

FRANS VOSMAN

Surviving as a Form of Life

The Ethics of Care as a Critique
of the Ideal of the Successful Life



WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY PER NORTVEDT

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CONTENTS

Preface	7
Surviving, a struggle to live and a struggle for life – an introduction	9
Surviving as a form of life	15
A vignette	15
Introduction: types of survivors and what is or is not dealt with	17
1 The ethics of care and the idea of surviving	20
1.1 The start of the inquiry	21
1.2 Perception of surviving	23
2 Survivors	30
Contrast I: Form of life, not double-decker anthropology	34
3 Thinking in tensions	37
3.1 A first tension: between passibility and steepness	38
3.2 A second tension: the everyday	39
Contrast II: Normativity first?	42
3.3 A third tension: irreversibility and irony	44
3.4 A fourth tension: survival and the life never-lived	45
3.5 A summary of four tensions	48
4 A cultural class and its ‘bourgeois coldness’	48
4.1 Cultural class	48
4.2 Bourgeois coldness	50
4.3 Significance for the ethics of care	52
5 Surviving as a form of life	53
Contrast III: The ideal of self-development as epistemic practice	57
Conclusion: A glance forward	60

	Literature	61
	Frans Vosman's English bibliography	72
1	Edited Volumes	72
2	Book Chapters	72
3	Papers	74
4	Translated Dutch papers and lectures	77
	Frans Vosman's academic career	78

PREFACE

Guus Timmerman, Sabrina Keinemans and Henk den Uijl

May 2023

Frans Vosman passed away on June 10, 2020. He left us a legacy that was far from finished. One of the last full texts he composed was his valedictory lecture as Professor of Care Ethics at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht in 2018. Like many of his texts, it is both very enlightening and somewhat enigmatic. Certain passages may inspire us by the important insights he proposes, but at the same time make us wonder what exactly he is telling us. It raises questions about how to evaluate survival as a life form, and to what extent his own situation was reflected in the text. His farewell speech perhaps reflects more of who he was, to others and perhaps to himself, than he himself would have acknowledged.

The text certainly reflects an important theme in Frans Vosman's life: he was attracted to the lives of survivors, and he was a survivor himself. Surviving and being a survivor can mean two things: outliving a threat and succeeding in living under threat. Ultimately, Vosman did not survive the cancer that had threatened his life for years. In that sense he was not a survivor. But he survived his expulsion from moral theology: he became an internationally respected care ethicist. Vosman was also a survivor in the second sense of the word. He continued living under the menace that besets gay people in a world and a church ruled by heteronormativity. And he continued working in an academic environment that did not give him the recognition he deserved. He shared his attraction to the lives of survivors in this second sense with his own mentor, Theo Beemer, who died on May 5, 2003, and who, like Vosman, regarded these lives as the litmus test of his thinking and teaching.

In this book, we present an English translation of Vosman's valedictory lecture, as an invitation to others to join us in working with the ideas and suggestions that he proposes. We believe more study of the life form of survival is needed, especially of the life of those groups of survivors who cannot be helped by any simple intervention or specific policy. We think we need to understand their lives so that we can stay near to them. More broadly, it is helpful to understand survival, as a fundamental aspect of life and of the living together of people. It is important also that survivors are not represented as helpless or passive, or merely as undergoing their circumstances. Vosman's suggestion to conceptualize their lives as a life form is useful. The lecture is a starting point, full of intellectual branches and detours, but also deeply empathic to survivors. Vosman invites us to read further, to look more closely at what is at stake in their lives or, as he suggests, in their form of life.

We thank the University of Humanistic Studies, and in particular the dean, Prof. Joke van Saane, and the current head of the Department of Care Ethics, Prof. Carlo Leget, for their permission to publish the English translation of Frans Vosman's valedictory lecture. We thank the *Critical Ethics of Care* Foundation for funding the translation, editing and publication of this text, Madzy Dekema and Richard Brons for their translation, and Brian Heffernan for his editing of the texts. We also thank Netty van Haarlem for her permission to use the illustration of survival she made for Vosman's valedictory lecture, and Per Nortvedt for his introduction.

SURVIVING, A STRUGGLE TO LIVE AND A STRUGGLE FOR LIFE – AN INTRODUCTION

Per Nortvedt

May 2023

Frans Vosman, whose acquaintance I made in early 2000, was a very kind and humble man. He was a man sincerely dedicated to phenomenology, sociology and the ethics of care. I met him at seminars in Tilburg and Stuttgart in the first decade of the twenty-first century, as we were both occupied with normative questions pertaining to philosophical phenomenology and care ethics. Frans was more interested in the sociological and political questions of the philosophies of care, I was more attracted to metaethical problems and metaphysical questions on the borders between theology and philosophy. Our common interests, however, resulted in our joint editorship of a special section on new theoretical and empirical perspectives in care ethics, published in *Nursing Ethics* (Nortvedt & Vosman, 2014). The idea underlying this volume was the need to anchor theoretical work on care ethics more firmly in empirical realities and in the many facets of clinical health care work. The other aim of this special section was to address some unsolved normative challenges that care ethics faces. These challenges concern its claimed relational ontology and what that really amounts to when it comes to ethical judgments between right and wrong and between impartial and partial considerations in ethics.

By early 2017, Frans and I were working to realize our longstanding desideratum of bringing philosophical phenomenology and care ethics into closer contact with each other. Thanks in large part to Frans and his relations with Peeters Publishers, our collaboration on this project resulted in the book ‘Care Ethics and Phenomenology’ published shortly after Frans’s death (Vosman & Nortvedt, 2020). Frans was at that time too sick to write his own contribution to the book and he died in June of the same year. As I read the commemorations of Frans’s life and work after his death,¹ it became so apparent to me that he was a survivor who did not survive. He wanted to live to continue his much-cherished work on care ethics, and he fought to survive within the arduous, changing academic life in the Netherlands. He established what is, as far as I know, the first and only department of care ethics in Europe. That is indeed a huge accomplishment.

In 2018, Frans delivered a valedictory lecture at the University of Humanistic Studies on ‘Surviving as a Form of Life: The Ethics of Care as a Critique of the Ideal of the Successful Life’. This speech is presented here in English translation by the Critical Ethics of Care Foundation. It deals with the phenomenon of survival in its many facets and forms, philosophical, political, sociological as well as anthropological. The text is enormously rich in its perspectives, covers insights that are central to life itself and engages with many prominent researchers and philosophers of our time. It gravitates around the two most central ideas in Frans’s later work and life: what it is to care and to think about caring in a more systematic, academic way, and what survival means as a pivotal part of the human condition.

In the text, Frans Vosman is eager to defend care ethics both as a political, an epistemological and an empirical endeavour. He strongly defends the value of doing empirical research on care, and not only seeing it as a particular philosophy. However, the lecture’s most

1 Especially, <https://ethicsofcare.org/frans-vosman-1952-2020-a-concise-sketch-of-his-life-and-work/>.

original contribution is how it links the phenomenon of survival in its diversity with an ethics of care, and how it connects the sociology of survival with politics in many of its modern forms. And survival, in Vosman's words, is an endeavor, an arduous experience and a struggle to cope with the challenges in life. The text gravitates around three essential contrasts, which again delineate four tensions of surviving: the tension between *passibility and steepness*, the tension of *the everyday*, the tension between *irreversibility and irony* and the tension between *survival and the life never-lived*.

Frans makes an interesting claim when he evokes the phenomenological concept of passivity to explain and contrast it with a concept of passibility or *passibilité* as part of Ricoeur's idea of the *conatus essendi*. Passivity is also central to the Husserlian phenomenology of time, as Husserl understands the origin of consciousness as lying in the primal expression and in the temporal sequence of retention of the immediate present and protention, in which each moment of protention becomes the retention of the next. The idea of passivity is even more central in the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas, specifically in his understanding of ethical sensibility and of how consciousness and the subject are awakened in responsibility for the Other. But Vosman's essay is not about the awakening of consciousness and care for the other person. Rather, *passibility* captures how life is a struggle and an endurance in which survival means going up the steepness again and again. Survival is Sisyphean. In Frans's words on page 42: '[t]he survivor does nothing other than to make an effort to stay afloat and keep this ship from sinking'.

Leading up to the second contrast about normativity, Frans criticizes Mill's idea of freedom and Kantian autonomy as well as Joan Tronto's idea of humans as caring animals, and he replaces these with an ambiguous normativity. His normativity is not about responsiveness and self-expression, but is a normativity that pictures the realities of life, the ambiguities, *the not yet, the both this and that*; it exists 'not in any ideal that sets a norm for lived reality', as Frans himself argues (p. 43).

It is clear at this point that Vosman rejects normativity and an idealized conception of lived reality. Survival is a continuous ordeal, a struggle, involving the destabilization of “not yet”, or “not, yet again” (p. 44). In the fourth tension, that between *survival and the life never-lived*, the project of picturing survival as a critique of the ideal of a successful life, of a happy life, of a life in which one’s goals are achieved, becomes more and more apparent. Vosman is as critical of an idealized notion of life as he is of an idealized notion of care. Survival is struggle in all its forms, social, interpersonal, relational and political. It is never at peace with itself.

