

Article

SHE (Sustainability, Health, Ethics)—A Grid for an Embodied Ethic

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Abstract: Our current planetary emergency is one in which we are facing significant global warming as a result of human-driven climate change. This is having and will continue to have catastrophic results for the earth's ecosystems and for life as we know it. The Christian tradition often works actively against the seriousness of these challenges due to its eschatological outlook. Process theology, as one stream within the Christian tradition, embraces a different vision of the future that fosters engagement in current concerns rather than an escapist approach. A process theological proposal is therefore offered that calls for an embodied ethic that embraces the acronym SHE. SHE stands for Sustainability, Health, and Ethics. It provides a dietary grid as a way to embody ethics to bring about societal change in light of environmental challenges. SHE is proposed against a background that argues for Christian engagement in our current global crisis. The idea of "small turnings" as a conceptual idea is adopted to help frame how the SHE grid might be understood.

Keywords: ecology; theology; sustainability; embodied ethic



Citation: Macallan, B. SHE (Sustainability, Health, Ethics)—A Grid for an Embodied Ethic.

Philosophies **2022**, *7*, 23.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/philosophies7020023>

Academic Editor: Michael Marder

Received: 27 November 2021

Accepted: 8 February 2022

Published: 25 February 2022

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1. Introduction

New Testament scholar Marcus Borg used the word "dream" to frame how he imagined God might think about the planet and its future [1]. In this book he defined God's dream for the world as follows:

The dream of God is a social and political vision of a world of justice and peace in which human beings do not hurt or destroy, oppress or exploit one another. It is the dream expressed with many images and by many voices in the Bible . . . The dream of God is a vision of shalom, a rich Hebrew word often translated as "peace" but meaning much more than the absence of war. It means well-being in a comprehensive sense. It includes freedom from negatives such as oppression, anxiety, and fear, as well as the presence of positives such as health, prosperity, and security. Shalom thus includes a social vision: the dream of a world in which such well-being belongs to everybody.

Many find the idea of God having a "dream for the world" too vague. The Christian tradition, however, has often returned to the eschatological passage at the end of Revelation in an attempt to offer a glimpse of what a future world would look like. In chapters 19–21, the closing chapters, it speaks of a new heaven and a new earth, where there are no more tears. There has been much written about Jesus' message regarding the Kingdom of God as something that would be realized here on earth and not something that would result in the end of the space-time universe [2]. Others have offered the beatitudes as a blueprint, or at best a guide, in crafting a vision for what God's dream for the world might look like in human relations. The Hebraic prophetic tradition has also been an imaginative resource for how Christians might think about treating the poor and the environment. These theological perspectives can be found in many other religious and non-religious traditions in their attempt to craft a hopeful vision for our future.

For many Christians, their vision of the future is captured by the image of Jesus returning at a future date in history. However, Jesus restoring the world to a former pristine

state, and one in which there is no more conflict and pain like the passage in Revelation, can be problematic. As much as there has been a strong move among certain Christians to emphasize the importance of stewarding the environment and getting involved in social issues, this image has the potential to lose its motivating power for engagement. It is the ultimate “get-out-of-jail-free card” because regardless of how we treat the planet, God will return to intervene and fix things in the future. One strand within the Christian tradition, process theology, has argued that God cannot intervene in the future [3]. Rather the future is truly open, both for God and the planet [4]. Process theologians argue that we need to respond to God’s invitation in each given moment and, by doing so, potentially contribute towards a more just and holistic future. Process theology argues that we cannot eliminate the risk that we might eventually destroy the earth beyond repair, or at least the planet’s ability to support human life. This makes our efforts to participate in the world and its concerns even more pressing, along with a desire to seek to understand and articulate God’s preferred future for the earth.

