitized physical activity education in lieu of the intrinsic value of embodied action. In C. Steinberg & B. Bonn (Eds.), *Digitalisierung und Sportwissenschaft [Digitization and Sports Science]* (pp. 63-71). Academia.
- Kosma, M., Buchanan, D. R., & Hondzinski, J. M. (2015). The role of values in promoting physical activity. *Quest*, 67, 241-254.
- Kosma, M., & Erickson, N. (2020a). The embodiment of aerial practice: Body, mind, emotion. *J Dance Educ*, 20, 224-233.
- Kosma, M., & Erickson, N. (2020b). The love of aerial practice: art, embodiment, *phronesis*. *Int J Kinesiol Sports Sci*, 8, 14-25.
- Kosma, M., Erickson, N., & Gremillion, A. (2023). The embodied nature of physical theater: Expression, creativity, communication. *Res Q Exerc Sport*, 94 (Supplement), A60-A61.
- Kosma, M., Erickson, N., Savoie, C. J., & Gibson, M. (2021). Skill development vs. performativity among beginners in aerial practice: An embodied and meaningful learning experience. *Community Health Equity Res Policy*, 41, 173-187.
- Kosma, M., Kim, M., Moon, D-H., & Fritts, S. (2023). Effects of Covid-19 mandates on college students’ exercise experiences and psychosocial health. *Int J Sport, Exerc Health Res*, 7, 1, 9-16.
- Lamont, K., Chin, M., & Kogan, M. (2011). Mirror box therapy: Seeing is believing. *Explore*, 7(6), 369-72.
- Li, X., Vanderloo, L. M., Keown-Stoneman, C. D. G., Cost, K. T., Charach, A., Maguire, J. L., Monga, S., Crosbie, J., Burton, C., Anagnostou, E., Georgiades, S., Nicolson, R., Kelley, E., Ayub, M., Korczak, D. J., & Birken, C. S. (2021). Screen use and mental health symptoms in Canadian children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA Netw Open*, 4(12), e2140875.
- McClamrock, R. (2020, July 7). *The embodied self: Merleau-Ponty on consciousness and the lived body*. IAI news. [https://iai.tv/articles/merleau-ponty-and-the-embodied-self-consciousness-auid-1582&\\_auid=2020](https://iai.tv/articles/merleau-ponty-and-the-embodied-self-consciousness-auid-1582&_auid=2020)
- McCullough, P. A., Alexander, P. E., Armstrong, R., Arvinte, C., Bain, A. F., Bartlett, R. P., ... Zelenko, V. (2020). Multifaceted highly targeted sequential multidrug treatment of early ambulatory high-risk SARS-CoV-2 infection (COVID-19). *Rev Cardiovasc Med*, 21(4), 517-530.
- McKune, S. L, Acosta, D., Diaz, N., Brittain, K., Joyce-Beaulieu, D., Maurelli, A. T., & Nelson, E. J. (2021). Psychosocial health of school-aged children during the initial COVID-19 safer-at-home school mandates in Florida: A cross-sectional study. *BMC Public Health*, 21, 1-11.
- McPhillips, D. (2022, September 7). *Nearly 1 in 4 young adults in US treated for mental health during pandemic, CDC survey finds*. CNN Health. <https://www.cnn.com/2022/09/07/health/mental-health-treatment-pandemic/index.html>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of perception* (D. A. Landes, Trans.). Routledge. (Original work published 1945).
- Mohamed, A. A., & Alawna, M. (2021). The effect of aerobic exercise on immune biomarkers and symptoms severity and progression in patients with COVID-19: A randomized control trial. *J Body Work Mov Ther*, 28, 425-432.
- Moya, P. (2014). Habit and embodiment in Merleau-Ponty. *Front Hum Neurosci*, 8, 1-3.
- Procter, B. C., Ross, C., Pickard, V., Smith, E., Hanson, C., & McCullough, P. A. (2020). Clinical outcomes after early ambulatory multidrug therapy for high-risk SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) infection. *Rev Cardiovasc Med*, 21(4), 611-614.
- Purser, A. (2018). ‘Getting it into the body’: Understanding skill acquisition through Merleau-Ponty and the embodied practice of dance. *Qual Res Sport Exerc Health*, 10, 318-332.
- Santin, A. D., Scheim, D. E., McCullough, P. A., Yagisawa, M., & Borody, T. J. (2021). Ivermectin: A multifaceted drug of Nobel prize-honoured distinction with indicated efficacy against a new global scourge, COVID-19. *New Microbes New Infect*, 43, 100924.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2019, May 23). *Phenomenological approaches to self-consciousness*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/self-consciousness-phenomenological/#OneLevAccSelCon>

- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2023, January 6). *Existentialism*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/#BeinWorl>
- Swiss Policy Research (2022, June). *How effective are covid vaccines, really?* <https://swprs.org/how-effective-are-covid-vaccines-really/#vaccine-injuries>
- Swiss Policy Research. (2023a, April). *Covid vaccine adverse events*. <https://swprs.org/covid-vaccine-adverse-events/>
- Swiss Policy Research. (2023b, June). *Facts about covid*. <https://swprs.org/covid19-facts/>
- Tanaka, S. (2011). The notion of embodied knowledge. In P. Stenner, J. Cromby, J. Motzkau, J. Yen, & Y. Haosheng (Eds.), *Theoretical psychology: Global transformations and challenges* (pp. 149-157). Captus Press.
- Turni, C., & Lefringhausen, A. (2022). COVID-19 vaccines – An Australian review. *J Clin Exp Immunol*, *7*(3), 491-508.
- Wathelet, M., Duhem, S., Vaiva, G., Baubet, T., Habran, E., Veerapa, E., ... D'Hondt, F. (2020). Factors associated with mental health disorders among university students in France confined during the COVID-19 pandemic. *JAMA Netw Open*, *3*(10), e2025591.
- Wittkopf, P. G., & Johnson, M. I. (2017). Mirror therapy: a potential intervention for pain management. *Rev Assoc Med Bras*, *63*(11), 1000-1005.