The last section of the paper further develops this reluctance to find any definite answers to the questions as to what the good life is and what good care is. He claims on p. 55 that ‘it is important for the ethics of care to go beyond the “constraining distinctions between “ethics” vs. “morality” or “the good life” vs. “moral principles” or “the right” vs. “the good”’. Again, he argues that survival, ultimately, is a form of life with no definite aim, no direction, no normative guidance. We stand alone in carving out the messiness that life is and that it creates. ‘A form of life is not about a problem with a solution, but about a way to move forward with the problem’ (p. 55). There are no easy solutions here.

Moreover, Vosman does not make things easy for the reader, as his text is rich in insights and at times dense and ambiguous. Nor does he give much hope to those of us who long for solutions, for guidance, for peace. Rather, survival, like life itself, means enduring, means to ‘keep standing or to get up again in the face of steepness and slipperiness’ (p. 56).

Finally, he introduces sensibility, a concept that is central both to moral phenomenology, pace Husserl and Levinas, and to modern care ethics. He describes sensibility as vulnerability, as apprehension, and as responsiveness to what matters to you, in coping with pain, struggling to sleep, ‘small things or everyday moments’ (p. 56).

The fourth contrast he sets up is that between survival and self-realization. Again, what he says, both in relation to the human condition and to care ethics, is rather nihilistic, dystopian. There does not seem to be any ultimate value, there are no ultimate ideas that can ever be realized, there will always be ambiguity in the ideal, as he says, 'such as the built-in impossibility of the ideal' (p. 59).

It became increasingly clear to me reading this text that Frans had moved away from any fixed normative ideal in his later years, and also how far removed from traditional care ethics he had really become. Care ethics paints a picture of something in life that is worth pursuing, and it treasures the value and significance of relationships and attachment to others. Care ethics at its best regards survival as possible, but on the condition that we belong to someone, matter to somebody, care for the culture and the community to which we belong. In care there is hope and there are some inescapable values that matter and that matter most. But this is not the picture of care ethics that this text paints.

The title of Frans Vosman's lecture is 'Surviving as a Form of Life', with the subtitle: 'The Ethics of Care as a Critique of the Ideal of the Successful Life'. Indeed, this text shows that such an ideal is unattainable, and that survival is impossible work, is steepness, is to constantly fall back, as Frans says many times in the text. However, the question is whether an ethics of care with its ideals and normative framework can be accommodated within such a picture of the non-idealized philosophy of existence that Frans gives us here. I think it cannot. And to speculate, one must wonder how much this text is coloured by his own suffering and his struggle for survival in the last years of his life after the return of his cancer in 2015. It is difficult to understand the text without considering his own predicament and the shadows that the disease cast over his existence in the last years he had to live.

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SURVIVING AS A FORM OF LIFE

The ethics of care as a critique of the ideal of the successful life

Frans Vosman

June 2018

A vignette

In the midsummer of 2015, I went to Berlin. I had asked the radiologist whether, after the chemo and radiation therapy, I could take a trip to this city that is so familiar to me. My very young-looking doctor said, 'Yes, you do that, Mr. Vosman, it won't do any harm. But mind, don't go beyond your limits, don't even go near your limits, stay well within them'. This specimen of the kind of applied social technology that doctors learn during their training made perfect sense to me. But maybe it wasn't so smart after all, wanting to be in Berlin. As it turned out, I had to plan my way from toilet to toilet, because that's what happens to your bowels if you have chemo: I had to take a dump all the time.

That is how I met her, in the small neighborhood supermarket. I was standing by the shelf with the toilet paper and she was there too, with her walker. 'Do you know where to find the four-ply paper?' That's how I got talking to the old lady; she helped me out. Later it turned out her name was Hilde. But we always stuck to the formal Sie. The next day, I saw her walking with her rollator one street away and I

asked if she wanted to have a drink together on the corner at the Iraqi place, beneath the linden trees. Hilde was then 91 years old, a woman beautiful in her old age. She had been a widow for a very long time. Her husband, an *Elektroschlosser* or electrician, had spent a long time in captivity in a Russian prisoner of war camp after the war. He came back a wreck, and he died at a young age, in the late fifties. Hilde lived on, childless, though she would have wished differently. She became a shop assistant in a clothing store, and also did alterations: shorter trouser legs, wider waists.

Nearly everyone she loved had now died. That is the way things are, at a very old age, you become a survivor, willy-nilly. Hilde has two girlfriends, also of an advanced age. They live relatively close by, until of course you realize that even with a rollator, it isn't that close at all. And then, in addition to the two very old girlfriends, there is a grandnephew, Markus. Markus lives in Brandenburg, where Hilde was born and where she took refuge during the war. He is a young man who works as a telecom mechanic in the metropolis, of plump build, always dressed in blue overalls. He is a natural at making contact: he stands right in front of you, looks you in the eye and says what he's got to say. Markus keeps an eye on his great-aunt and brings her things: flowers from his garden, potatoes, mineral water. He peels apples for her and cuts them into small pieces.

In later years, I often saw Hilde again, each time a little older of course, and a little more bent, but always vibrant as ever. 'I live in my little cell, my small world', she tells me at some point. This cell is not just the one-room apartment in a high-rise built on bombed-out land in Berlin Schöneberg, West Berlin, in the early sixties. This cell, it also means the very few people she still sees, her small world. She lives with whoever and whatever presents itself now. Three loudly conversing ICT people present themselves, youngsters from India, the young representatives of the creative industry in Berlin, who spend hours at night sitting on the tiny balcony right above her little home. After having lived in Berlin for three years, they still don't speak a word of German and Hilde doesn't speak English. Due to an administrative

error, Hilde's tiny pension skips a month; a minor catastrophe. Hilde regularly talks to the kind lady in the little supermarket, who has a thoughtful word for everyone, including for Hilde, but who always appears stressed by the effort to keep the little shop afloat against the forces of the big chains. '*Es kommt alles wie es halt kommt*' [Everything simply happens the way it happens], Hilde once told me. Hilde lives with the difficulties that are inherent to life. She never concerned herself with self-fulfillment, or with the meaning of life. She has more urgent things to deal with: surviving whatever comes her way.

You will understand why she and I got along: she, a bare survivor of the war and its dead, I, a survivor of a different kind, with a silent cancer within me and my cheerful rock, the doctor, in the background.

Introduction: types of survivors and what is or is not dealt with

The meaning of surviving is not adequately covered by 'burdensome old age' and 'insecure and very ill'. For one, the members of a Syrian family that has been living for six years in a refugee camp in Lebanon, as EU payments are cut and they have to live on even less, are also survivors in their own way. They are the survivors of war and political despair. Then there are the survivors of abuse and rape, women and, to a lesser extent, men; some of them may be among us today. There are the survivors of the camps. And there are many more people and groups that are called survivors, both in scholarly literature and in ordinary speech. Abraham Lincoln called them 'sons of toil'; toiling daughters got the short end of the stick.²

2 Editors' Note: the expression 'sons of toil' was used in relation to President Abraham Lincoln. On May 4, 1865, in the funeral address delivered at Lincoln's burial, the Rev. Matthew Simpson, bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, said of Lincoln: 'His early life, with its varied struggles, joined him indissolubly to the working masses, and no elevation in society diminished his respect for the sons of toil. He knew what it was to fell the tall trees of the forest and to stem the current of the broad Mississippi',

I myself would like to speak of survivors first of all in relation to people or groups of people who have gone through stressful life events and have been subjected to systemic influences. Joined together, these influences determine the lived lives of people. These are people who try to stay alive by yielding and by acting. Survivors put energy into sustaining or enduring and into ‘carrying on’, as I will call this here. *Dur doen*, to carry on in the dialect of the Dutch province of Brabant, more or less means: to keep going, no matter what happens. Survivors are endurers.

Yet when I speak of ‘people or groups of people’, the question quite rightly arises straight away whether, morally speaking, the denominator of survivor can in fact yield a proper categorial set. To give one example, the Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte has been called a survivor, thanks to his ‘Teflon factor’. Does this mean that slickness and versatility are part of survival? And to give another, there are clans and families that are very good at surviving and persevering, but who do this by leading a life of crime. Think of the recent movie *A Ciambra* by the director Jonas Carpignano, in which a family of Roma survives in Calabria. They define themselves by the slogan ‘surviving together – whatever it takes’. They take this very literally, because to save their own skins, they are willing to betray the African refugees, who in their eyes are even lower down the ladder than they themselves are, to the *carabinieri*, their enemies, even though the refugees are bare survivors just like they are.³ Are these kinds of survivors also part of the category? I will get back to this.

<https://lincoln.digitalscholarship.emory.edu/simpson-001/>. On April 14, 1876, in his ‘Oration in Memory of Abraham Lincoln’, delivered at the unveiling of the Freedmen’s Monument in Lincoln Park, Washington, D.C., Frederick Douglas, an African-American social reformer, abolitionist, orator, writer, and statesman, said of Lincoln: ‘A son of toil himself, he was linked in brotherly sympathy with the sons of toil in every loyal part of the Republic’. (<https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/oration-in-memory-of-abraham-lincoln/>).

3 <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt6802896/>.

I will not discuss here the surviving that nations and cultures do. From a democratic perspective, this is an equally important subject, but one I will have to leave aside here.