With this process tradition in mind, I offer the acronym SHE as one way to help orientate Christians towards an embodied ethic concerning food consumption and its impact on the planet. SHE stands for Sustainability, Health, and Ethics. Rethinking the question of how we think about food can address some of the pressing environmental challenges that we are currently facing. Before doing this, we need to first understand those key challenges, against which the acronym SHE will then find its proper context.

2. Global Crisis and Disorder

One of the most powerful challenges that process theology poses to certain aspects of traditional Christian thought is in its rejection of the all-too-easy fix of Jesus’ return, traditionally understood. This contrasts with process theology’s cousin, open theism, which still allows for a decisive interventionist event at the end of time to inaugurate a new world [5]¹. Process theology by nature implies risk and adventure. The adventure is not pre-ordained or already known to God. It needs to be lived and worked out. Sadly, letting go of this key tenant in traditional Christian thought means, as we already noted, that as a species we can destroy ourselves, along with the planet. This results in the loss of assurance that the traditional view had offered. As much as God will continue to invite us into a more just and merciful future, God will not and cannot coerce us into that future according to process thinking [6]. Our planet, as a result of our actions as human beings, is on an incredibly self-destructive path. The recent best-seller *Sapiens* by Yuval Hariri has charted this maniacal direction Homo sapiens took after originally leaving Africa 70,000 years ago. Hariri argues that it is not only since the advent of modern warfare and the industrial revolution that our destructive tendencies have been at work [7]. A process perspective can help us understand the seriousness of our task, offering the potential for hope and real change as we partner in God’s dream for the world. The acronym SHE can become part of actualizing this dream.

3. The Current Climate Emergency

Climate change is a deeply polarizing issue in many countries around the world. Christians remain divided on human-driven climate change but have tended to take conservative positions on this and related issues. The difficulty with climate change is the difficulty in understanding its effects. We can understand the result of acid rain in nearby environments, and pollution in our creek, making the connection between cause and effect more visible. This is more difficult, although not impossible, with climate change. The retort by climate skeptics that climate change has always happened, and is always happening, is certainly true. What is often overlooked, though, is that the amount of carbon we are emitting into the atmosphere has been significantly above normal carbon emissions historically [8]. The scientific community is almost unanimous in its assessment that humans are contributing decisively to this increase of carbon into the atmosphere [9]. One of the challenges we face is our inability as a species to make sacrifices for future

generations when we might not see those benefits ourselves. Evolutionary psychology has suggested that we often make short-term decisions based on survival instincts. One could, however, make a strong evolutionary argument that if we do not do something about climate change, our offspring will have no place to live and our “line” will die out.

Human-driven climate change is the most serious existential threat we have faced as a species since we made that trek out of Africa to populate the earth [10]. Even putting climate change aside, our economic practices have resulted in significant damage to the environment and food chain. Before offering SHE as a way to become bodily engaged in change, the importance of Christians becoming active more generally concerning social and environmental issues needs to be addressed.

4. Staying Engaged

There are many who reject the reality of climate change and are antagonistic towards other religions, sexes, minorities, and different cultures. Tragically, those aligned with the Christian message often walk hand in hand with those who tout these policies and inflame its rhetoric [11]. This is often at the expense of the explosive core ideas of Christianity where all are created in the image of God, along with the tradition of a radical prophetic critique of power [12] and Jesus’ message of the kingdom [13] and its counter-cultural and counter-imperial perspective².

In the current world context, Christians might attempt to withdraw completely from seeking to bring about change in the world and its structures. This is not a uniquely Christian problem but perhaps a decidedly human one. Evolutionarily we are prone to fight or flee when danger is imminent. When the world is in such turmoil, it is tempting to simply “check out” of taking responsibility for what is going on. It is easy to reject the call to participate in alleviating the suffering of structural injustice. This is particularly so if we are well fed and have good jobs. Non-involvement and inaction are an endorsement of the status quo, though, which was the challenge Christians faced under Apartheid South Africa. The implication is that by refusing to take a political position, on, say, historical issues such as slavery and racism, we by default endorse the current unjust system. For many of us, these are systems that we benefit from. Those that despair of the political process often withdraw into smaller communities in an attempt to embody their hopes for change. One should not dismiss this option, particularly when many other opportunities have been foreclosed. We should not see political and structural change, though, as something that is in opposition to personal and communal activism. This is a false dichotomy. Gandhi said that change starts with the individual, although this tends to oversimplify things. Communal and structural change can bring about different ways of thinking, believing, and behaving in individuals that would not have happened if that change had not taken place. When change is not possible politically, or at least not immediately possible, we can seek to elicit change through the communities we are part of.

