

Axial Consciousness and the Somatic Anthropocene

Spiritual Ecology, Embodied Ontology, and Ontological Restitution

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An Ontological Companion Essay to *The Somatic Anthropocene: Body, Interoception, and Planetary Crisis* (Lick, 2026)

Abstract

This essay accompanies the preprint *The Somatic Anthropocene: Body, Interoception, and Planetary Crisis* (Lick, 2026), published simultaneously as a companion paper. While that article outlines the epidemiological, macroeconomic, and psychometric contours of somatic political ecology, this essay develops their ontological interpretation. It argues, at the level of theoretical synthesis and speculative extension, that planetary crisis may also be interpreted as a crisis of **axial consciousness**—the embodied capacity to perceive oneself as vertically situated between earth and sky, mortality and meaning, biosphere and history. The essay develops four philosophical diagnostics: the cognitive error of disembodied rationality; the technological error of technosolutionism; the political error of transhumanist neoteny; and the ontological error of treating the body as obsolete infrastructure. These diagnostics are interpretive categories, not empirical diagnoses. It introduces **spiritual ecology** as the recognition that the body is itself a biospheric organ, and **somatic political ecology** as the study of planetary-scale feedback loops between bodily dysregulation, economic systems, and Earth-system processes. The essay interprets the Somatic Restitution Index (SRI) proposed in the companion article not only as a public-health instrument, but also as a philosophical prompt for auditing the bodily conditions for ecological care. It extends the framework to include **somatic justice**: the active centring of disabled, aging, neurodivergent, and differently embodied lives as legitimate modalities of axial consciousness. Finally, it proposes that somatic restitution is not merely a public-health intervention, but an ontological restoration of the grounds from which planetary care becomes possible. The essay concludes with the concept of the **biological veto**—a speculative ontological reading of fertility decline as a philosophical question about whether organism–environment coupling is increasingly experienced as costly, precarious, or uninhabitable for reproduction. These arguments operate at levels **L4–L5** of evidential support and should be read as ontological provocations rather than empirical conclusions.

Keywords: axial consciousness; somatic political ecology; spiritual ecology; embodied ontology; neoteny; technosolutionism; transhumanism; ontological restitution; Sanskrit phenomenology; biopolitics; Somatic Restitution Index; biological veto; somatic justice; companion essay.

Highlights

- The essay provides the ontological companion to the scientific-conceptual Somatic Anthropocene framework.
- Axial consciousness is introduced as the embodied awareness of being situated between earth and sky, mortality and meaning, biosphere and history.
- Spiritual ecology is reframed as the recognition that the body is not merely in nature but is itself a biospheric organ.
- The essay distinguishes restorative technologies from disembodied technosolutionist imaginaries.
- The Somatic Restitution Index is interpreted as a philosophical prompt for auditing the bodily conditions for ecological care.
- Somatic justice centres disabled, aging, neurodivergent, and differently embodied lives as legitimate modalities of axial consciousness.
- Ontological restitution is proposed as the recovery of embodied conditions from which

planetary care becomes possible.

1 Introduction: From Somatic Political Ecology to Ontological Restitution

A powerful strand of Western philosophy has been marked by suspicion toward the body. For Plato, the *soma* is a prison—*soma sema*—and true knowledge is attainable only by the soul that loosens its corporeal chains. Descartes completes the gesture: *res cogitans* is severed from *res extensa*, and the body becomes a machine whose motions are quantifiable, repairable, and ultimately replaceable. This dualism is not merely an epistemological convenience. It is an ontological programme: to render the body transparent to thought, and thereby to master it.

The companion article to this essay (Lick, 2026) argues that this mastery has reached its planetary limit. Sedentary, screen-mediated, chemically altered environments do not merely damage bodies; they damage the *mode of being* that a body is. The feedback loop between somatic dysregulation and ecological extraction is not only a public-health crisis. It is the materialisation of a two-and-a-half-millennia metaphysical error: the belief that consciousness can be separated from its axial, gravitational, respiratory, and proprioceptive ground. For the epidemiological and psychometric operationalization of this feedback loop, including the Somatic Restitution Index (SRI), see Lick (2026, §7 and Appendix C.3).

This essay proposes a counter-concept: **axial consciousness**. The concept does not deny neural computation; it contests the assumption that consciousness is exhausted by computation occurring inside a skull. It names a mode of awareness structured by the vertical axis of the body—the head–trunk–limbs–ground continuum—and by the continuous, mostly unconscious negotiation with gravity, atmosphere, and terrain that this axis demands. Axial consciousness is not a mystical addendum to cognitive science. It is a phenomenological interpretation of what embodied cognition and interoception research help make visible: that thinking is supported by standing, breathing, balancing, moving, and feeling the weight of one’s own existence.

This essay operates at levels **L4–L5** of evidential support as defined in the companion article (theoretical synthesis and speculative extension). Its purpose is not to add new empirical data, but to ask: what kind of embodied subject is presupposed by the Somatic Anthropocene; what ontological conditions must obtain for somatic restitution to be possible; and what the convergence of bodily, ecological, and civilizational crisis reveals about the architecture of human consciousness itself.

The essay introduces three interconnected concepts. **Somatic political ecology** names the study of planetary-scale feedback loops between bodily dysregulation, economic systems, and Earth-system processes, while also naming a deeper ontological wager: the body is not merely a biological substrate or a site of political struggle, but a *living biosphere organ*—the medium through which ecological value becomes experientially real. **Axial consciousness** names the vertical, embodied awareness of being situated between earth and sky, mortality and meaning, biosphere and history—an awareness that digital, sedentary, and chemically altered environments may erode, though this remains a philosophical synthesis rather than a settled empirical claim. **Ontological restitution** names the recovery not only of movement, sleep, and nature contact, but of the body’s capacity to register the world as worthy of care.

These concepts are offered not as empirical hypotheses, but as ontological provocations. They should be read as invitations to phenomenological and philosophical inquiry, not as claims to

be tested in the laboratory. Where the companion article asks *what* is happening to bodies and *how* it can be measured, this essay asks *why* it matters ontologically and what kind of being-in-the-world is at stake. Science without phenomenology is blind to the meaning of its own measurements; phenomenology without science is empty speculation. This essay attempts to hold them together: to let the data speak, and to let the body feel.

Genre Note

This essay operates primarily at the level of theoretical synthesis and speculative extension (L4–L5). It does not add new empirical data. It should be read as a philosophical and phenomenological companion to the scientific-conceptual preprint *The Somatic Anthropocene: Body, Interoception, and Planetary Crisis*. Its concepts are offered as ontological provocations rather than as laboratory-tested hypotheses.

Throughout this essay, terms such as “crisis,” “veto,” “neoteny,” “anaesthesia,” “dissolution,” and “ontological audit” should be read as philosophical and phenomenological concepts. They do not name clinical diagnoses, biological laws, demographic proofs, or validated measurement categories. Where empirical studies are cited, they provide context and plausibility for interpretation; they do not by themselves establish the ontological claims developed here.

2 Somatic Political Ecology: Ontological Foundations

The companion article situates itself within embodied political ecology (Doshi, 2017; Kinkaid, 2019; Hayes-Conroy and Hayes-Conroy, 2013; Truelove, 2024) and extends it toward a planetary, epidemiological, and psychometric framework. This essay provides the ontological depth that such an extension requires. Somatic political ecology is not merely a subfield of political ecology with better biomarkers. It is an ontological claim: the body is the ground of political ecology, the site where environmental destruction first becomes felt, and the medium through which ecological care must pass if it is to become durable.

2.1 The body as field of power

Foucault (2008) showed that modern power operates not through sovereign violence alone, but through the administration of life—biopolitics. Rose (2007) extended this analysis to the molecular level, demonstrating that contemporary governance targets DNA, neurotransmitters, hormones, and metabolic pathways. The Somatic Anthropocene adds a further dimension: biopolitics may also operate through the design of environments that tend to produce patterned somatic outcomes. The school chair, the open-plan office, the 24/7 notification architecture, the ultra-processed foodscape—these are not neutral infrastructures. They may function as biopolitical technologies that shape the body toward productive and consumptive routines (Han, 2015).