My purpose in this valedictory lecture is to describe, with the aid of insights from the ethics of care but also from phenomenology and social theory, (1) who and what survivors are. I do this on the one hand because there is structure to surviving, but on the other because the concept of survival must not be defined too widely; it must not be given a kind of romantic spin. This is what happens when the idea of surviving indiscriminately takes its cue from Romanticism and becomes what is in effect a naive version of itself. My proposition is not about any covert appeal to Romanticism, with its horizon of fatefulness and melancholy;⁴ instead I wish (2) to show that surviving is a form of life, with a strength and a misery all its own, with *Glanz und Elend*, and in doing so, I draw on Rahel Jaeggi's ideas about what constitutes a form of life. My purpose is also (3) to show how the ideas of self-development and a successful life are not only tied to a certain cultural class, but are also hegemonically applied to another cultural class, that of the survivors. Well-intentioned policies that are driven by these ideals can be, to frame it ethically, a form of humiliation. But they could also be called, in a term coined by the American phenomenologist Lewis Gordon, an epistemic practice, which forces people out of their own position, because their knowledge, their *savoir-vivre*, is denied.⁵ Despite the good intentions, it is tantamount to humiliation and a denial of phenomenality, that is, of how life presents itself to a large group of people. My proposition ultimately is (4) to consider expanding surviving as a form of life from a large, more or less clearly outlined group to all who decisively face the reality that they are leading a *life*

4 Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*, 2017, 285-289 | *The Society of Singularities*, 2020, 207-210, shows how Romanticism and bourgeois values have entered a paradoxical but rigorous relationship with each other: 'successful self-actualization'.

5 Gordon, *Die Realität zuliebe*, 2014, 244-267.

never lived. The German doctor and phenomenologist Thomas Fuchs has called this: leading an ‘unlived life’.⁶

Ultimately, I am speaking of survivors in a double sense, and both are versions of a *political* nature. First of all, I envision a neglected *class* of survivors, but I also mean a dimension in the lives of many people in other cultural classes, of people who do not live in difficult conditions, and who are adherents of the all-encompassing idea of development and resilience. They belong to a cultural class that is oriented towards self-development and resilience. They live this and they believe, they *belong and believe*. But even such believers have to face that which was not achieved, that which did not succeed, that which was dreamt and dreamt away in their lives and in the lives of those to whom they are connected: the partner who turned out to be different from expected, whereas it proved impossible to give up the expectation, the career that did not go forward or the freedom that did not materialize.

On three points along the way, I will pause for a moment to contrast the thoughts I am unfolding with conflicting ideas in humanistic studies and in the ethics of care. Some may regard this exercise of contrasting as an unwelcome delay. My advice to them is simply to skip those parts.

1 The ethics of care and the idea of surviving

I will first discuss (1.1) what the ethics of care can do to start acknowledging and investigating surviving. To this end, I will first

6 Fuchs, *Psychopathologie der subjektiven und intersubjektiven Zeitlichkeit*, 2014. Editor’s Note: In Fuchs, *Das ungelebte Leben*, 2012, ‘unlived life’ designates the ‘perceived discrepancy between basic wishes of life and life as it has actually been lived; it is usually connected with feelings of regret, rue, or bitterness’ (2012, 496).

place myself in the position of the researcher and give an account of what constitutes a form of life as a unit of research. Subsequently, (1.2) I will address the perception of surviving through a *Gestalt* and by inquiring into what a *Gestalt* means for the perception of policy and of survivors. In this context, I will also discuss the meaning of the three legs on which care ethics stands: political ethics, epistemology and empirical research.

1.1 The start of the inquiry

The researcher: let me place you and me here, during this lecture, in the position of researchers, that is, of a group, both curious and concerned, that is willing to look at the categorization of its own ideas. This seems appropriate to me for a valedictory lecture. Saying goodbye involves thinking together. My ultimate intention is to give the idea of survivors an accepted place in the ethics of care. For her version of care ethics, Hilde Lindemann has formulated the following object of study: ‘real-time, here-and-now morality’.⁷ In my own words I call this ‘ethos’.⁸ Giving attention to this is what can make the ethics of care interesting. When I intend to give surviving an accepted place in the ethics of care, this equally concerns the already existing ethos.

While I aspire to do this, a deep sense of amazement about the ethics of care also plays a role. *Gender, color* and *class* stood at the

7 Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go*, 2014, X.

8 Editors’ Note: Vosman’s use of ‘ethos’ has a long history. He used the term in a narrow, descriptive sense to explain his view on ethics in his monograph, *De orde van het geluk*, 1997, 16–18. He explained in his inaugural address at Tilburg University (October 24, 2008) that his view on ethics is ‘ethos-based’, referring to Meyers, *The “ethic of care” and the problem of power*, 1998, 143. He added that, in doing so, he wished to continue the line of thinking that Wolfgang Kluxen (*Ethik des Ethos*, 1974) and Vosman’s own mentor Theo Beemer had developed in different ways. The care ethicist Jeannette Pols uses ‘*intra-normativity*, a normativity that exists within practices where participants act to deliver good care’, in a similar way (Pols, *Radical relationality*, 2014, 177).

beginning of the feminist reflection on care. While *gender* has remained on the agenda, maybe *class* has somewhat disappeared from sight?⁹ Does the Dutch ethics of care relate to it at all? It is a little late in the day, but I wish to do my part to help it catch up. In my opinion, there is a need in care ethics to think about class, at least in a very specific sense: that of cultural class, and to think about the chafing that exists between one class and another. At the end of this lecture, I will take a closer look at the question what a cultural class is and why it is a necessary category of thought. For the time being I will use the term ‘cultural class’ in a global sense: a group in society that is united through shared practices around a representation of what a desirable social life means.

Form of life as a unit: the care ethicist Sandra Laugier, together with three anthropologists, among them Veena Das, has already made an important start when it comes to reflecting on difficult life, in the book *Face aux désastres*. Laugier explicitly focuses the attention of care ethics on the ‘everyday’, and she also uses the concept of form of life. In her version of form of life, she draws on Stanley Cavell and Cora Diamond and – ultimately – on Wittgenstein. Laugier describes a form of life as ‘a natural and at the same time social aggregate of expressions and of varied relations with others’.¹⁰ The core of her argument is that we must not ontologize vulnerability, but should see it as a vulnerability of a form of life, of living with others in a specific form.¹¹ I would say that a two-tier anthropology, with a separate layer of natural vulnerability beneath socially determined vulnerability, is unlikely to do any good. Care ethics would do better to focus on the entanglement of the two.

9 Editors’ Note: Vosman writes more about this in Vosman, 2020.

10 In Lovell et al., *Face aux désastres*, 2013, 168: ‘une forme de vie, au sens (postwittgensteinien) d’un agrégat à la fois naturel et social de formes d’expression et de rapports variés à autrui’.

11 Laugier, in Lovell et al., *Face aux désastres*, 2013, 172, and on what the ethics of care should do with it: 166.

I am happy, therefore, to use Laugier's insights in connection with the everyday practice of survival.

This interest in the everyday is by no means self-evident.¹² On the contrary, the historian Claudine Haroche points out that this attention has been cyclical, with ups and downs. It is precisely in emerging Modernity that a 'hatred of the ordinary' arises, that is, of the non-grand. The everyday is approached with 'coldness and indifference.'¹³ We will come across this later very poignantly, when we look at Adorno's analysis of the 'bourgeois coldness' vis-à-vis the ordinary and towards 'ordinary' people.

Despite Laugier's impetus, there is still much to do. I realize that I can here only propose part of the program that must be carried out. At the end of this reflection, I will show how far I think I have come.

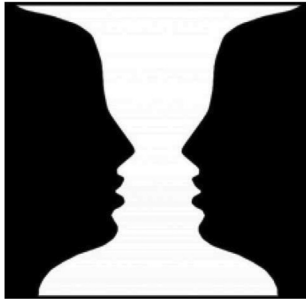
1.2 Perception of surviving

Gestalt: If you think survivors are far away, you should take the opportunity to wander around the Utrecht neighborhood of Ondiep and patiently and persistently talk to people there. The neighborhood chaplains in this city do this, and they do it in such a way that the city council supports them, perhaps because it realizes that the arms of policy are too short. The Catharijnesteeg is even closer, a day-care center for the homeless, where a few Humanistic Studies students help out as volunteers. These things bring you into contact with fellow citizens in Utrecht who have endless stories to tell (if you are prepared to be quiet yourself long enough, that is), stories characterized by

12 Jaeggi, *Kritik von Lebensformen*, 2014, 69f: 'So kann man aber auch in der Sozialtheorie seit den 1970er Jahren geradezu von einer Konjunktur des Alltagsbegriffs und der Alltagsforschung sprechen, die sich aus ganz unterschiedlichen Motiven und Quellen speist'. | *Critique of Forms of Life*, 2018, 36, note 5: 'Since the 1970s, however, the concept of the everyday and research on everyday life can also be said to have undergone a veritable boom in social theory informed by very different motives and sources'.