5. Communities and Zones of Resistance

Rodney Stark’s book entitled *The Rise of Christianity* is a sociological analysis exploring the reasons for the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire [15]. Stark notes that the early Christians had taken a progressive attitude concerning women and slaves, both considered minority groups in the Roman Empire. They further took charge of looking after the weak and poor when many in Roman society would not, particularly during plagues. This is seen in the well-known quote of the emperor Julian who noted that Christians looked not only after their own poor but those who were not Christians too. The communities that Christians formed were inclusive and caring, seeking to embody in their faith the practices and rituals that would help foster this inclusivity. Christian communion was originally a “love feast”, whereby those in the community would bring food and wine to share, not the individualistic expression in many churches today.

Stark believes that these communities were so transformative that it contributed to the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire so that by the time Constantine

legalized Christianity, he was simply endorsing a fact in which Christianity had become the dominant religion within the empire. In the same way today, Christian communities can be transformative in their practices in a way that gives concrete expression to their beliefs and rituals. There was something about the early Christians' moral and communal engagement that led to its impact and growth too.

Philosopher Peter Rollins argues that communities can indeed be transformative. He defined communities that seek to practice different modes of being as *Communities or Zones of Resistance*. These zones of resistance are known for being just, merciful, inclusive, and hopeful, becoming signposts for the kinds of countries and world we would want to inhabit. At worst, they are signposts; at best, they become part of the transformative change in wider society. These communities of resistance and hope need not only be religious or Christian but can equally be football clubs or other groups formed for the common good. It is perhaps ironic that in Australia the AFL (Australian Football League) is often at the forefront of education and consciousness raising concerning gay and indigenous rights. Unfortunately, many in the church and religious community are either not actively involved or are working against these important issues.

The French philosopher Louis Althusser spoke about organizations, or certain groups within society, as ISAs (Ideological State Apparatuses) [16]. These are groups that embody dominant cultural and political views in their institutional structure. Too often community groups and churches are complicit in the ideology of the dominant narrative and function as these ISAs. This is why bringing about change in educational institutions and churches can prove so difficult. The options are either to seek to change the institutions that we are part of or to create new ones [17].

6. Small Turnings

As mentioned earlier, Gandhi had stated that change starts with the individual, or rather "Be the change you want to see". There I rejected too narrow a view of this idea that does not take into account the change that individuals can undergo as political and cultural change works itself through transformative local communities. Alternatively, though, the change that takes place in individuals can be so profound that it can generate significant transformation in society. Gandhi is one example, but we can think of Martin Luther King, or more recently Greta Sternberg concerning climate change. We need not end up being as famous as the aforementioned, but we can begin to think about the small turnings we might make in our own life to generate change and transformation. The embodied ethics of SHE that we will soon delineate is an example of personal change that can have societal ramifications. These small changes can be examined through the idea of "small turnings".

The concept originates from the book entitled *An Earth-Careful Way of Life* [18]. The book was an early call for evangelicals to engage in bringing about change in their approach to their environment by creating small turnings towards a more just and ecological world. A small turning can take many forms depending on one's context. One way to imagine the concept of small turnings is by contrasting it with attempting significant economic and political change through a carbon-emissions trading scheme, or a carbon tax. A small turning could be a commitment to use plastic bags or by installing solar panels in your home. A small turning would also be a move towards a more plant-based diet, which we will discuss in a moment. A further example would be to consider making a financial commitment to World Vision or another worthwhile project, as against attempting to create a charity or social enterprise.