In this perspective, somatic political ecology asks not only who controls the means of production, but who controls the *means of embodiment*. Who decides that children will sit for eight hours; who designs platforms that monetise attention through reward-sensitive engagement loops; and who permits endocrine-disrupting chemicals to permeate the gestational environment. These are political questions, and they are ontological questions, because they concern the conditions under which human beings can experience themselves as embodied, embedded, and ecologically responsible.

The companion article (§ 4.2) documents the biomechanical and neurobiological costs of this arrangement: reduced cerebral blood flow, insulin resistance, chronic neuroinflammation, and the prefrontal cortex operating in a mode of cognitive strain against a background of metabolic deficit. Somatic political ecology adds the interpretive layer: this is not merely poor health. It is a biopolitical arrangement in which the body is treated as a productive unit whose value is measured by cognitive output and consumption input, not by somatic integrity. The sedentary workplace, the standardized school chair, and the 24-hour digital availability are not neutral infrastructures; they are arrangements that organize labour around bodies with reduced access to movement, recovery, and ecological contact.

The financialization of pharmaceuticals extends this biopolitical logic into metabolic governance. Synthetic royalties, priority review vouchers, and portfolio structures treat chronic disease management as a revenue stream, converting the body from a productive unit into a yield-generating asset (Kesselheim et al., 2016; Fernandez et al., 2012). This is not only medical commerce. At the level of philosophical diagnosis, it may be termed *biopolitics 3.0*: the shaping of somatic dependence through financial instruments, alongside disciplinary institutions and molecular targeting.

For the intersectional analysis of how race, class, and caste structure exposure to these arrangements, see Lick (2026, § 1.4.1).

2.2 The body as planetary sensor

Kinkaid (2019) demonstrated that agrarian change in north India is not merely an economic process; it is a sensory process, registered in the body's experience of taste, smell, fatigue, and disease. Doshi (2017) showed that urban water inequality in Mumbai is not merely a distributional problem; it is an embodied problem, experienced through thirst, skin, dignity, and shame. Somatic political ecology scales these insights to the planetary level: the body becomes a sensor not only of local injustice, but of planetary destabilisation.

When the body is chronically inflamed, sleep-deprived, digitally overstimulated, and chemically burdened, its capacity to register the living world is diminished. The forest becomes a background; the river becomes a utility; the soil becomes a substrate. This is not a cognitive failure. It is a somatic failure: the body has lost the physiological conditions—the interoceptive quiet, the vestibular openness, the sensory richness—that make ecological relation possible. The companion article (§ 3.4) argues that ecological value is partly embodied. Somatic political ecology adds: the loss of ecological value is also partly somatic. The Somatic Restitution Index (SRI) proposed in the companion article (§ 7) is therefore not merely a public-health tool.

At the level of this essay's philosophical interpretation, the SRI also invites attention to the emerging terrain of algorithmic sociality. AI companions may provide forms of pseudo-attachment—simulated intimacy without ordinary reciprocity—which, in some contexts, may reduce the axial field to a horizontal signal plane (Banks, 2026; De Freitas et al., 2025). An ontological audit that ignores relational deskilling would mistake digital connectivity for ecological embeddedness.

In this essay's vocabulary, it becomes an ontological audit: not a separate validated instrument, but a philosophical reading of whether the bodily conditions for ecological care are present or absent in a given population. For the pilot operationalisation of the SRI using existing datasets, see Lick (2026, Appendix C.3).

2.3 The phenomenology of digital labour

Merleau-Ponty (2012) argued that consciousness is not a Cartesian theatre but a body-in-the-world. The digital knowledge worker, spending 8–12 hours in a seated position before a screen, inhabits a phenomenologically peculiar condition: the body is present but deprived of agency, the mind is active but deprived of somatic support. This is not merely poor ergonomics. It is an ontological modality in which the body is reduced to a click-generating interface—a horizontal surface for the extraction of cognitive labour and consumer attention.

The companion article describes this as “developmental mismatch and reduced sensorimotor input” (levels L1–L4). This essay names it more radically, at the level of phenomenological diagnosis: the digital labour regime may produce a *somatically anaesthetised subject*, one for whom the world is increasingly experienced less as a field of affordances than as a field of signals. The slope is no longer climbable; it is scrollable. The forest is no longer a field of smells and textures; it is a feed. This anaesthesia may not be incidental to ecological crisis. At the level of this essay’s argument, it is one possible ontological condition through which ecological crisis becomes tolerable. For the three-wave historical model of sedentarisation, see Lick (2026, § 4.3 and Figure 2).

3 Axial Consciousness: The Verticality of Being

Definition.

Axial consciousness refers to the embodied awareness of being vertically situated between earth and sky, mortality and meaning, biosphere and history. It is not a mystical state or an able-bodied norm, but a phenomenological description of lived orientation, interoceptive presence, gravitational situatedness, and ecological embeddedness.

3.1 The gravitational field of awareness

Every moment of waking life is structured by a fact so obvious it is routinely forgotten: we are upright beings in a gravitational field. The vestibular system, located in the inner ear, registers head position and acceleration; the proprioceptive system maps limb location and muscle tension; the plantar surface of the foot continuously calibrates pressure distribution against the ground. These are not peripheral inputs to a central processor. They are the medium in which consciousness happens.

Merleau-Ponty’s (2012) concept of the *corps propre*—the lived body—captures this medium. The body is not an object that I have; it is the subject that I am. Perception is not the reception of stimuli but the body’s engagement with a world that offers itself as climbable, traversable, habitable. The slope is not a geometric angle; it is a possibility for my legs. The forest is not a visual scene; it is a field of smells, textures, gradients, and temperatures that my body navigates. Consciousness, in this view, should not be reduced to brain-internal computation; it is enacted through brain, body, and world.

Patočka (1995) pushes this further. For Patočka, movement is not a displacement of the body in space; it is the fundamental mode of our being in the world. The body does not first exist and then move; it exists *as* movement. Walking is not transportation but revelation: each step discloses the ground, the horizon, the distance, and the body’s own capacity. The “natural world” is not a theoretical construct but the pre-given field that opens up through the body’s kinetic

engagement. To deprive a body of movement—through sedentary labour, digital immersion, or urban design—is not merely to reduce physical health. It is to contract the world, to shrink the horizon of what can appear as real.

3.2 The axial diagram

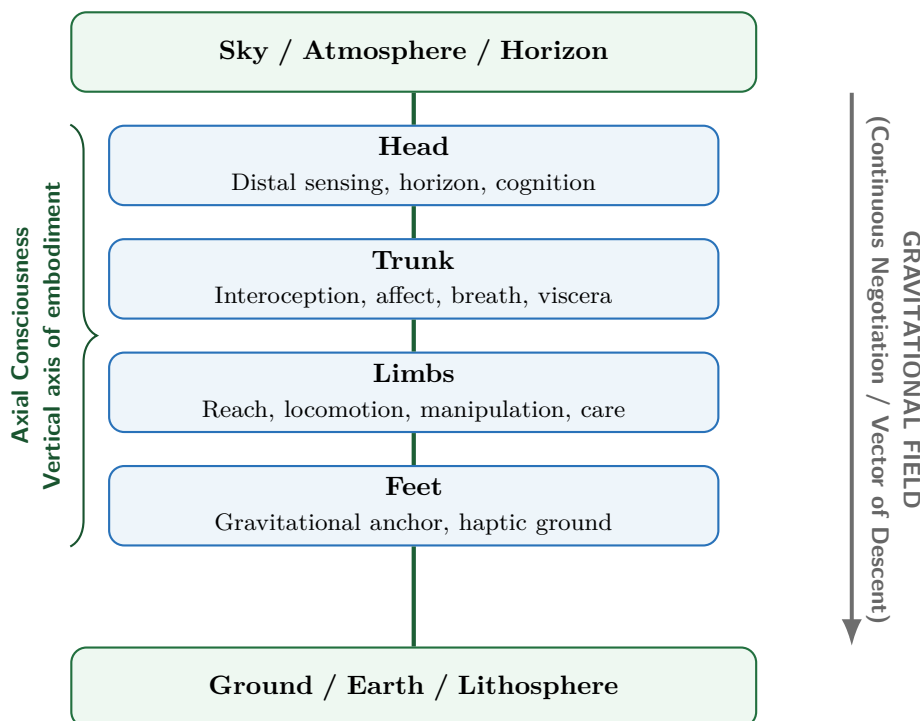


Figure 1: The axial field of consciousness. Awareness is not centred in the cranial cavity but distributed along a vertical axis of gravitational, interoceptive, proprioceptive, and exteroceptive integration. This is a phenomenological diagram, not a neuroanatomical representation. No measured data.