13 Haroche, *L'avenir du sensible*, 2008, 64: 'l'amour des grands, la haine de l'égal'.

survival. If you were to keep this up for a while, this *inquiry*¹⁴ patiently carried out very close to home would reveal to you the *Gestalt* or figure of survival, a *Gestalt* with a foreground and a background, as Edgar Rubin outlined as far back as 1915.¹⁵



You probably know the phenomenon of ‘the *Gestalt*’: first you see this figure, but when you look again, you see a different one. First you see two people facing each other. Then you see a thing, in this case Rubin’s vase, that is, a material object. The first image of the *Gestalt*, which means a recognized form, in this case a form of human living together: the life form of survival, can be lost again to the researcher in an instant. The researcher certainly looks, but sees something else: for example, poverty, precarity or another sociological category, which can, with dangerous rapidity, acquire a normative sense. Or the researcher looks with a policy category in mind and sees people who are not self-reliant in the way that is desired, people who are insufficiently self-reflexive and resilient.

14 I use the term ‘inquiry’ in a specific sense, in line with John Dewey and in the sense in which Sandra Laugier uses it for the ethics of care: Laugier, in Lovell et al., *Face aux désastres*, 2013, 172. Specifically: the researcher is involved totally, as a person, in the research, does not occupy a stand vis-à-vis an object, is no ‘data thief’ nor a ‘flaneur’ and can at most add some reflexive depth, but can never pretend to step out of the field.

15 Lidwell et al., *Universal Principles of Design*, 2010, 97.

It may even be difficult to recognize the first form again. But the gaze of the experienced researcher can become ‘multistable’, as it is called in *Gestalt* theory: it is possible to see two different forms alternately, and even *at the same time* – contrary to what Carol Gilligan¹⁶, a care ethicist of the first hour, thought.¹⁷ The same goes for studying the life form of survival. The researcher begins to see the *Gestalt* in a multistable manner. At first glance, the researcher sees survival, but he or she at the same time also sees the annex form, for example what happens in the neoliberal gaze that is aimed at internalizing preferred situations. The researcher then sees resilience, buoyancy or the ability to cope, in other words: psychological categories, which, incidentally, are often deployed in a political, policy-oriented way far beyond their actual purport.

The intention of my proposal to look at ‘survival as a form of life’ is *not* to eliminate this second gaze. I *do* want to explain what happens when the first gaze (seeing survival) oscillates with the second, with the gaze that psychologizes and wants citizens to internalize social relations. This is the gaze that locates in the inner life of the citizen what is actually material and systemic in nature. It is a gaze that can quickly become hegemonic.

Noticing policy that has been ‘swallowed’: as reported in his book *Das unternehmerische Selbst* (‘The Entrepreneurial Self’), the German sociologist Ulrich Bröckling has shown in his research that this hegemonic gaze is not just ‘a gaze’, but that it gets under the skin both of the viewer and of the person observed. The hegemonic gaze has an appellative and prescriptive effect. It is a gaze that propels people towards taking a direction. In this context, Bröckling uses the term ‘real fiction’ (*Realfiktion*): policymakers design the fiction of an attractive reality, that of being ‘independent and self-realizing’. It is

16 Gilligan, *Moral Orientation and Moral Development*, 1987, 19–20, 30.

17 Don Ihde is one scholar who has elaborated on this, see Zwier et al., *Phenomenology and the Empirical Turn*, 2016.

a fiction that conceals the reality of lived life, but it has a magnetic effect. This kind of fiction pulls.¹⁸

On a more practical level, that of care and welfare professionals, the physician Reimer Gronemeyer and the psychotherapist Charlotte Jurk speak of an ‘increasingly abstract, cold and leveling language’, a newspeak that has penetrated all care organizations, ‘plastic language’.¹⁹ ‘Plastic’ not only refers to the artificiality of language, as in ‘tailor-made care’, jargon that citizens are supposed to adopt so they can competently formulate their ‘care needs’. ‘Plastic’ also refers to concealing and insulating, like plastic foil does with vegetables: insulating lived lives together with the language that citizens use to speak falteringly – and more often, whisper – about their troubles. But their language, or rather our language – I would like to assert – is not as naive as is often believed, and it requires no plastic.

The German sociologist Andrea Bührman provides a name for the turn that citizens who live under resilience policy are experiencing. Unlike Bröckling, she deals with the empirically traceable subject, with *what actually befalls* citizens who know they are objects of the gaze of policy. What citizens experience is this: they are required to move from ‘taking care of themselves’ to ‘controlling themselves’. According to Bührman, they must go from *care of the self* to *control of the self*.²⁰ For citizens, submitting to ‘action therapy’, as current care and welfare policy advocates – a topical subject in the Netherlands in the context of policies of prevention – is not without its consequences. Indeed, one consequence can be a paradoxical ‘incapacitation trap’: because a diagnosis has been made and there is a corresponding therapy that has to be followed, citizens once again lose their ability to

18 Bröckling. *Das unternehmerische Selbst*, 2013, 35–36 | *The Entrepreneurial Self*, 2016, 10–12.

19 Gronemeyer & Jurk, *Entprofessionalisieren wir uns!*, 2017.

20 Bührmann & Ernst, *Care or Control of the Self?*, 2010.

act, precisely because the diagnosis and the therapy are remote from their lived lives in a form of life.²¹

Shoehorn gaze: this second gaze, the policy gaze, is a shoehorn gaze. People are perceived as vulnerable, as people who must move from an undesirable state of vulnerability – consisting of a set of objective characteristics – to another state, the desired state. As a result of interventions – the metaphorical shoehorn – people must be turned from ‘weak’ into ‘enterprising’ and ‘responsible’. We are dealing with a gaze that is actually there and that has to be recognized as such. However, as researchers, we must also keep looking from the other perspective, the perspectives of diverse citizens themselves, of the people who are the objects of policy. The first gaze, which sees survivors, must be maintained and – better yet – must be made to oscillate with the second gaze.

How can this process of oscillation be made to succeed? For ethics researchers who earn their living with policy-supporting research, it is important not only to recognize the shoehorn gaze, but also to clearly observe the consequences of the policy: citizens ‘swallow’ what is expected of them. To put it in my own words, the researcher must be aware that citizens speak a mixed language: their own language to discuss their difficulties, and the desired policy language, the ‘plastic language’. In Schneider and Vogt’s study on resilience, they call this task for researchers *Entlarvung*, the task of tracking down, with the deliberate connotation of the detective bureau. It is about indirect evidence, about insight acquired by taking a detour, a detour through lived experience. Tracking down hegemony is done by observing what citizens say and experience and by detecting what sort of knowledge

21 For the incapacitation trap, see Celikates, *Against Manichaeism*, 2015, 94. See for the consequences of care policy for citizens: Baart & Carbo, *De Zorgval*, 2013.

is at stake: some kinds of knowledge that citizens have count, some do not.²²

Sensibility: in short, it is important for the researcher to acquire a double and multistable gaze: both the first gaze of survivors as a group, and the second gaze that literally ignores their reality and wants to get them to move. The care ethicist Laugier, in her conversation with Veena Das, points out that it is very difficult to perceive what you want to perceive: it is so close that you overlook it. Careful observation does not happen by itself. Moreover, it has nothing to do with benevolence, ‘there is nothing quite as common as not recognizing others’, Laugier says, referring both to not acknowledging and not recognizing people as they are, at least to the extent that the latter is ever possible.²³ Thus, caring research starts with going for it and keeping your mouth shut when appropriate. And the rest is about the art of perception. This art requires a multistable gaze, in the paradoxical awareness that what you want to perceive is precisely what escapes you.

Three legs: how can research of survivors and of the practice of survival be done? What research-related approaches are available? In a polemic about Ruddick’s *Maternal Thinking*, the Canadian care ethicist Fiona Robinson brought to the fore that care ethics has three legs on which it can walk: political ethics, epistemology and empirical research. The claims that result from this may diverge.²⁴ The question is whether this awareness is widely shared in the ethics of care. And even more so, whether all three legs are seen as equally necessary and even as presupposing one another in the ethics of care. Many care ethicists think the research part can be done by philosophizing.

22 Schneider & Vogt, *Responsible resilience*, 2017, 176.

23 In Lovell et al., *Face aux désastres*, 2013, 174.

24 Robinson & Confortini, *Symposium: Maternal Thinking for international Relations?*, 2013. Editors’ Note: Vosman developed an ‘empirically grounded ethics of care’ together with Andries Baart and Guus Timmerman, Vosman et al., *Digging into care practices*, 2018; Timmerman et al., *In search of good care*, 2019.

Or they stick to a form of relational ethics and epistemology, thinking it is possible to omit the painstaking work of getting into the thick of it, which, as explained above, is a characteristic of doing empirical research. Of course, it certainly is irritating that empirically acquired insights gathered in patiently conducted research into forms of life, sometimes disassemble high-minded ideas about relationality. For some, this could even mean a narcissistic injury. But maybe this is the implication of what María Puig de la Bellacasa advocates in her provocative book *Matters of Care*: that research itself must be done caringly, including with regard to the groups and persons with whom the researchers are dealing.²⁵ Caring research implies both observing and preserving. The researchers then not only bracket their own preconceived ideas, but – even more so – preserve groups and people they are dealing with from potentially misleading influences that arise from the research, and even from the web that care and welfare policy tightly weaves around them; this kind of research preserves them from adopting ‘plastic words’.²⁶ The double and multistable gaze that has just been outlined helps with this task of preserving. ‘Thinking along’ with policy and citizens therefore presupposes ‘counter thinking’. ‘Counter thinking’ means asking whether the plastic language in fact does any good.²⁷

25 Puig de la Bellacasa. *Matters of Care*, 2017, 69–93: ‘Thinking with care’.

26 An example of a misleading influence of research is the effect of action research in which citizens who live in precarity speak and are mobilized into action together with local groups, whereupon the researchers disappear again without being sure that the increased collective consciousness of citizens can be carried any further.

