

SURVIVING AS A FORM OF LIFE ('Lebensform')

Ethics of care as a critique on the ideal of the successful life

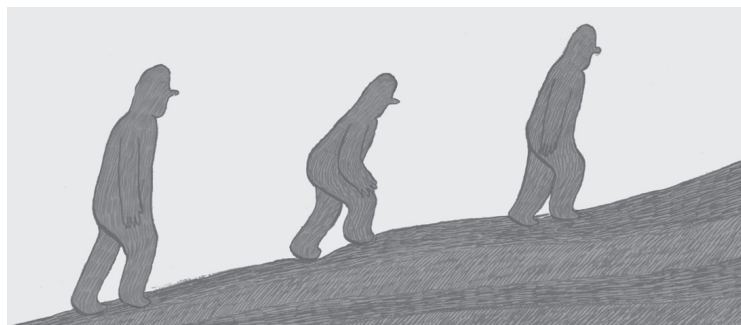
Brief summary of the valedictory lecture by prof. dr. Frans Vosman, University of Humanistic Studies, Utrecht, the Netherlands (June 15, 2018)

This valedictory lecture is all about survivors. The purpose is to draw attention to the cultural class of survivors in care ethical thinking, and to look at this class through a phenomenological lens. That is: to understand how life presents itself to survivors. In doing so, Frans Vosman is making an effort to 'unveil' what surviving means, and removes any existing romantic connotations of surviving. The lecture sets off with a vignette in which he describes his acquaintance with an old Berlin woman. He is surviving cancer, she lost her husband in World War 2 and is trying to make ends meet in the broadest sense ever since. This vignette, and the way it is written down, might also be an attempt to 'de-romanticize' the survivor: surviving is not an heroic process, resulting in a better life, or new insights or whatever positive outcomes heroes might achieve. Surviving is messy, contingent, with no definitive outcome, let alone a positive one.

Frans Vosman discusses the structure of surviving, answering the question: what is surviving? Who can be considered to be a survivor? He distinguishes a twofold meaning of surviving: (1) surviving as an inherent *element of life*, which is present in all human lives, even 'successful' ones and (2) surviving as a way of life, which is reality for those who are generally considered to be 'vulnerable' (e.g. the sick, the disabled, the working class etc.). He suggests to call this a cultural class of survivors and for them, surviving is a form of life.

Furthermore, to describe this life form of surviving, it is necessary to take account of systemic and policy driven influences. To put it more precisely: the *gestalt* of surviving can only be grasped by meticulously studying surviving practices, while at the same time studying the systemic context and the concepts, ideologies and discourse which are in use as they will be visible in the way life presents itself for survivors, and hence in the self-definition and language of survivors. In social policy surviving, 'arduous life' as Ricoeur would have it, is alienated by rendering it in 'plastic language' (Gronemeyer & Jurk): the 'arduous' becomes 'resilience'.

Several aspects of surviving as a form of life are discerned. Surviving is about keeping up with those aspects of life that did not succeed, dreams that did not come true, aspirations which weren't realized (Frans Vosman explicitly does not speak of 'failed lives'; failure is something different from 'not succeeding'). Surviving as a life form is not merely related to overcoming specific events or setbacks - rather it is life itself which needs to be 'survived'; which needs to be lived throughout deceptions, difficulties, messiness. The image below is used to illustrate that surviving is about dealing with a certain *steepness* which is an inextricable element of the life of survivors.



This steepness is also *slippery*, that is: it does not offer any grip and survivors are continuously balancing, though falling is inevitable and surviving means one has to keep dealing with the steepness, even when fallen down. A final characteristic of survivors is that they share a *sense of community*: they recognize other survivors and consider themselves to be a 'we'.

This surviving life form is embedded in a playing field which is defined by four fields of tension:

- 1) The first field of tension is about *endurance and steepness*. Vosman refers to Merleau-Ponty and Waldenfels to explain how life precedes people and continues after they are gone. Survivors realize that they are not merely agents, that the steepness in their life is partly out of their control. Surviving is trying to make the best out of it, while at the same time realizing that life is not fully in your own hands (contrary to what some people might make you believe, e.g. bullet 4).
- 2) *Perseverance of ordinary life*. The steepness of life can never be escaped or surmounted. Consequently, surviving is not about conquering setbacks nor is it about revolting against oppression (hence the de-romanticizing), instead, it is about resisting those 'grand narratives' of revolt, oppression and the good, thriving life, meanwhile placing just one foot after another, persevering in ordinary life and dealing with its steepness. Here we see how modern ideals of self-care and self-determination are in contrast with the actual lives of survivors: they are merely trying to stay up.
- 3) *Irreversibility and the capability to be surprised*. The steepness and slipperiness of life inevitably leads to falling, sometimes things go wrong in life. It is an ordeal to be open to new possibilities which may present itself in life. Surviving is accepting the irreversibility of life while keeping the ability to be surprised (pleasantly or unpleasantly) by what is yet to come.
- 4) *Fictional accounts of the good life*. Life goes on, which does not necessarily mean that it 'goes up', life is not a 'yellow brick road' towards the destination of the good life. There are side paths, and sometimes one goes downhill again. Irrespective of the discomfort or joy that goes with it, these unexpected turns and roads are not mere distractions from the yellow brick road which leads to the good life and self-realization. Surviving means living with the knowledge that the pursuit of a good life does not provide meaning (not even in hindsight) to current life.

Frans Vosman explains, with help of the ideas of Rahel Jaeggi, how surviving, understood in this specific way, is a form of life (*Lebensform*). The characteristics of a *Lebensform* coincide with the characteristics of surviving (e.g. both are practices, both are at the same time predefined and enacted, but above all, both deal with an issue by finding a way to endure and live it. The 'issue' of surviving is to stay upright when confronted with slippery steepness, and the life form of surviving makes it possible to bear this and keep up with tensions).

However, dominant cultural classes feel contempt for survivors/the cultural class of survivors. Frans Vosman cites Adorno and speaks of the 'bürgerliche Kälte' to characterize the attitude of dominant class towards survivors. Also, he criticizes some basic humanistic as well as care ethical assumptions with regard to the cultural class of survivors.

With regard to the first, hegemonic ideals of the good life and self-actualization are applied to the cultural class of survivors. Obviously, these ideals have nothing to do with the ordinary, daily making ends meet of the Berlin lady. Her survival is a way of life, in which self-actualization is the least of her worries. These humanistic ideals therefore lead to a misunderstanding of the meaning of 'survival'

(Frans Vosman calls this an epistemic threat of survivors), but ethically speaking it also causes misrecognition.

The ethics of care should take the cultural class of survivors seriously, as well as the 'bürgerliche Kälte' towards these citizens, as it helps to get around the subtle hegemony of one class over the other without formulating new, improved (that is: a 'true') anthropology. However, this project has not succeeded yet:

- 1) Although ethics of care originated as a critique on universalistic/rationalistic claims in ethics, putting gender, race and class on the agenda, the issue of cultural classes was lost out of sight.
- 2) In spite of the critique on universalistic/rationalistic thinking, the ethics of care still lingers on the 'higher ground' of ethical theory, making anthropological and ontological assumptions about the inherent vulnerability and caring nature of human beings, where in fact, these assumptions are mostly ideologically and theoretically grounded. Thus, in some sense, these ideas about human vulnerability and the care that is necessary to address this vulnerability also misrepresent the lives of survivors. Consequently, ethics of care should take practices as a departure point for thinking and should really be grounded in the practices of survivors.

This is obviously the background for this lecture, and the reason for looking at survivors using a phenomenological lens and the concept of Lebensform.

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