Axial consciousness can be diagrammed as a vertical field of integration (Figure 1). The head, at the upper pole, is not a “brain container” but the site of distal sensing—vision, audition, olfaction—oriented outward toward the horizon. The trunk is the seat of interoception: heartbeat, respiration, visceral tension, the affective background that Damasio (2018) calls the “feeling of what happens.” The limbs extend the body’s reach into the environment, transforming perception into manipulation, locomotion, and care. The feet, at the lower pole, anchor the body in the gravitational field, providing the continuous haptic dialogue with ground without which upright consciousness is impossible.

The diagram is not a metaphor. It is a phenomenological map. When the axial field is intact—when the head balances freely atop an aligned spine, when the breath descends into the abdomen, when the feet sense the ground, when the limbs move through varied terrain—consciousness operates in a mode of collectedness. When the axial field is disrupted—by chronic sitting, by screen fixation, by the collapse of the breath into the upper chest, by the loss of ground contact through footwear and flooring—consciousness fragments. It becomes what the companion article calls dissociated cognitive stress: the mind overheating in a body denied its ecological operating conditions.

3.3 Damasio and the feeling of being

Damasio's (1994; 2018) work on interoception and homeostatic feeling provides the neurobiological correlate of axial consciousness. For Damasio, consciousness begins not with thought but with the "feeling of what happens"—the continuous, wordless sensing of internal bodily states. Emotions are not mental interpretations of bodily changes; they are those changes, mapped in the brain's insular and cingulate cortices. Reason is not separate from feeling; it is feeling refined by experience.

This has profound consequences for ecological ethics. If values emerge partly from homeostatic feeling, then a body whose homeostasis is chronically disrupted—by sedentarism, sleep deprivation, chemical stress, or digital overstimulation—may generate a different affective background than a body that is rested, moving, and embedded in living environments. The first body experiences the world as intolerable, insufficient, and demanding compensation. The second body experiences the world as sufficient, habitable, and worthy of care.

Sleep deprivation may erode this ontological difference. When the axial field is disrupted by chronic sleep loss, the prefrontal cortex loses capacity to integrate health-related signals, while the ventral striatum hyperactivates, shifting the affective background toward immediate, low-effort compensation (Gujar et al., 2011; Greer et al., 2013). The body does not merely feel tired; it feels the world as intolerable, requiring constant digital or nutritional satiation that never arrives.

The companion article (§3.2, §5.1) proposes that subjective well-being is the missing mediator between somatic dysregulation and compensatory consumption. This essay adds: this difference is not merely psychological. It is ontological: it concerns what kind of being one is, and therefore what kind of world one can perceive.

3.4 Axial consciousness and non-normative embodiment

Axial consciousness should not be confused with able-bodied normativity. It does not require athletic capacity, perfect posture, normative mobility, or the absence of disability. It refers to lived orientation, interoceptive presence, relational embodiment, and ecological embeddedness, which can take many forms across disabled, ill, aging, neurodivergent, or differently embodied lives. A wheelchair user may experience profound axial consciousness through the rhythmic pressure of hands on rims, the vestibular sway of movement, and the proprioceptive mapping of accessible terrain. A blind person may experience it through the acoustic depth of space, the haptic texture of surfaces, and the interoceptive rhythm of breath in conversation. Axial consciousness is not a physical ideal but an experiential modality: the capacity to feel oneself as situated, grounded, and relationally open, regardless of the specific morphology or capacity through which that situatedness is achieved. For the somatic justice extension of this claim, see §8.4.

4 Spiritual Ecology: The Body as Biospheric Organ

4.1 Against nature as scenery

The modern environmental movement has often relied on a conception of nature as scenery: the wilderness to be preserved, the landscape to be admired, the biodiversity to be catalogued. This conception, while politically indispensable, risks reproducing the very dualism that produced the crisis. Nature becomes a theme park outside the city, visited on weekends, photographed, and left behind. The body, meanwhile, remains an urban machine fuelled by coffee, screens, and

transportation.

Spiritual ecology proposes a different relation. It begins with the recognition that the body is not in nature; the body *is* nature. The breath that enters the lungs is the same atmospheric circulation that moves across continents. The water that constitutes 60% of the body is the same hydrological cycle that fills rivers and oceans. The minerals in bone and blood are the same elements mined from the lithosphere. The microbiome that digests food is a symbiotic community of organisms whose evolutionary history predates the human species by billions of years. To care for the body is therefore not a private act of health optimisation. It is an ecological act.

The companion article (§3.3) documents that nature connectedness predicts ecological behaviour, mediated by positive body image and self-compassion. Spiritual ecology adds the ontological layer: nature connectedness is not merely a psychological variable. It is the reactivation of axial consciousness, the recovery of the body's capacity to stand upright in a living world and feel itself as part of it. For the cross-national evidence (58 nations, $N = 50,363$), see [Swami et al. \(2026\)](#) and [Lick \(2026, §3.3\)](#).

4.2 Breath and atmosphere

The breath is the most immediate interface between the body and the biosphere. Every inhalation draws in approximately 500 ml of air containing 21% oxygen produced by photosynthetic organisms. Every exhalation releases carbon dioxide that will, within years, be incorporated into plant tissue. The respiratory cycle is therefore a literal metabolic exchange with the planetary metabolism. To breathe consciously—to feel the air entering the nostrils, filling the lungs, oxygenating the blood—is to experience oneself as a node in the Earth's carbon cycle.

Contemporary environments disrupt this interface. Indoor air pollution, particulate matter, volatile organic compounds from synthetic materials, and the shallow, upper-chest breathing promoted by sedentary posture all degrade the breath's ecological function.

The shallow breath of the digital knowledge worker—upper-chest, rapid, unconscious—is not merely a medical risk. It is an ontological forgetting: the body ceases to experience itself as a node in atmospheric circulation and begins to experience itself as an isolated unit requiring artificial climate control, synthetic nutrition, and pharmaceutical management. The financialization of this management (synthetic royalties on GLP-1 agonists, chronic metabolic bonds) transforms the breath-cycle into a revenue cycle.

The companion article (§4.4) documents the epidemiological consequences: reduced lung capacity, chronic inflammation, anxiety disorders. It also adds the emerging evidence on microplastic accumulation in human tissue ([Lick, 2026, §4.4](#)). Spiritual ecology adds the phenomenological dimension: when the breath is shallow and unconscious, the body forgets its atmospheric embeddedness. It begins to experience itself as an isolated unit, requiring artificial climate control, synthetic nutrition, and pharmaceutical regulation.

4.3 Walking and the lithosphere

If breath is the interface with atmosphere, walking is the interface with lithosphere. The human foot contains 26 bones, 33 joints, and more than 100 muscles, tendons, and ligaments. Its architecture evolved for the continuous negotiation of uneven terrain: stone, soil, sand, grass, slope. Each step is a micro-negotiation with gravity, friction, and elasticity. The information generated by this negotiation—proprioceptive, tactile, vestibular—constitutes a significant

portion of the brain’s sensory input.