27 Editors’ Note: during a research and transition project in a general hospital, Vosman developed the idea that care ethics must be a three-step approach, involving ‘thinking along with’, ‘counter thinking’ and ‘rethinking’: ‘Care ethics is not about giving normative prescriptions from the outside of a practice, it is rather about looking along with practitioners at what they see, looking at what is good and bad in a practice and discerning them in the ethos. (...) *Thinking along* implies taking the perspectives of patients, nurses, physicians and managers seriously, (...).

2 Survivors

In this section, I will discuss types of survivors and a possible approach to survival, and will also further define what survival entails.

As I have said before, the meaning of surviving is not adequately covered by ‘burdensome old age’ and ‘insecure and very ill’ (as exemplified in the vignette). Indeed, the Syrian family I mentioned, living as they have now been in a camp for six years, can just as well be regarded as survivors. And many other people and groups could be designated as survivors.

Types of survivors, various approaches: is it possible at all to determine clearly who is a survivor, and what is a survivor? Various philosophical proposals are available when it comes to survival, although, unfortunately, they have not been highly operationalized or researched empirically.²⁸ Thus, there is Merleau-Ponty’s idea of ‘*la vie brut*’, Adorno’s idea of ‘*damaged life*’, Agamben’s ‘*bare life*’ and Rancière’s idea of ‘*raw life*’ and, last but not least, Derrida’s ‘*sur vivre*’.²⁹ These are the propositions of giants. A lot can be learned from them. However, I am going to take another path, appealing first of all to basic phenomenology, staying very close to the phenomenality of survival: how does the phenomenon of survival manifest itself? But phenomenology, even in the form of political phenomenology, is not sufficient.

Counter thinking is the phase of critically looking at what the inquirer sees and hears, and searching for more fitting frames, (...). *Rethinking*, the third phase, implies recasting the ideas about what good care is about, (...) Indeed, our stance is a typical ethical one, namely ethics as a discipline wanting to be radically loyal to the partakers in a practice’, Vosman & Niemeijer, 2017, 273-274.

28 This was already prominently addressed in Bührmann, *The Emerging of the Entrepreneurial Self and Its Current Hegemony*, 2005.

29 Guyer, *The Rhetoric of Survival and the Possibility of Romanticism*, 2007.

We also need critical forms of sociology.³⁰ After all, some groups are called survivors without it being immediately clear how this is the case, whereas empirical research shows that they are indeed, in one way or another, survivors. Anyone interested in surviving as a social reality will therefore need to engage in so-called *diffractive reading*.

In his sociological study of a field that is close to that of survival, social uncertainty (hence the title: *Taking part in uncertainty*), the Utrecht Professor Vrooman has shown what the growing uncertainty about the possibility to cope in life looks like in the Netherlands.³¹ He has demonstrated very clearly that uncertainty whether one will be able to cope is rife, not only among the precariat, but even among ostensibly comfortable retirees and working citizens from the middle class.

The same is true for survival: researchers are likely to get it badly wrong if they think they can pinpoint the *Gestalt* of survival, its phenomenality. In Suleiman's forty-year-old study of the unimaginably strong ability of French elites to stay in power, this sociologist emphatically uses the word 'survival': these elites know how to *survive*, whereas normally we do not immediately associate elites with survival. In his research, Suleiman uncovered two capacities that inspired him to use the image of survival. First of all, French elites are able to adapt very cleverly, changing so as to stay in the saddle. Moreover, they have acquired a second ability, the *dexterity* not to become too specialized. This dexterity permits them to remain generalists and thus to stay on top of things. And it is this that allows them to retain their power.

30 On the tense relationship between phenomenology and sociology and the limitations of phenomenology, see Karsenti & Benoist, *Phénoménologie et sociologie*, 2001. Editors' Note: Vosman emphasized the necessity of applying a 'critique of the critique' to care ethics, referring to Didier, The endurance of critique, 2017, in a lecture for the CEC research network on June 14, 2018: <https://youtu.be/HDTmdJ2Cn-A>.

31 Vrooman, *Taking part in uncertainty*, 2016, 23.

Suleiman also pointed to what has been called *pantouflage*, the ability of politicians, to name an example, if they were to fail in politics, to continue their career at a high level in business, without falling below the levels of power and income they are accustomed to. We will come across this adaptability and dexterity again a little later, albeit with other attributes and qualifications. Of course, we can also observe the opposite of *pantouflage*: the inability ever to climb out of a certain social position; survivors always remain workers (even if they have retrained several times). This example shows that there is no obvious delineation of the life form of survival. As a result, this form of life risks becoming very diverse indeed.

Steepness: and yet, it is possible to give certain indications to delineate survival that can serve as a restriction, by focusing on the *practice* of survival, by regarding survival as a practice. The following drawing shows what survivors do.

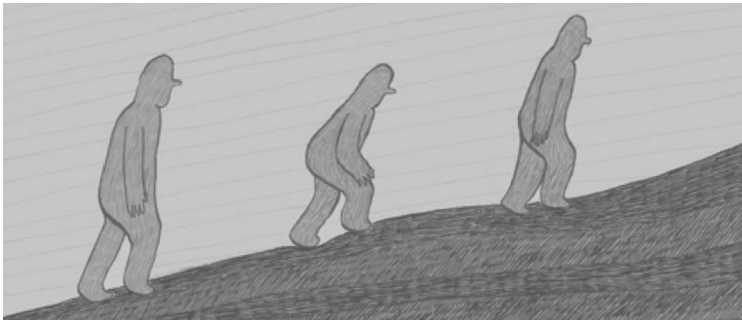


Illustration: Netty van Haarlem (<https://nettyvanhaarlem.com/>)

They scramble up against the steepness that is present in human lives. They live with these steepnesses, they have a memory of the steepnesses, of the burdens these can entail, and they have their own repertoire of possibilities to scramble up the steepnesses. These slopes are not external to them. Life is arduous, and life – to use the language of high medieval philosophy – is the pursuit of a '*bonum arduum*', a steep good. Life itself is a steep good; not only fine moral

goods such as justice are a *bonum arduum*, something you have to fight for.³²

In his book *Fragilité*, the phenomenologist Jean-Louis Chrétien points to yet another characteristic of the practice of survival. Chrétien thinks about brittleness or fragility from the inside. He speaks of a ‘*bulle de savon*’, a bubble that can burst. That is not the same as vulnerability in the sense of being hurt by outside forces. Fragile people not only scramble up the slope, but also experience how slippery the slope is. Chrétien refers to Ambrose of Milan’s thinking about human endeavors to speak about the slipperiness of the road. For the practice of survival, this means: trying to retain and regain your balance. It also means: knowing for sure that falling is inevitable. *Cadere*, falling, is therefore inescapable, just like having fallen and being broken.³³ The surface is slippery, sometimes pulls and gives way again unexpectedly, as muddy soil does.³⁴ Survivors have a balance-seeking ability and the ability to carry on even when damaged. In addition to the steepness and slipperiness of survival, there is a third characteristic that must be mentioned in this first round of our orientation on the practice of survival. That is what I call ‘the actual we’: survivors recognize to whom they turn out to belong. Chrétien articulates this very starkly, and he is amazed by it himself: community comes to survivors.³⁵ They know they are participants in a community of survivors.³⁶ Steepness, slipperiness and being included

32 McInerny, *The Difficult Good*, 2006.

33 Chrétien, *Fragilité*, 2014, 56, 80.

34 Beckett calls this the ‘swamp’ or ‘mud’. Kleinberg-Levin, *Beckett’s Words*, 2015, 181: ‘mud realm’.

35 Chrétien, *Fragilité*, 2014, 168, drawing on Ambrose’s treatise on Luke: ‘*le port qui vient de lui-même au-devant de nous. Sobre et forte expression de la fraternité humaine!*’ [‘*The port that comes by itself ahead of us. Sober and strong expression of human brotherhood!*’]. I must leave the theological source for what it is here.

36 Editors’ Note: Vosman uses ‘the actual we’ to refer to a sense of community that is grounded in real-life human interaction and that

by ‘the actual we’: these three characteristics together form the first delineation of survival.³⁷

Contrast I: Form of life, not double-decker anthropology

Before I elaborate further on the practice of survival, I will describe one contrast to clarify what it is we are thinking about.

My first description of survival immediately yields a different image than, for example, the one Hartmut Rosa sketched in his inaugural speech in Jena. Rosa depicts groups of people who relate to the world and (1) feel supported in this, (2) try to stay balanced within their protected world, (3) are in unstable equilibrium or – Rosa’s fourth form of *Weltbeziehung* – (4) are indifferent to the world.³⁸ Survivors, however, do not have the opportunity to relate to ‘an opposite’, to a world *outside them*. The arduous *comes to them* and there is no ‘loose I’. Apart from existing in the arduous, the survivor also exists as ‘we’, or more precisely: ‘an I in the we’. In my opinion, Rosa has articulated a way of thinking that is ultimately modern, which means that it reflects the characteristics of Modernity (such

is political in nature. It is a ‘we’ that ‘can be actually created through encounter, friction, self-confrontation, and by actually sharing concerns (...) The use of the word “we” without actuality, without awareness of friction, and without the knowledge that a “we” can also be lost, is dangerous’ (Vosman, 2020, 51).