One of the challenges for those who live in wealthy areas or countries is being removed from the more obvious forms of suffering that many face. Peter Rollins reminds us that what we believe is often demonstrated by what we do with our time and money. A good way to bring about change is to give to important projects that seek to create a more just and ecologically sustainable society. The critique of giving money is often that it seeks to assuage guilt and helps us avoid getting our hands dirty in the day-to-day task of creating change. This is, of course, potentially true and is certainly a worthwhile question for

self-examination. Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot* reminds us, though, that we should resist not doing the right thing simply as a result of mixed motives [19]. Avoiding doing something out of guilt due to mixed motives should not stop us making a choice to do the right thing.

Care should be taken, though, in the more dangerous proposition of thinking that giving away money or participating in communal change can excuse us from challenging the political and structural systems that affect our lives and the lives of others. One needs to be aware of the personal benefit that can accrue at the expense of others who are victims at a more systemic level and think that generosity to others excuses one from actions to bring about change [20]. Systemic issues need to be confronted. With the concept of small turnings now in mind, we turn to the idea of embodied ethics, demonstrated in the acronym SHE.

7. Embodied Ethics

Our bodies are fragile but also incredibly resilient, and as the Celtic mystic John O'Donahue [21] reminds us, it is our only home in the universe³. Our various organs and their interconnections are themselves a form of community and society. Often what happens to our bodies is out of our control, as when cancer strikes randomly, or when our genetic inheritance works against us. However, growing research is indicating how cancer and other diseases are the results of environmental pollution and degradation, eating habits [22], and even stress⁴. Before my diagnosis with cancer, family members had challenged me to eat healthier. I would reply with the oft-repeated refrain around increased life expectancy and advancing health care. Following colon cancer, I delved deeply into the current medical research on the role of diet in preventing the recurrence rates of colon cancer. Change in diet was a desperate attempt to live longer to enable me to be around as my kids grew up. Following the perfect diet (if such a thing exists) cannot prevent the recurrence of cancer for everyone, but the statistics are informative in noting the effect of diet on cancer, along with its potential recurrence [24].

Aside from the above survival benefits of eating well, and as John O'Donahue reminded us earlier, our body is the only home we have in the universe. To participate to the best of one's ability in God's dream for the world, we can attempt to make sure our bodies are as healthy as possible, for as long a time as we can. We have been the beneficiary of 13.8 billion years of evolution, in which millions of life forms have lived and died. This should inspire gratitude. Ultimately, though, looking after your body to avoid suffering and being sick is surely beneficial enough.

However, there is something deeper at play when one begins to think that the change we can bring about in our diet, and the way we think about that, might also bring about change in ourselves and the world around us. By actualizing certain values in our dietary choices, we can embrace an embodied ethic for the benefit of the world.

The acronym that I use for an embodied ethic is called SHE (Sustainability, Health, and Ethics). I argue that by choosing to eat sustainably, healthily, and ethically, we not only change ourselves, but we can change the world. In a very real way this takes seriously the interconnectedness and relational aspect of reality that process theology articulates, we are all connected in this adventure called life and responsible for its future direction. Our religious traditions can speak directly into a better future for our planet. By taking a SHE approach to food, we can participate directly in a different outcome to the one we are currently facing. It is literally an ethic that can be embodied.