Paved surfaces, flat flooring, and some forms of footwear and flooring may attenuate or standardize this negotiation. The foot becomes a passive platform rather than a sensory organ. The brain loses a major channel of environmental information. The body, deprived of ground feedback, loses its sense of rootedness—a condition that phenomenology describes as *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) but which spiritual ecology recognises as uprooting. The sedentary, shod, urban body is uprooted not only from nature but from the ground itself.

Patočka’s (1995) insight is crucial here: walking is not transportation but revelation. Each step discloses the ground, the horizon, the distance, and the body’s own capacity. In the Somatic Anthropocene framework, the systematic replacement of walking by seated transport and screen-mediated leisure is not merely a public-health deficit. It is an ontological attenuation: the body loses its primary mode of world-disclosure. For the three-wave historical model of this replacement, see Lick (2026, § 4.3 and Figure 2).

4.4 The inner ecology

Spiritual ecology extends inward. The human body hosts approximately 39 trillion microbial cells, comprising thousands of species whose collective genome contains approximately 150 times more genes than the human genome, and whose composition correlates with metabolic health, immune function, and mood regulation (Sender et al., 2016). This microbiome is not an invader to be eliminated but a co-evolved ecosystem whose diversity is essential to somatic integrity.

The “hygiene hypothesis” suggests that the rise of autoimmune and allergic diseases in industrialised populations stems from insufficient microbial exposure during childhood—a somatic parallel to the “nature deficit disorder” described in environmental psychology. To restore the body is therefore to restore an ecology. Diet, movement, sleep, and nature contact are not lifestyle choices but ecological management practices. The Somatic Restitution Index proposed in the companion article (§ 7) can be read in this light: not as a health dashboard but as an ecological audit of the body’s internal and external habitats. For the SRI domains and operationalisation, see Lick (2026, § 7.2 and Appendix C.3); for the illustrative pilot calculation, see Lick (2026, § 7.9).

5 Developmental Mismatch and Neoteny

Conceptual Note

The term *neoteny* is used here analogically and ontologically, not as a strict biological diagnosis or a judgement about individual development. It names a condition in which environments deprive adult bodies of the sensorimotor, ecological, and social affordances that support embodied agency and self-regulation. The companion article uses the related term “developmental mismatch” (L1–L4); this essay develops its ontological implications at L4–L5.

5.1 Neoteny as ontological diagnosis

Biologically, neoteny refers to the retention of juvenile characteristics in an adult organism. In the Somatic Anthropocene, neoteny becomes an ontological diagnosis: the digital adult exhibits arrested sensorimotor agency because the environment fails to provide the mechanical, vestibular, proprioceptive, and ecological stimuli that support mature embodied self-regulation. Crucially,

this “arrested sensorimotor agency” is an indictment of the extractive environment, not the individual body. It describes the culturally engineered deprivation of spatial and ecological autonomy, and must be strictly distinguished from any ableist evaluation of physical or cognitive disability. The result is not a culture of thinkers but a culture of dissociated cognitive stress: minds active without somatic support, bodies present without agency. The digital labour regime may produce a somatically anaesthetised subject, one for whom the world is increasingly experienced less as a field of affordances than as a field of signals.

5.2 Neoteny and digital labour

The phenomenology of digital labour reveals a specific mode of intentionality: the scroll, the click, the notification. These are not merely actions but *disembodied intentions*—mental directedness stripped of axial support. The finger moves, but the trunk is frozen; the eye tracks, but the vestibulum is silent. Patočka (1995) argued that movement is the fundamental mode of being-in-the-world. The digital regime inverts this: being becomes a mode of watching, and movement is reduced to the micromotion of the thumb. The slope is not climbable; it is scrollable. The forest is not a field of smells and textures; it is a feed.

In the absence of the mechanical, vestibular, and proprioceptive stimuli that shaped hominin development, the body may not fully assume its adult operational architecture. The prefrontal cortex may operate in a mode of cognitive strain against a background of metabolic deficit rather than cognitive support. The result is not a culture of thinkers but a culture of dissociated cognitive stress. The mind is active but deprived of somatic support; the body is present but deprived of agency. The result may be mental strain without the capacity for collectedness, potentially generating anxiety, burnout, and existential emptiness that civilisation offers to fill with yet another product or platform. For the epidemiological evidence on the digital–reward–loneliness loop, see Lick (2026, § 5.2 and Figure 3).

5.3 Neoteny and compensatory culture

The companion article (§ 5.3, § 5.5) proposes that somatic dysregulation may reduce subjective and eudaimonic well-being, increasing vulnerability to compensatory consumption. Neoteny adds an ontological layer to this mechanism. A somatically immature organism is not merely “unhealthy”; it is ontologically incomplete. It lacks the internal sources of satisfaction—postural integrity, interoceptive depth, motor agency, ecological embeddedness—that would render external compensation less necessary. Ontological neoteny is therefore not only a medical problem but a cultural-economic one: it produces subjects whose deficit is not merely physical but existential, and who are therefore structurally dependent on the very systems that produce their deficit.

The compensatory consumption that fills this existential deficit is not merely behavioural but ontological. It operates through what Baudrillard termed the simulacrum: the wellness app that simulates restitution without axial recovery, the food delivery that simulates nourishment without metabolic grounding, the AI companion that simulates intimacy without reciprocity. Each purchase promises ontological fullness while delivering only another horizontal signal, deepening the neotenic condition it claims to remedy (Baudrillard, 1994).

Ontological neoteny may also have demographic resonances, but this claim must remain speculative. The AT&T iPhone rollout (2007–2011) has been analysed as a quasi-experimental case in which counties with smartphone access experienced lower teen birth rates relative to counties without access, with null effects on non-iPhone carriers (Myers and Hooper, 2026). In

the vocabulary of this essay, such findings can be read as a possible sign of embodied relational displacement: a shift in which face-to-face peer time, spontaneous encounter, and shared bodily presence are partly displaced by an always-available digital interface. This does not prove that digital life causes fertility decline, nor that ontological neoteny is a demographic law. It suggests a philosophical question: what happens to reproduction, intimacy, and relational maturation when the conditions of encounter are increasingly mediated through screens? The adolescent who spends less time with friends in person does not simply make a lifestyle choice; he or she inhabits a world where the slope is less often climbed, the forest less often smelled, and the other person less often encountered. The body has not been killed; it has been bypassed.

This is not a moral judgment on individuals. It is a structural diagnosis: when environments reduce movement, sleep, face-to-face relation, and ecological contact, subjects may become more vulnerable to the compensatory consumption that those same environments market to them. The companion article (§5.5) notes that corporate food systems, platform monopolies, and fossil-fuel infrastructures can shape sedentary, anxious, and sleep-deprived bodies. Somatic political ecology adds: they may also shape subjects whose deficits are existential as well as physiological, and for whom consumption becomes less a free preference than a structured compensation. For the SRI's compensatory consumption domain, see [Lick \(2026, §7.2\)](#).

In this section, “ontological neoteny” should therefore be read as a speculative metaphor for arrested embodied maturation, not as a biological diagnosis or a validated demographic mechanism.

6 The Four Errors: A Philosophical Diagnostics

The Somatic Anthropocene can be read as the convergence of four philosophical errors—four ways of thinking that systematically displace the body from its ontological ground. This section develops each error and proposes the somatic alternative.

6.1 The cognitive error: disembodied rationality

Classical cognitive science treated the mind as a computer and the body as a peripheral. This error persists in the ideology of the “knowledge economy,” which measures human value by cognitive output while ignoring somatic cost. The companion article (§4.2) shows that the prefrontal cortex operates in a mode of cognitive strain against a background of metabolic deficit. This essay adds: the disembodied rationality of the knowledge worker is not a higher form of cognition. It is a pathological form, one that requires the systematic suppression of the body's own intelligence.