37 I cannot discuss here the extension of Charles Lindblom’s famous 1959 concept of *muddling through* (Lindblom, *The science of muddling through*, 1959), from a concept meant to describe policy progress into a much broader concept in which firstly public professionals, subsequently all professionals and finally also citizens ‘tread through the mud’ (whether or not elegantly). See also Reckwitz, *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*, 2017, 350–355, | *The Society of Singularities*, 2020, 252–255, on ever-muddling losers.

38 Rosa, *Geworfen oder getragen?*, 2012, 387–392.

as individualism). Rosa is sublime in his stipulation of what distinguishes Late Modernity from Modernity. Late Modernity pushes Modernity to the extreme, even to paradoxes.³⁹ Yet in his view, there is and remains an 'I', a subject presented as an individual, even a classless individual. The emphasis is on the interior and on how this relates to the outside. Class and community make an appearance only subsequently, as if the doll that is the individual is given clothes. This is all the more remarkable because – and I think this is highly desirable for the ethics of care – he constantly emphasizes that he wants to *historicize*, *materialize* and *sociologize* people and their relationship to the world.⁴⁰ He emphatically distances himself – and again this is very desirable for the ethics of care – from the tendency to anthropologize, to design yet another anthropology.⁴¹ Rosa avoids setting up a generally valid view of human beings in front of what he calls the *Unverfügbare* (the unavailable) in his sociology of resonance.

Many modern people, at least in North Atlantic societies, find it annoying and insufferable to be confronted with the unavailable, not to be able to intervene; that is what they are modern for. As a result, there is a great temptation to turn the *Weltbeziehung* (relatedness to the world) into a view of humanity and an ontology. Rosa resists this. There is no such thing as 'the human being', for example, 'the human being as a caring animal', at least not primarily. In my opinion, Joan Tronto makes an incorrect claim when she writes that the human being is a 'caring animal'. In making this claim, she places a view of human beings, and therefore an ontology,

39 Rosa. *Resonanz*, 2016, 518 ff.

40 Idem, 534.

41 Idem, 518.

beneath her plea for care.⁴² *Biolayering*,⁴³ to buttress an ethical proposition, distracts from the political, that is, from the actual gathering, chafing, caring and clashing of people. This is not just about an ontology, but about an ontography, about inscribing properties that are currently desirable in ‘the human being’.⁴⁴

In my opinion, to anthropologize is to suppress the political character of caring and, moreover, it kills off regional and historical talk about people. Therefore, when I advocate that care ethics should consider survivors as a cultural class, and when I refer to a practice of survival, then my recommendation is to observe *the actual movement of a group in time and space*, so as to *study ethos* rather than attempt to found ethics from the outside and substantialize caring.⁴⁵ Caring is beautiful *and* it is a mess, to care is to humanize and to dehumanize, sometimes even at the same time, as María Puig de la Bellacasa shows in her *Matters of Care*.⁴⁶ In doing so, I am making a claim about an *actual* ordering of living together, an ordering that is not

42 Tronto. *There is an alternative*, 2017.

43 Thrift, *Intensities of feeling: towards a spatial politics of affect*, 2004, 59. As far as I am concerned, the political is the criterion of success for attempts to extend the lines from cells, via animals to humans (see for instance Harry Kunneman but also, in relation to care, María Puig de la Bellacasa).

44 Lynch, *Ontography*, 2013, 453-455.

45 I am adopting an insight of my mentor Theo Beemer and applying it to the ethics of care: moral theology is a ‘doctrine of movement’: people move away from God and towards Him, and they do the same with respect to one another. The first question of ethics is: what are people moving away from, and what are they moving to; a turning to and a turning away from, see Beemer, *Het geboorterecht van de berooiden en de verborgen God [The birthright of the destitute and the hidden God]*, 1992, Anyone who studies this movement must of course postpone judgements.

46 Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 2017, in particular chapter 1 (*Assembling Neglected “Things”*).

necessarily morally attractive. It is not about ‘the human being’ who is presented as being ‘essentially’ this or that across cultures and political figurations. That is an attempt to buttress something. This contrast also invites the idea that we could speak of a form of life with respect to survival: life that cannot be separated from its form.

3 Thinking in tensions

In a new round, I will now further delineate arduous survival, trying to achieve greater accuracy. Step by step, I will outline the tensions in which survivors live. From Ricoeur’s late text, *Love and Justice*, I derive the idea of tensions which must be maintained.⁴⁷ Although I am borrowing this from Ricoeur, I will give it a twist of my own, by positioning actions and failures within various tensions that are maintained. In order to apply this thinking in terms of tensions which are not eliminated but maintained, I will identify four tensions (or arcs of tension). This opens a space in which survivors carry on, as I call it. These four tensions do not yet paint the complete picture, but they do provide sufficient distinction.

This will give me a foothold from which to articulate my surprise at how the current care policy of ‘resilience’ and ‘can do’ radically misunderstands the lived reality of survivors.⁴⁸ To borrow, and expand, an expression from Annelies van Heijst: not only care, but also care

47 Ricoeur, *Liebe und Gerechtigkeit. Amour et justice*, 1989 | *Love and justice*, 1995. Ricoeur was already working on the underlying idea in the late 1950s, for instance in his essay *Le socius et le prochain*, 1955 | *The Socius and the Neighbor*, 1965.

48 A razor-sharp critique of ‘positive thinking’, but without much of an attempt to think along with policymakers, can be found in: Han, *Psychopolitik*, 2014, 46. In my view, this absence of the attempt to think along with policy makers also characterizes Braedly & Luxton (Eds.), *Neoliberalism and Everyday Life*, 2010.

policy can ‘add suffering’ by misunderstanding a group of citizens that in itself can be observed clearly enough.⁴⁹

3.1 A first tension: between passibility and steepness

In order to gain insight into steepness and the arduous, I will first of all revert to Paul Ricoeur’s idea of the ‘*conatus essendi*’. Ricoeur dealt with this at an early stage in his productive life, in the early work *L’homme faillible*.⁵⁰ He takes the expression of ‘*conatus essendi*’ from Spinoza. For Ricoeur, it means something like the commitment to deal with the arduous character of life. Furthermore, he introduces the term *passibilité*, ‘passibility’. The arduous has to do with *the enduring* of life, the not-primarily-being-an-actor. This is where we come upon a correction to ethics (one that is widely shared in French phenomenology): passibility. This was a necessary thought for Aristotle and Thomas, but one which has been elided from the ethics of Modernity. To be clear: not passivity, but passibility. Nor is this about powerlessly crying, ‘It’s fate!’, but it is about enduring life, people, materiality and society. According to Ricoeur, the ‘*conatus essendi*’ entails that passible people are untransparent to themselves, ‘*opaque*’ as he calls it. The first tension in which survival takes place is therefore the tension between passibility and the arduous.

Passibility also plays a major role in the work of Ricoeur’s interlocutors Husserl and Merleau-Ponty.⁵¹ Don Beith has shown that, for Merleau-Ponty, passibility is related to life that precedes ‘our’ or

49 Van Heijst, *Professional Loving Care*, 2011, 134. Specifically: ‘We see the paradoxical situation of a health system that owes its very existence to the relief of pain and sorrow, yet adds further suffering to the grief that is already there’.

50 Ricoeur, *Finitude et culpabilité. L’homme faillible*, 1950/1960, 69ff., 97ff. | *Fallible Man*, 1986. There is much about Spinoza’s *conatus* for instance in Ricoeur, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 2000, 447. Editors’ Note: And *Oneself as Another*, 1992, 315-317, 316: ‘the effort to persevere in being’].

51 Biceaga, *The Concept of Passivity in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, 2010; Beith, 2018. *The Birth of Sense*, 2018.

‘my’ life.⁵² Survivors, I would say, live with a sense of being participants in what precedes them and what will come after them. Incidentally, the life in which they participate is ‘non-sense’, to use a term by Beith again.

The contemporary German phenomenologist Bernard Waldenfels has expressed passibility even more radically, partly in parallel to current thinking in the ethics of care, but partly differently, and critically: human behavior begins elsewhere. ‘When responding, we are always incited, attracted, threatened, challenged, or appealed to by a somewhat or a somebody’.⁵³ This is a hard pill to swallow for modern ethics, which after all believes that in the beginning was the deed, and which agrees with modern poetic subjectivism. ‘Doing’ is also what ethics itself wants: it is ‘doing’ in the form of ethical action: ‘valuing, grading, forbidding, permitting, forming resolves,...’.⁵⁴ Opaquely modern, in other words.

Let me summarize: we have looked at arduous life, at passibility, at being opaque to ourselves and to others, at life that precedes the living and that comes after them, at what makes participants and ‘me in a we’ of them. I have thus outlined a first tension within which survivors carry on, so to speak: they move between passibility and arduous striving.