8. Sustainability

As a human species, eating meat is considered to be the norm. Not eating meat seems difficult for many to even consider. The following argument contends that at a bare minimum, we should reject eating meat that is not sustainably farmed and not good for the planet or at least reduce our meat intake substantially. The beef industry contributes to around 30% of the carbon emissions that are driving climate change. This is a result of many factors, from the energy used to grow the food for cows to eat to the transport and

logistics involved in the industry. As our population swells to over 10 billion in the next few years, we cannot afford to feed the whole planet on a meat-based diet [25]. Statistics have also shown that the amount of calories you can generate from a plant-based diet, as against a meat-based one, is not remotely comparable [26]. If it is an important value that we can feed those that are the least fortunate among us, then the question of efficient and sustainable use of our land is crucial. By reducing our meat intake, we can participate in actualizing values for a more just and sustainable world at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. This is truly an embodied ethic. It presents an opportunity to change the world through a small turning by embracing an ethic of sustainability simply through what we eat.

Aside from addressing climate change through diet, we have the opportunity to reduce our reliance on carbon in our own homes. One of the ways we can do this is by installing solar energy in our homes where possible. Again, this seems like a small turning, but small collective acts can begin to make a difference. Installing solar in your home or work is a way to participate in God's dream for the world. When the issues often seem bewildering, and it is hard to figure out the way forward, it is often good to embrace small turnings. Getting back to the question of meat, we can by reducing our meat intake attempt to embody our ethics. Both may come at a personal and social cost. Often family and friends find it difficult to understand why you are moving towards a plant-based diet.

9. Health

This brings us to the second part of the acronym of SHE. As a human being, which diet is best for a healthy life? Today there is enormous debate regarding diet, in what we could almost describe as the "diet wars". Many criticize society's fixation on health and the so-called "health industry". Without wanting to downplay some of the negative features of this focus on health and youth, I remain convinced that health remains important for both our mental and physical well-being. Simply because many people are negatively fixated on health does not mean focusing on health is a negative thing. In the same way that people overeating does not mean we should not eat food.

Following my operation, and during my chemotherapy, I began to look both generally and specifically at ways that I could potentially reduce the potential of a recurrence. This was prompted by my surgeon's suggestion that by simply beginning to run I could probably reduce the risk of my cancer returning. My research has borne this out and continues to do so. What the research is suggesting is that shifting to a plant-based diet, away from meat and artificial sugars, can produce a significant reduction in cancer recurrence [24]. This is particularly directed towards red meat consumption, to which the world health organization has drawn attention [22]. Studies continue to emerge showing that cancer amongst young people is on the rise. Many believe this to be diet-related. It makes sense that diets preventing the return of cancer would also prevent cancer occurring in the first place. I cannot emphasize enough the reality, though, that one could have the perfect diet and still get cancer. It is a limiting factor, not a cure-all factor.

Putting red meat through the SHE grid leads me to the conclusion that it is the right thing to reduce, if not eliminate, red meat intake. This would be so even before considering the ethics involved. The same would not apply to fish, which most studies indicate is incredibly beneficial for human health. There are, however, some deeper questions that ought to be raised about the sustainability of fishing and the ecological devastation taking place in our oceans.

What about chicken eggs? It is certainly sustainable and, although there is some debate regarding this, certainly not bad for our health. The issue of eggs, though, raises some questions that need to be explored from an ethical point of view, and the same would apply to fish.

10. Ethical Explorations

Philosopher Dan Dombrowski argues that we ought to pose the following question [27]: If there is no need for us to eat meat, is it ethically fair to kill another sentient

being simply for the pleasure of eating it? For many of us who have been raised in the meat-eating world, such a question makes us uncomfortable. Dombrowski would ask us to consider the first part of the sentence as our starting point. He believes that if there is a need to eat meat, as in the case of hunger, or even health, then it is legitimate to do so. For many of us, though, in our current contexts, we can achieve enough nutrients through a plant-based diet that is also more sustainable for the planet and healthier for our bodies. Many people draw the line differently at where sentient life is and feel comfortable eating fish. Others such as Peter Singer draw the line somewhere around crustaceans but later retracted that view [28]. Even if you feel it is ethically legitimate to kill other animals, I would urge you to consider how you do so and the kinds of suffering you feel animals are allowed to go through so that you may eat them. We know that pigs have the intelligence of a four-year-old. Recent studies have demonstrated incredibly high intelligence levels in cuttlefish, octopus, and squid [29]. Separating baby lambs from their mothers for slaughter and the emotional trauma this causes for both mother and child are real. Allowing cows and pigs to be factory-farmed has shown to generate high levels of anxiety for the animals involved. I would urge you to at least consider eating animals that have been treated well, both in terms of the environment they live in and the food they eat.