[Varela et al. \(1991\)](#); [Thompson \(2007\)](#) and [Chemero \(2009\)](#) have demonstrated that cognition is not internal computation but embodied action: it arises through sensorimotor coupling between organism and world. To treat cognition as disembodied computation is therefore not merely an epistemological simplification. It is an ontological error that licenses the systematic neglect of the bodily conditions under which thinking becomes sustainable.

6.2 The technological error: technosolutionism

Technosolutionism approaches ecological crisis as a problem of optimisation, substitution, and infrastructural redesign. It is not anti-technology; it is anti-embodiment. It treats the body as an obstacle to be bypassed—whether through smart cities that eliminate walking, through food delivery that eliminates cooking, or through virtual reality that eliminates the need for natural environments.

The iPhone case suggests that technosolutionism does not need to promise mind uploading to generate disembodiment effects. A device that optimises social connection through a screen while reducing some axial conditions for encounter—gravity, proximity, breath, touch—may produce a form of disembodiment at scale. In the terms of this essay, the fertility decline associated with smartphone diffusion can be read not as proof of ontological collapse, but as a possible sign of embodied relational displacement. Myers and Hooper (2026) provide preliminary quasi-experimental evidence that the AT&T iPhone rollout was associated with reduced teen births, plausibly through displacement of in-person peer time. This evidence should be treated cautiously and requires peer-reviewed replication before strong causal conclusions are drawn.

The companion article (§5.6) distinguishes between technologies that restore embodied agency and those that bypass the body altogether. This essay adds: technosolutionism is not merely an engineering stance. It is an ontological stance, one that assumes the world can be managed without being inhabited.

Boundary condition.

The critique in this essay is not directed at therapeutic, assistive, or restorative technologies that return agency to injured, disabled, aging, or suffering bodies. The target is narrower: disembodied technosolutionist imaginaries that treat the living body as obsolete hardware rather than as the ground of consciousness and ecological relation. For the SRI's institutional evaluation of technology, see Lick (2026, §7.6).

6.3 The political error: transhumanist neoteny

Transhumanism is often presented as a technological programme: the use of genetics, robotics, informatics, and nanotechnology to enhance human capacities and eventually transcend biological limitations. But beneath the engineering discourse lies an ontological commitment that is rarely examined: the belief that consciousness is substrate-independent, that it can be transferred from biological tissue to silicon substrate without loss of identity or meaning. This belief is the logical endpoint of Cartesian dualism: the *res cogitans* is extracted from the *res extensa* and uploaded to a more durable medium.

Against Bostrom's whole brain emulation, the somatic reply is Damasian: without a body, there is no homeostatic feeling, and without homeostatic feeling, there is no valence—only a simulation of behaviour (Damasio, 2018). Against Kurzweil's singularity, the reply is Patočkian: without movement through a gravitational field, there is no world-disclosure, only data processing. Against Harari's *Homo Deus*, the reply is Foucauldian: enhancement is not liberation but the intensification of biopolitical governance, now targeting DNA, neurotransmitters, and metabolic pathways for optimisation rather than care (Harari, 2017; Rose, 2007).

The body, finally, is treated as what it was always implicitly understood to be: obsolete infrastructure.

This essay proposes that some forms of transhumanism may be read not only as ideological projects, but as expressions of what this essay calls ontological neoteny—a speculative metaphor for arrested sensorimotor and existential maturation under disembodied technological imaginaries, not a biological diagnosis. If the body has never been allowed to mature into its full ecological form, it becomes easy to imagine that the body is disposable. Mind uploading, neural lacing, and

substrate-independent cognition are fantasies made plausible only by a prior somatic dissolution, understood here as an ontological metaphor for weakened embodied orientation. One does not abandon a body one has never truly inhabited. For the critique of substrate independence developed through the four interlocking arguments below, see also [Lick \(2026, §6.3\)](#).

The political error of transhumanism is therefore not simply that it promotes technological hubris. It is that it promotes ontological homelessness: the idea that human beings can flourish without the bodily conditions—interoception, mortality, sensory contact, ecological embeddedness—that make flourishing meaningful. Somatic political ecology resists this not by rejecting technology, but by insisting that the body is not an interface to be optimised but a home to be inhabited.

The critique of substrate independence rests on four interlocking arguments, developed in the companion essay tradition:

The epistemological error.

Consciousness is modelled as computation: information processing occurring in a neural network that could, in principle, be simulated on any sufficiently complex substrate. This view ignores the fact that all cognition is situated—it occurs from a specific bodily perspective, in a specific gravitational field, with specific sensory capacities and limitations. A disembodied mind would have no “here” from which to perceive a “there.” It would lack the spatial deixis that makes perception possible. As [Merleau-Ponty \(2012\)](#) showed, to see is to stand somewhere; to know is to move through a world that offers itself differently to each embodied subject.

The ontological error.

Substrate independence assumes that consciousness is a kind of software that can run on different hardware. But consciousness is not a program. It is a process of self-regulation in a living organism maintaining homeostasis within a changing environment. Damasio’s (2018) “feeling of what happens” is not information about the body; it is the body’s continuous adjustment to its own internal states. Remove the body, and there is nothing to regulate, nothing to feel, and therefore no consciousness in the phenomenological sense—only a simulation of behavioural output.

The ecological error.

An affordance, in Gibson’s (1979) terms, is a possibility for action offered by the environment to a specific organism with specific capacities. A stairway is climbable for a legged body of a certain scale; it is not climbable for a snake or a wheel. A disembodied mind would have no effectors, no scale, no metabolic needs, and therefore no affordances. It would inhabit a world without valence—without attractions, repulsions, or cares. Such a mind could optimise, calculate, and simulate. But it could not value, because valence is rooted in the body’s needs and vulnerabilities.

The political error.

Mind uploading is not a universal human aspiration. It is the aspiration of a specific class—the cognitive elite of high-income societies whose labour already occurs in screens, whose sociality is already mediated by platforms, and whose bodies are already treated as transportation between meetings. Transhumanism is the ideology of those who have already lost their axial consciousness and now seek to make this loss irreversible by declaring the body technologically obsolete. It is not emancipation. It is the reification of alienation.

6.4 The ontological error: the body as obsolete infrastructure

The deepest error is ontological: the assumption that the body is a machine for production and consumption, a biological substrate that can be engineered, upgraded, or discarded. This essay proposes the opposite: the body is a living biosphere organ, the medium through which the Earth becomes conscious of itself. To treat the body as obsolete is not merely to misunderstand biology. It is to misunderstand being.

The financialization of the body completes this error. When chronic metabolic management is securitized into synthetic royalties and portfolio positions, the body ceases to be a living biosphere organ and becomes a bond—a fixed-income instrument whose yield depends on the perpetuation of somatic dysfunction. The body is not obsolete; it has been made collateral.

6.5 The somatic alternative

Against the four errors, the Somatic Anthropocene proposes not primitivism but restitution. The goal is not to reject technology but to redesign it around the axial body: movement-rich workplaces, sleep-compatible cities, breathable buildings, edible landscapes, and digital tools that augment rather than replace embodied perception. The question is not whether to use tools, but whether the tools restore or erode the axial field. The companion article (§8.2) cites examples: Finland’s school-based outdoor play mandates, the Netherlands’ cycling infrastructure, France’s “right to disconnect,” Barcelona’s superblocks. Somatic political ecology adds: these are not merely public-health interventions. They are ontological restorations: the recovery of the conditions under which the body can feel the world as real. For the full policy intervention mapping, see [Lick \(2026, Appendix D, Table S5\)](#).

7 Sanskrit Phenomenology: A Lexicon of Axial Embodiment

7.1 Reading tradition as phenomenology

Sanskrit texts on the body—from the Upaniṣads to the Yoga-sūtra to the Tantric traditions—are often read as theology, cosmology, or esoteric physiology. This essay proposes a different reading: as phenomenology.