3.2 A second tension: the everyday

The French phenomenologist Bruce Bégout directs our view to yet another dimension of survival, the everyday nature of survival. This qualification of ‘everyday’ is important; when it comes to survival, there is no need to think of Sisyphus or of the hero Prometheus, the

52 Beith, *op. cit.*, 158.

53 Waldenfels, *Responsive Ethik zwischen Antwort und Verantwortung*, 2010, 72. | *Responsive ethics*, 2012, 424.

54 Blackburn. *Ruling Passions*, 1998, 51.

connotation of fate. Rather, it is about everyday doings, not fate and heroism. What is the character of everyday survival?

Bégout criticizes the philosophers of the quotidian, such as Lefebvre and De Certeau, who are guilty, in his opinion, of romantic overestimation when they attempt to deploy the everyday as resistance to submission. Bégout characterizes the arduous in everyday life shortly but sweetly, 'It is neither creative, nor inventive nor subversive'.⁵⁵ People's passibility, in his view, does not arise from submission. Submission worsens the arduous life, but is not the source of passibility.

Passibility in its everyday form resists, but is not opposed to hegemony. By 'resists' he means: life follows a different pursuit, its own pursuit. It is determined by the steepness that comes to survivors, I would say. Bégout formulates this as heaviness, the weight of life, which is part of the everyday.⁵⁶ Therefore, he believes, survival dissonates with regard to policies of self-direction, but it does not articulate a political critique of these. For him, survival is, however, thoroughly shaped by society, but it is not a category of resistance. In *De la décence ordinaire*, a study of George Orwell's political thinking and his fascination with ordinary people, Bégout reverses the relationship. Survival is not a criticism of oppression, but has the potential to transform the political – what I would call, the flow of coming together, chafing, understanding and conflict.⁵⁷

55 Bégout, *La découverte du quotidien*, 2010, 482. Considered at the level of forms of life, Laugier and Ferrarese think that it can very well be about 'transformation ou de résistance', Ferrarese & Laugier, *Politique des formes de vie*, 2015, 12. I think we should first look more closely at 'opposition' as a particular kind of striving, before making the life form of survival politically useful.

56 Bégout, *La découverte du quotidien*, 2010, 483: 'cette gravité intrinsèque du quotidien'.

57 Bégout, *De la décence ordinaire*, 2017, 76.

Moreover, I believe that everyday survival should not be understood as an ideal. It is transformative but not in that way.⁵⁸ There is constitutive power in survival,⁵⁹ because survivors do not define themselves in relation to laws and law enforcement.⁶⁰ Does that mean crime clans belong to the survivors? No, the constituent power resides precisely in ‘the non-secluded we’. Survivors recognize other survivors and do not form a closed clan. In my own words, it is rather the *ethos of persistence* that can be constitutive for the political. Bégout provides a starting point for this ethos: aversion, *le dégoût*, against humiliation and being humiliated. Also, it is the opposite of pursuing perfectionism.⁶¹

In his study of the everyday, Eran Dorfman (‘proto-phenomenologically’⁶²) points out that the everyday is fractured, which is what I call emerging steepness.⁶³ I must agree here with Frank Chouraqui’s correction of Dorfman: there is a continuity, a coherence between the everyday and steepness, not a rupture. Chouraqui cites Merleau-Ponty, who speaks of ‘sedimentation’: the unexpected, which is not so unexpected to the survivors, has sedimented.⁶⁴ Steepness is therefore not separate from or opposite to the survivors.

Bégout has led us to a second tension that typifies survival. He postulates a tension in which arduous life takes place: the tension between everyday persistence on the one hand and resistance against being annexed by someone else’s ‘progressive’ project on the other. Essentially, this is a completely different tension from that between autonomy and vulnerability. Vulnerability is understood as the

58 Idem, 85.

59 Idem, 88.

60 Idem, 81.

61 Idem, 82 and 87.

62 Frank Chouraqui characterizes Dorfman’s approach as follows: ‘this proto-phenomenological account’, Chouraqui, Eran Dorfman, 2014, 261.

63 Dorfman calls it ‘shock’, that which goes against the grain, *Foundations of the Everyday, Shock, Deferral, Repetition*, 2014.

64 Chouraqui, op. cit., 262.

inability to perform (preferably measurable) actions: someone cannot do something any more, or not yet. It is also a different tension from that between *self-reliance* on the one hand and *inability* on the other.

The concepts of ‘conatus essendi’ and passibility provide an important first distinction when it comes to the idea of survival. They permit us to see what survivors do: they lead lives stretched out between the arduousness of going up against the steepness, again and again, on the one hand, and enduring life on the other. Thanks to this second tension, however, which I was able to formulate with Bégout’s help, we can also see that the charge given to citizens to look after themselves is at odds with the survivor: the survivor does nothing other than to make an effort to stay afloat and keep this ship from sinking. This phenomenology has allowed us to identify a first dissonance with regard to policy.

Contrast II: Normativity first?

This provides a different picture from the idea of autonomy that must develop, for instance, towards self-expression and ‘freedom to’ and ‘freedom from’ (derived from Mill), or, from the idea of autonomy as reasonable self-control (derived from Kant). But it also presents a different picture from what the care ethicist Tronto has argued in relation to care ethics and social sciences, that ‘we must free ourselves from the incessant refrains about our inability to act’.⁶⁵ Tronto advocates deploying a well-developed idea of responsibility against power, which must be understood as oppression. Her aim is a shift from a society full of missed responsibilities (her concept of ‘privileged irresponsibility’⁶⁶) to a society which

65 Tronto, *Le risque ou le care?*, 2012, 9.

66 Editors’ Note: in Tronto, *Moral Boundaries*, 1993, 120-122, 146-147, 174, and *Caring Democracy*, 2013, 103-106. See also Bozalek, *Privileged irresponsibility*, 2014.

takes shared responsibility, specifically when it comes to caring, the building block par excellence of living together as a society. She regards caring as the responsiveness of people who she believes should ultimately – as we have seen, that means ontologically – be regarded as ‘caring animals’.

This is a strongly normative approach.⁶⁷ Self-expression, reasonable self-control and the responsiveness of caring animals are all examples, however distinct, of ‘normativity first’, of approaching realities through the lens of the desire to change them through normativity.

But why would the image I am advocating – consisting of tensions which must be maintained and, above all, not ruptured – be any different from these kinds of normative programs? Because there is and remains room for ambiguities, for ‘both this and that’. Normativity, in the sense of guidance of people’s actions, has all the more chance of success if it can accommodate reality, if normativity is not at odds with reality. The religious *senkrecht von oben* (vertically from above), the commandment of God that is at odds with human existence, has been replaced by many horizontal ‘musts’ and self-imposed obligations, accompanied, however, by a barely concealed vertical ‘must’. Would it not be better to postpone normativity as long as possible, and first carefully examine the purport of the ethos? I think it would, because it is in the ethos, with its lived sense of ‘already’ and ‘not yet’ and ‘both this and that’, that the source of normativity resides, not in any ideal that sets a norm for lived reality.

67 Toronto, *Caring Democracy*, 2013; *There is an alternative*, 2017.

3.3 A third tension: irreversibility and irony

The third arc of tension that I identify revolves around the awareness of irreversibility: the irreversibility of what has been done and what has been undergone. The French philosopher Philippe Grosos makes it poignantly clear that irreversibility is not about the tragic, at least not in the Romantic sense. For those who survive, irreversibility, even if they have no words to articulate it, is about what does not work, about what I call the steepness that they could not cope with. According to Grosos, not succeeding and failing are not the same thing. When someone did not succeed in scaling the steepness, this is not because they were not making an effort or were not open to innovation or surprise, but because of the continuous experience of destabilization, of ‘not yet’ or ‘not, yet again’, with which people are always attempting to bargain. This is something that requires unimaginably great effort. Grosos agrees here with the phenomenologist Henri Maldiney and he gratefully adopts the latter’s neologism ‘*transpassibilité*’ (transpassibility).⁶⁸ The ‘trans’ in ‘transpassibility’ means something like being at the mercy of, or being exposed to steepness (Grosos himself speaks of ‘risks and dangers’), but it also means being left to one’s own devices.

Survivors are therefore not relativists (‘what I had to deal with is all relative anyway’) nor skeptics (‘nothing is really reliable’), nor indeed victims of fate that are behaving accordingly. Their practice of survival stands in a tension between two poles: the irreversibility of what was undergone and what was done on the one hand, and readiness to be surprised on the other. Maldiney, and Grosos in his footsteps, calls this ‘irony’: the paradox of allowing oneself to be taken by surprise in the face of irreversible reality – raw, shabby and cheerful as it is.⁶⁹

To give a micrology as an example: in Andries Baart’s valedictory lecture on April 17, 2018, he talked about his wife Monique’s experience

68 Grosos, *Le réversible et l’irréversible*, 2014, 178-179.

69 Idem, 44-45, 50, 179.

when she was lying in a hospital ward. Once during her convalescence, late at night, an elderly, visually impaired and confused widower was brought into Monique's ward. He never stopped talking about what he could see: little flies everywhere. The diagnosis was: delirium. That means that strong medication is not far away. It was a cold late December and there was not a fly to be seen. Until Monique looked at the ceiling: a plasterboard ceiling with tiles across the length of the ward that were covered with speckles, including above the confused man's head. He was still confused, although he improved the following day when familiar people came to visit him and literally and figuratively speaking brought him back to reality. But paradoxically, he had seen what he had seen: speckles that really looked very much like flies. *That is irony: that which you do not expect and could not expect.*

The following day, Monique and I had to laugh when she told me this story. Irony can be *tragi-comic* (and it is only cruel when it goes off the rails).⁷⁰ We had to smile because of Monique's attentiveness, but we also saw how miserable the confusion was for the old man. This reaction that Monique and I had is also part of irony: apparently it is possible to see both sides at the same time. The perpetuated paradox of irony is a space in which survivors can carry on, because that is what irony does: creating space where that is not possible.