The SHE acronym can be used as a grid to evaluate which foods to eat. Is it sustainable for the planet, healthy for your body, and ethical for the animal? For myself, I have found that the beef industry and red meat consumption do not tick any of these three boxes. Whereas, in my research, eating free-range organic eggs does pass the SHE test. Fish that are sustainably farmed tick two boxes but not the ethical question around the need to kill other sentient life.

I reject the argument that simply because we have done something for most of our evolved lives that we should maintain that practice. We have changed much about our social life from our early evolutionary history and are continuing to do so. More importantly, though, the grid can become a tool for actualizing religious values for the world and thereby embracing an embodied ethic. By rejecting the cattle industry and meat consumption, we can contribute to fewer greenhouse emissions and reduce the destruction of our environment, along with freeing up land and water for more efficient production of food and nutrients for the world's poor. By looking after our health we can, as John O'Donahue reminded us, affirm our body as the only home we have in the universe. By looking after our bodies, we potentially allow a longer time on this planet to experience and explore its richness, while allowing more time on the planet to help participate in building a better world. By taking ethics seriously, we affirm all aspects of life and the place of our fellow creatures in it. Although we might not fully be able to reduce the suffering for all animals, we can surely cherish the fact that their mental and emotional suffering is being reduced in the way we treat them. It is important to reflect on the fact that as our science continues to develop, more studies affirm a growing awareness of intelligence and emotional complexity in animals. This applies not only to mammals but to birds and cephalopods alike.

11. Conclusions

Our current planetary emergency concerning climate change is real. The negative effects will hit the poorer populations around the world the hardest. Human-driven climate change will result in widespread ecological devastation and species extinction. Certain aspects of the Christian tradition have led to a withdrawal from engaging with the pressing social and ecological problems of our time. A process theological perspective, as a specific expression of the Christian faith, encourages responsive engagement with the world. Sustained engagement that taps into the important resources of the Christian tradition advocates for small turnings as a conceptual frame for activating such an engagement. The SHE acronym is consistent with the concept of small turnings that can have a big impact. By examining what we eat through the lens of SHE (Sustainability, Health, and Ethics), we can engage an embodied ethic that addresses questions of sustainability, health, and ethics

from an ecological perspective. It is a small turn but a turn nonetheless, giving expression to Christian religious values in a practical, embodied, and engaged manner.

The Christian worldview is not monolithic. It captures the historical development of over 2000 years of the church and its engagement with its context. The diversity in its history is not dissimilar to its diversity across denominations and cultures today. Migliore argued that the Christian tradition has a checkered history, one in which it has been accused of creating our current ecological devastation through its doctrinal formulations and its practices [30]. As this paper has demonstrated, there are positive contributions that Christian ecological thought and theology have offered and can still offer. The SHE acronym is proposed as one such contribution from a process theological perspective. One that seeks to take the environmental crisis seriously through embodied action.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ See Clark Pinnock et al. “The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God” as an example of this [5].
- ² The classic text *A Theology of Liberation* by Gustavo Gutierrez is an example of the impact the more liberatory aspects of the Christian tradition can have, his “preferential option for the poor” becoming one of the central tenants of Latin American liberation theology [14].
- ³ Many Christians believe that they will have another body (whether physical or spiritual) in the life to come. O’Donahue’s point is not to deny this but to emphasize the value of importance of our current body. We literally cannot be anywhere else at this moment.
- ⁴ Although the role of stress in the cause of cancer has been noted to be unclear, its role in preventing a recurrence is less unclear [23].

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