Why Sanskrit? The Indic traditions offer one granular pre-modern lexicon of axial embodiment, articulating layers of breath, posture, and vertical presence that Western phenomenology often describes in more general terms. This is not a universal or exclusive claim: Chinese medicine (qi, jing-luo), African somatic practices, and Greek phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty’s *corps propre*) offer equally valid lexicons. Sanskrit is used here as a heuristic bridge, not as an ontological privilege. By deploying these terms, this essay does not endorse a metaphysical dualism or an esoteric physiology. Rather, it places these granular phenomenological observations in dialogue with contemporary affective neuroscience, especially Damasio’s account of neurovisceral integration and the pre-reflective bodily self ([Damasio, 2018](#)).

These texts describe not the body as biological object but the body as lived field of awareness—precisely the field that [Merleau-Ponty \(2012\)](#), [Patočka \(1995\)](#), and [Damasio \(2018\)](#) later mapped in different vocabularies.

The phenomenological readings offered here draw on standard philological and historical scholarship ([Feuerstein, 1998](#); [Mallinson and Singleton, 2017](#)), but interpret these terms as descriptive psychology rather than religious doctrine. The following terms are not offered as religious doctrines but as conceptual instruments. They provide a granular vocabulary for experiences that Western phenomenology often describes in more general terms: breath, balance, visceral

tone, attentional focus, and the sense of vertical presence. These terms are not claimed to map directly onto anatomical structures or clinical categories. For the glossary of interdisciplinary bridges, see [Appendix A](#).

7.2 The axial lexicon

Table 1 presents eight key terms from Sanskrit phenomenology, read as descriptions of lived bodily experience. The table is intended as a heuristic for interdisciplinary translation, not as an exhaustive system.

Table 1: Sanskrit phenomenology: a lexicon of axial embodiment.

Sanskrit term	Conventional translation	Phenomenological reading in the Somatic Anthropocene framework
<i>Deha</i>	Body, physical form	The lived body (<i>corps propre</i>), not the anatomical corpse. The body as subject of experience, not object of medical gaze.
<i>Śarīra</i>	Perishable body	The body as temporal process: ageing, breathing, digesting, dying. Emphasises impermanence not as metaphysical doctrine but as experienced finitude—the condition that makes care possible.
<i>Prāṇa</i>	Vital breath, life-force	The respiratory cycle as primary interoception: the continuous, mostly unconscious sensing of air exchange that grounds affective tone. Not a metaphysical energy but the phenomenology of breathing.
<i>Apāna</i>	Downward breath, excretion	The visceral sensations of elimination, gravity, and descent. The body’s grounding function: the felt sense of weight, release, and return to earth.
<i>Kuṇḍalinī</i>	Coiled serpent energy	Axial tonicity: the felt tension or relaxation along the spinal axis. Not a mystical force but the proprioceptive awareness of postural integrity—the “coiled” potential that is released when the spine aligns and the breath deepens.
<i>Ṣaṭ-cakra</i>	Six wheels, energy centres	Proprioceptive nodal points: zones of heightened self-reference along the axial field. Not metaphysical vortices but phenomenological “thickenings” where interoception, proprioception, and affect converge.
<i>Mokṣa</i>	Liberation, release	Not escape from the body but restitution of axial consciousness: the dissolution of dissociative cognitive stress and the recovery of collected embodiment. Liberation <i>into</i> the body, not from it.
<i>Samādhi</i>	Concentration, absorption	The state in which attention is fully integrated with the axial field—not “mind over matter” but mind as matter, consciousness collected in the breath, the spine, and the ground.

7.3 Vertical cosmology as vertical phenomenology

Traditional cosmologies often describe the universe as a hierarchy: earth, water, fire, air, ether; or body, mind, intellect, bliss. These hierarchies are routinely dismissed as pre-scientific. But from a phenomenological perspective, they are vertical maps of consciousness. The “lower” levels

correspond to the body’s grounding in gravity, digestion, and sexuality; the “middle” levels to emotion and breath; the “upper” levels to cognition and distal sensing.

The Somatic Anthropocene does not endorse these cosmologies as physics. It reads them as descriptive psychology: attempts to articulate the layers of axial consciousness before the vocabulary of neuroscience existed. The “ascent” described in contemplative traditions is not a journey to another world. It is the vertical integration of attention within the body’s own axis: from the scattered, dissociated, screen-fixated consciousness of the digital subject to the collected, breathing, grounded consciousness of the axial body. This is not mysticism. It is the phenomenological description of what the companion article (§3.2) calls interoceptive awareness and what [Damasio \(2018\)](#) calls the feeling of being.

8 Ontological Restitution

8.1 The SRI as ontological audit

The companion article proposes the Somatic Restitution Index (SRI) as a preliminary multidimensional profile for sustainability assessment (§7.2). It maps eight domains—postural integrity, interoception, nature contact, sleep, subjective well-being, eudaimonia, compensatory consumption, and ecological footprint—and provides pilot hypotheses for longitudinal validation. This essay interprets the SRI not only as a technocratic public-health instrument, but also as a philosophical prompt for asking how the ontological layers described here might appear in measurable bodily and social conditions. Each SRI domain corresponds to an ontological category:

- **Motor integrity** = bodily agency, the capacity to act in the world;
- **Interoception** = internal self-awareness, the capacity to feel what one needs;
- **Nature contact** = ecological embeddedness, the capacity to experience the biosphere as living;
- **Sleep** = temporal regulation, the capacity to surrender to circadian rhythm;
- **Subjective well-being** = affective tone, the capacity to experience life as worth living;
- **Eudaimonia** = ontological fullness, the capacity to experience purpose and meaning;
- **Compensatory consumption** = the displacement of internal sources of satisfaction by external ones;
- **Ecological footprint** = the material trace of ontological deficit.

The SRI should also be read cautiously in relation to algorithmic pseudo-restitution. When a population substitutes AI companions for face-to-face bonding, mindfulness apps for interoceptive depth, and wellness subscriptions for axial consciousness, such a profile could appear as high compensatory consumption alongside low eudaimonia—what this essay interprets as ontological deficit masked by digital simulacra.

The SRI is therefore not a dashboard for ranking populations. In this essay, it is read as an interpretive framework for asking whether the bodily conditions for ecological care exist in a given population. Where they do not, sustainability policy will face a structural deficit: exhausted, lonely, sedentary, anxious people may remain vulnerable to high-consumption compensation even if energy systems become renewable (§8.3 of the companion article). For the SRI pilot

calculation, see [Lick \(2026, § 7.9\)](#); for the Somatic Justice Matrix, see [Lick \(2026, Appendix D, Figure S6\)](#).

8.2 The body as ground of sustainability

Sustainability policy typically addresses energy systems, carbon pricing, circular economies, and conservation targets. These are necessary but insufficient. A society of exhausted, lonely, sedentary, anxious, and overstimulated people will remain vulnerable to compensatory consumption even if its energy systems become renewable. It will buy electric cars instead of petrol cars, organic packaged food instead of conventional packaged food, wellness retreats instead of beach vacations, and mindfulness apps instead of pharmaceutical drugs—but it will still buy, because the internal deficit that drives consumption has not been addressed.

The Somatic Anthropocene proposes that sustainability must become somatic. Not in the sense of individual health optimisation—the neoliberal translation of bodily care into personal responsibility—but in the sense of structural redesign: movement-rich schools, sleep-compatible cities, breathable buildings, edible landscapes, and digital infrastructures that respect rather than exploit the axial field. The goal is not to make better consumers but to make different beings: subjects whose sufficiency is grounded in bodily vitality rather than in commodity acquisition.

8.3 Structural redesign, not individual optimization

This is not an appeal to return to a premodern condition. It is a call to recognise that modernity has reached a limit. The digital, sedentary, chemically altered body should not be uncritically celebrated as evolutionary progress. It may also represent a narrowing of motor variability, interoceptive depth, and ecological embeddedness. Some disembodied transhumanist proposals may intensify this narrowing by treating the body as an obstacle rather than as the ground of consciousness.

Against this, the Somatic Anthropocene and its companion axial phenomenology propose a different future: not the uploaded mind but the re-grounded body; not substrate independence but substrate intimacy; not the conquest of nature but the recovery of the body as nature. The companion article (§ 8.2) cites structural examples: Finland’s school-based outdoor play mandates, the Netherlands’ cycling infrastructure as active-transport default, France’s 2017 labour law protecting workers’ “right to disconnect,” and Barcelona’s “superblock” urban redesign. Somatic political ecology adds: these are not merely policy interventions. They are ontological restorations. For the full policy intervention mapping, see [Lick \(2026, Appendix D, Table S5\)](#).

8.4 Somatic justice

The companion article (§ 1.3, seventh boundary condition) states that the SRI must accommodate disabled, aging, neurodivergent, and differently embodied populations without moral ranking. This essay extends that commitment into a positive principle: **somatic justice**. Somatic justice holds that axial consciousness is not a normative physical ideal but an experiential modality available across diverse morphologies and capacities. It rejects the neoliberal translation of bodily care into health optimisation, productivity enhancement, and resilience training. Instead, it demands that structural restitution be designed for the full spectrum of embodied difference.

A wheelchair user may experience profound axial consciousness through the rhythmic pressure of hands on rims, the vestibular sway of movement, and the proprioceptive mapping of accessible terrain. A blind person may experience it through the acoustic depth of space, the haptic texture of surfaces, and the interoceptive rhythm of breath in conversation. A neurodivergent

person may experience it through stimming as self-regulation, deep proprioceptive seeking, or the intense interoceptive focus that accompanies certain forms of sensory processing. These are not deficient approximations of a normative axial body. They are *alternative modalities* of the same underlying phenomenon: the capacity to feel oneself as situated, grounded, and relationally open.

Somatic justice therefore requires that the SRI be operationalised with disability-inclusive indicators: not “steps walked” but “movement agency”; not “outdoor time” but “sensory richness of environment”; not “postural integrity” but “postural comfort and support.” It also requires that policy interventions—the school, the workplace, the city—be designed for bodily diversity rather than for a single somatic norm. The companion article’s intersectional boundary conditions (§ 1.4.1) and Somatic Justice Matrix (Appendix D, Figure S6) provide the structural framework for this operationalisation.

8.5 The ethical imperative

The ethical imperative that follows from this analysis is not ascetic. It is not a call for deprivation, guilt, or individual moral perfection. It is a call for structural restitution: the recovery of the conditions under which the body can become a source of sufficiency rather than a site of deficit. The goal is not to make people “healthier” in the neoliberal sense—optimised, productive, resilient—but to restore the ontological conditions for care: the axial consciousness that makes the world feel real, the somatic integrity that makes agency possible, and the ecological embeddedness that makes the future feel worth inheriting.

The body is not an instrument of sustainability. It is its ground.

9 Epilogue: The Data and the Mystery

9.1 The biological veto

The companion article (§ 8.6) documents the convergence of four indicators—fertility decline, mental health decline, physical health deterioration, and loneliness—on the youngest cohorts. It treats fertility decline as a complex biosocial phenomenon in which somatic stressors interact with economic and cultural variables, not as direct evidence of somatic dysregulation. This essay offers a more radical interpretation, but only at the level of ontological provocation: fertility decline may be read as a **biological veto**, a speculative population-level sign that organism–environment coupling may be increasingly experienced as nonviable for reproduction.

Nature does not issue invoices. It issues bodies, symptoms, thresholds, refusals, and vulnerabilities. Fertility decline may therefore be read, at the level of ontological provocation, as a sign that organism–environment coupling is increasingly experienced as costly, precarious, or uninhabitable. This is not a claim that fertility decline is caused by somatic dysregulation. It is a philosophical question opened by demographic data: what it means when reproduction ceases to feel livable across multiple advanced societies.

This statement is not an empirical claim. It is an ontological provocation. It asks what it means when many people experience reproduction and childrearing as somatically, economically, relationally, or ecologically difficult to sustain. The companion article provides the epidemiological context. This essay provides the existential question. This ontological reading does not replace the materialist critiques of the “care crisis” found in feminist political economy. Instead, it posits that the systemic extraction of reproductive labour and the unaffordability of housing are experienced *somatically*—potentially culminating in an embodied refusal or hesitation where

the allostatic load of existence makes the generation of new life feel difficult to sustain. For the explicit feminist political economy framing of this provocation, and the rejection of reproductive determinism, see [Lick \(2026, § 8.6\)](#).

9.2 Ontological refusal

Fertility decline may also be read, at the level of ontological provocation, as a form of ontological refusal: not a conscious collective decision, but a structural signal that reproduction may increasingly be experienced as costly, precarious, or existentially burdensome. This is not a moral judgment on individual choice. It is a philosophical reading of a complex biosocial phenomenon shaped by economic insecurity, gender norms, housing costs, labour markets, health, ecological anxiety, and future uncertainty.

The biological veto is not an empirical variable in itself, but some of the conditions it interprets may be studied empirically. Preliminary quasi-experimental evidence, such as the iPhone natural experiment ([Myers and Hooper, 2026](#)), suggests that smartphone diffusion may have contributed to lower birth rates in the studied context, though peer-reviewed replication is necessary before assigning strong causal weight to this mechanism. If validated, this veto is not a conscious collective decision but a structural signal: when organism–environment coupling is mediated through a screen, the metabolic, social, and gravitational conditions for reproduction are eroded. The body registers the world as uninhabitable for childbearing before the mind formulates the decision.

The companion article notes that government pro-natal programmes have consistently failed. This essay suggests why: you cannot programme fertility with subsidies when the underlying ontological conditions—sleep, safety, nature contact, eudaimonic meaning, ecological hope—are absent. The body is not a machine that can be incentivised. It is a living biosphere organ that registers the viability of the world. For the SRI’s eudaimonia and social connection domain, see [Lick \(2026, § 7.2, Table 6\)](#).

9.3 The mystery

The data are already speaking. But they speak a language that exceeds the data. The SRI can measure somatic restitution. Phenomenology can describe axial consciousness. Political ecology can map the power relations that produce somatic dissolution, used here as an ontological metaphor for weakened embodied orientation. Yet there remains something that exceeds all these frameworks: the sheer fact of embodiment, the mystery of consciousness arising from flesh, the irreducible experience of being a body in a living world.

Somatic political ecology does not resolve this mystery. It honours it. It insists that the body is not a problem to be solved but a gift to be received. And it insists that the planetary crisis is, at its deepest level, a crisis of this reception: the failure to receive the body, the failure to receive the world, the failure to receive the future.

The data do not close the question; they open it. What exceeds measurement is not mysticism but the irreducible fact of *corps propre*—the body as subject of experience, not object of optimisation ([Merleau-Ponty, 2012](#)). In Levinas’s terms, the body is the site where the face of the Other first becomes sensible; in Nancy’s terms, it is the *corpus* that we share rather than possess. The planetary crisis is, at this level, a failure of this sharing: the failure to receive the body, the failure to receive the world, the failure to receive the future ([Levinas, 1969; Nancy, 2008](#)).

10 Conclusion

The Somatic Anthropocene thus opens a research frontier at the intersection of planetary health, affective neuroscience, and political economy—a field that may be termed somatic political ecology. The companion article provides the epidemiological, cross-national, and psychometric tools capable of tracking how bodily states become planetary forces. This essay provides the ontological depth that those tools require.

The task ahead is not merely to restore movement, sleep, and nature contact. It is to restore the ontological conditions for embodied care: the axial consciousness that makes the world feel real, the somatic integrity that makes agency possible, and the ecological embeddedness that makes the future feel worth inheriting. Without this restoration, sustainability will remain a technical project managed by anaesthetised subjects. With it, sustainability becomes an ontological project: the recovery of the body as a living biosphere organ.

This recovery is not a return to premodernity but a refusal of financialized and algorithmic disembodiment. Against the bond and the simulacrum, the Somatic Anthropocene proposes substrate intimacy: the re-grounded body, the re-collected breath, the re-encountered face.

The data do not close the question. They open it. And the mystery remains.

Data Availability Statement

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Appendix A: Glossary of Interdisciplinary Bridges

This glossary maps key concepts across the phenomenological, biological, and political domains of the Somatic Anthropocene framework. It is intended as a heuristic for interdisciplinary translation, not as an exhaustive taxonomy. Sanskrit terms are used as conceptual bridges between traditional medical ontologies and contemporary toxicology/embryology; they are not offered as clinical categories.

Table A1: Glossary of interdisciplinary bridges. Sanskrit terms are used as heuristic resources, not clinical categories.

Term	Domain	Definition in the Somatic Anthropocene framework
Axial consciousness	Phenomenology / Ontology	The vertical, embodied awareness of being situated between earth and sky, mortality and meaning, biosphere and history; the bodily condition for ecological care and ontological fullness.
Somatic political ecology	Political ecology / Public health	The study of planetary-scale feedback loops between bodily dysregulation, economic systems, and Earth-system processes; the body as living biosphere organ and political field.
Neoteny (ontological)	Evolutionary morphology / Phenomenology	An ontological metaphor for arrested sensorimotor agency under digital and sedentary conditions. It is not used as a strict biological diagnosis.
Technosolutionism	Philosophy of technology / Sustainability	The approach to ecological crisis through optimisation, substitution, and infrastructural redesign, treating the body as an obstacle to be bypassed rather than a mediator to be restored.
Ontological restitution	Phenomenology / Sustainability policy	The recovery not only of health behaviours but of the bodily conditions for being-in-the-world; the restoration of axial consciousness and ecological embeddedness.
Viṣama (toxic accumulation)	Ayurveda / Environmental toxicology	The systemic accumulation of endogenous and exogenous toxins (EDCs, microplastics, chronic inflammation) that alter metabolic phenotype and affective tone; the biochemical dimension of somatic dysregulation, interpreted phenomenologically as toxic accumulation.
Dhātu (tissue/structure)	Ayurveda / Embryology	The bodily tissues and structural matrices that constitute the somatic ground; in the Somatic Anthropocene, Dhātu refers to the axial skeleton, neural architecture, and endocrine system as sites of evolutionary vulnerability and biopolitical targeting.
Biological veto	Evolutionary biology / Demography	A speculative ontological reading of fertility decline as a possible signal that reproduction is increasingly experienced as costly, precarious, or uninhabitable. It is not an empirical explanation and does not replace economic, gendered, cultural, housing, labour-market, or policy explanations.
Prāṇa	Sanskrit phenomenology / Interoception	The respiratory cycle as primary interoception; the continuous, mostly unconscious sensing of air exchange that grounds affective tone and axial presence.
Mokṣa	Sanskrit phenomenology / Ontology	Liberation into the body: the dissolution of dissociative cognitive stress and the recovery of collected embodiment; not escape from the body but restitution of axial consciousness.
Somatic justice	Disability studies / Political ecology	The active centring of disabled, aging, neurodivergent, and differently embodied lives as legitimate modalities of axial consciousness; the rejection of neoliberal health optimisation in favour of structural restitution for bodily diversity.
Digital flattening	Phenomenology / Media studies	The phenomenological attenuation of the axial field of consciousness by chronic screen-mediated, seated, horizontally oriented attention; the collapse of vertical embodiment into planar signal processing.

Appendix B: The Axial Diagram: Somatic Dissolution as Ontological Metaphor

In this appendix, “somatic dissolution” is used as an ontological metaphor for the weakening of embodied orientation, not as a clinical diagnosis or empirical category.

Figure B1 presents a schematic representation of the axial body situated between the poles of somatic dissolution, understood as ontological metaphor, and ontological restitution. It complements the phenomenological axial diagram (Figure 1, §3.2) by mapping the political and ontological dimensions of the Somatic Anthropocene framework.

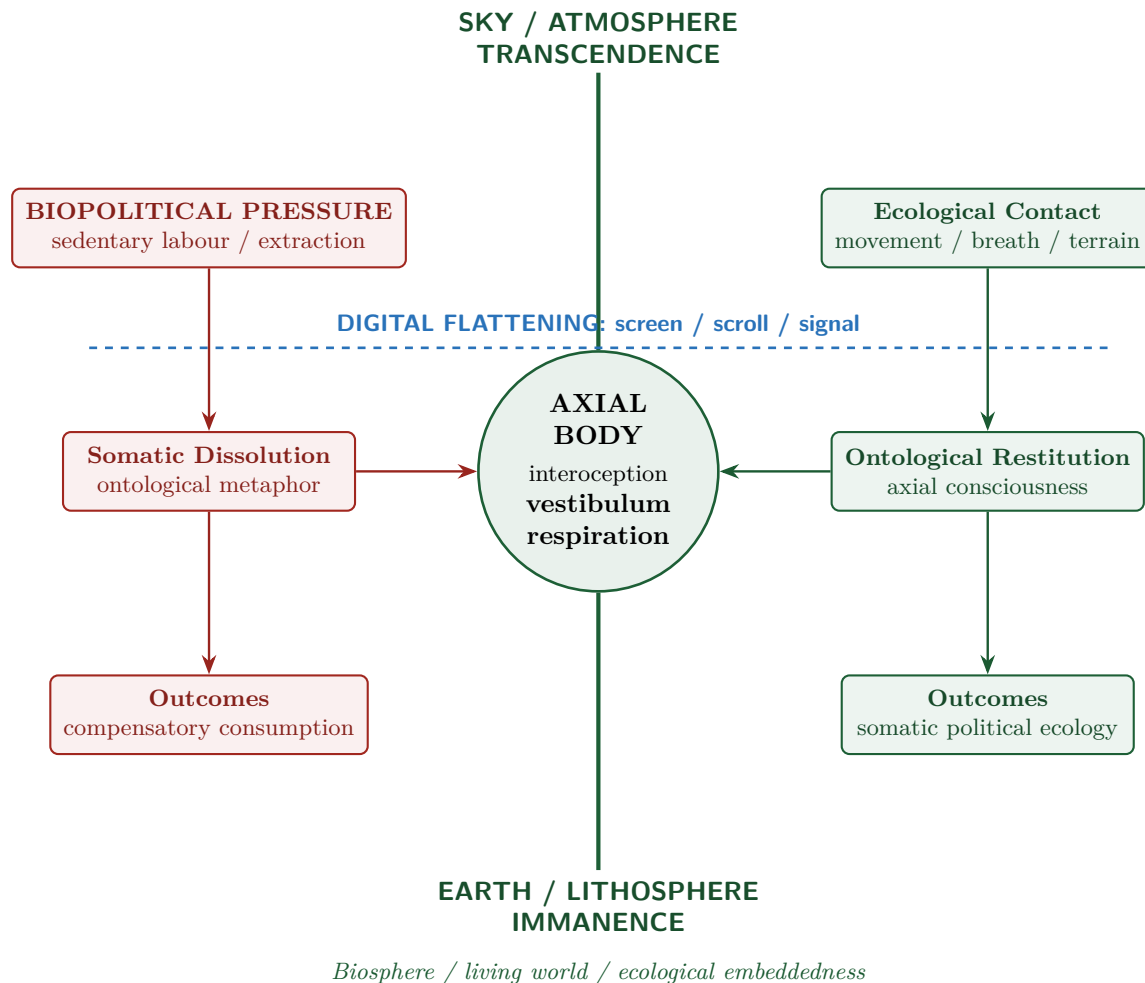


Figure B1: The axial diagram: somatic dissolution and ontological restitution. The upright body (centre) is situated between earth and sky, connected to the biosphere, and threatened by digital flattening (horizontal dashed line). Somatic dissolution (left), used here as an ontological metaphor rather than an empirical diagnosis, represents the neotenic, anaesthetised condition; ontological restitution (right) represents the recovery of axial consciousness. This vertical map complements and operationalizes the multidimensional subdomains of the Somatic Restitution Index (SRI) profile detailed in the companion article.

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