3.4 A fourth tension: survival and the life never-lived

As I have already said, the phrase 'survival as a form of life' not only refers to a specific cultural class, but also to a more widespread mode of life. In other words, survival is characteristic of a cultural class, but the survival mode also occurs in other classes, such as the cultural class of the self-confident, those who live by their own adage that everything is 'a challenge', and those who orient themselves towards the 'good life'.

⁷⁰ *Idem*, 143.

Just before she died, Cory Taylor in her book *Dying: A memoir*, recently gave a poignant but also ironic self-criticism of the tendency to want, someday, to live a better life : soon, not yet, but it will come, this better life. ‘You always assume you know how the unlive life turns out. And it is always a better version of the life you’ve actually lived. The other life is more significant and more purposeful. It is impossibly free of setbacks and mishaps’.⁷¹

Taylor here points to something which is missing in the idea of the beautiful, successful life. In my own words: we encounter an essential lack of a sense of reality, even a denial of sense, and we encounter the mythical nature of progress. The overemphasis on progress, this conceiving of forward movement as ‘always better’, prevents us from seeing other movements, and from seeing them as *sui generis* and humanizing movements. I will mention the downward movement, to the place where fellow sufferers are impatient and raring to emerge. I will mention the movement of falling, with the emphasis on the connotation of ‘deeper and deeper’. Finally, I will mention the movements of fending off and fleeing. We can say with Merleau-Ponty: these movements have their own purpose and meaning that are not determined by the upward movement.⁷²

In three studies of the design of life that strives for happiness, David Kleinberg-Levin has shown the ambivalence of the pursuit of happiness when it does not know what to do with bad luck. Kleinberg-Levin studies world literature, including Beckett, Döblin, and Sebald. In his study of Samuel Beckett’s work, he has argued that Beckett’s work is one long *inquiry* into how unhappiness is plastered over by stubbornly keeping an ideal alive even as it is imploding. According to Kleinberg-Levin, Beckett conducts his inquiry by ‘recalling and, in a certain sense, representing, the voices and lives of those whose

71 Taylor, *Dying*, 2016, 33. Taylor died on July 5, 2016.

72 Fuchs, *Leib-Raum-Person*, 2006, 63: ‘eigen Absichtlichkeit und Sinnhaftigkeit’.

suffering, destitution, and living death are not recognized in the dominant representations of life in our present time'.⁷³

Kleinberg-Levin explicitly associates this suppression of the realities of life with the bourgeoisie. It is not without reason that Adorno's study of Beckett is an important source for him.⁷⁴ The inability to mourn that which one pursued but never realized, and the inability to accept that the life one wished for was never lived is closely linked to a particular cultural class.⁷⁵ Apart from showing how this inability is linked to bourgeois class, Adorno also analyzes the political consequences of this inability. It implies choosing just one side and only allowing oneself to be guided by the regime of happiness, even if that happiness is not there, is no longer there or was never there, instead of enduring the tension between steepness and passibility. The debate on 'completed life' could be explored from this other angle, that is, as the result of the way a class regards its thinking about happiness as universally valid.

In summary, when it comes to this fourth arc of tension we can say: citizens who survive discover the discrepancies between the old practice of anticipating a better and more beautiful life that is yet to come and living on that expectation on the one hand, and the new carrying on on the other. One of the research routes I advocate is also to study the effects of this discovery empirically. I think the experience of the shattering of the intimate idea of life, a representation that fractures into pieces, as it is dissected in Cory Taylor's micrology, may have the power to rupture the compartmentalization of cultural classes. The broken image can help to recognize survivors. The shards are necessary. In a moment we will see that the social background of survivors can and must be further analyzed. There is chafing

73 Kleinberg-Levin, *Beckett's Words*, 2015, 187.

74 Kleinberg-Levin, *Redeeming Words and Promise of Happiness*, 2012, 8. For practical reasons I must here ignore Kleinberg-Levin's third study: *Redeeming Words*, 2013. Editors' Note: Adorno, Notes on Beckett, 2010.

75 Kleinberg-Levin, *Beckett's Words*, 2015, 175.

between survivors and others, to say the least. This friction is linked to the positions that groups occupy in society and not to differences in preference between people who occupy an equal position. This latter, quasi-liberal view can be resolutely discarded as short-sighted.

3.5 A summary of four tensions

I have so far mentioned four tensions within which survivors carry on: (1) the tension between passibility and steepness; (2) the tension between everyday persistence and resistance against being annexed by someone else's 'progressive' project; (3) the tension between irreversibility of what was undergone and done on the one hand and surprise arising from misunderstanding on the other; and (4) the tension between the fictional representation of a successful life on the one hand and carrying on when that representation breaks down on the other.

4 A cultural class and its 'bourgeois coldness'

In this section, I will discuss first the meaning of cultural class according to Andreas Reckwitz (4.1), and then the meaning, particularly in Adorno's work, of the 'cold gaze' of citizens directed at a lower class (4.2), and finally what the distinctions that this yields could mean for care ethics (4.3).

4.1 Cultural class

In his recent book *The Society of Singularities*, the German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz demonstrates in a surprising way the return of a class society in Late Modernity. By class, he means 'a social group that shares a common cultural model for leading one's life, a common social position (with access to socially relevant resources or capital),

and a particular form of work'.⁷⁶ For him, class is both materially and culturally determined. He speaks emphatically of the emergence in Late Modernity of a new sociocultural class, a middle class. He regards '[a]uthenticity, self-actualization, cultural openness, diversity, quality of life, and creativity' as the parameters of this lifestyle (*Lebensstil*), which he also calls life (*Lebensführung*).⁷⁷ Reckwitz also perceives the existence of an inverse image of this middle class: a new underclass.⁷⁸ It is made up of low-qualified people who live under precarious circumstances. The cultural class of citizens are busy bringing their own lives under control, including their own inner lives. In this project, everything can be transformed so as to lead a "'good", high-quality and exciting' life.⁷⁹ This new middle class looks down in many ways on the class of the precariat. Ideas about ethics and education (*Bildung*) play an important role in the devalorization of people of the lower class, says Reckwitz: they do not take good care of their bodies, they do not look after their health according to the standards of the middle class, and they surrender too much to their aging process. They fail

76 Reckwitz. 2017. *Die Gesellschaft der Singularitäten*, 2017, 274, noot 2; 363-370: 'Tableau der spätmodernen Klassen und ihre Relationen' | *The Society of Singularities*, 2020, 199, note 2; 261- 266: 'The Tableau of Late-Modern Classes and Their Relations'.

77 Idem, 273-275 | 197-200, 199: 'This is the milieu of (mostly) highly educated people who possess a high degree of cultural capital and wort in de knowledge and culture economy (...). In this sense, the new middle class is a milieu of educated individuals; it is an educated middle class or, in short: the educated class'.

78 Idem, 279 | 202: 'Altogether, the new underclass is a thoroughly heterogeneous group of simple service providers, semi-qualified industrial laborers, part-time employees, unemployed people, and social welfare recipients (as well as socially excluded people in the strict sense) who likewise constitute about a third of today's Western population. With respect to their income, assets, and social status, this group exists on a level that is clearly below that of the old middle-class society'.

79 Idem, 296: 'die das eigene Leben zu einem "guten", qualitative reichen und reizvollen machen' | 214: 'that might enrich the quality of one's own life and make it exciting'.

to exercise the desired, or rather required, self-discipline. Thus, the underclass is made the ‘object of negative culturalization’, it becomes the expression of what is ‘ethically “wrong”’.⁸⁰ This disdain for the underclass has been outlined before in critical theory.

4.2 Bourgeois coldness

The downward gaze that Gronemeyer regards as cold⁸¹ had already been described by Horkheimer and Adorno as *bürgerliche Kälte* (bourgeois coldness).⁸² Coldness is, of course, a metaphor. The cold gaze and the requirement of self-control so as to become a fully-fledged moral actor is opposed to the warm, sympathetic gaze. The bourgeois class takes a cold look at life that fails and is damaged, Adorno says. The ideal of the good life plays an important role in this, at least the bourgeois interpretation of that ideal. The cold gaze also implies a ‘ruthless application of idealistic morality’.⁸³ This requires desensitization. Scientists, too, are required, ‘soberly’, accurately and without calling their own position into question, to seek out ways to persuade people of the underclass to adopt the desired way of life and to transform them – paradoxically as this is – into autonomous actors.⁸⁴

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, language and representations play a major role in this: visual representations are needed to coax the underclass into adopting coldness. The representation of who and what people are must become universally valid, even if its interpretation is clearly linked to the bourgeois class.

80 Idem, 359 | 258.

81 Gronemeyer & Jurk, *Entprofessionalisieren wir uns!*, 2017, 9.

82 Editors’ Note: Horkheimer, *Egoismus und Freiheitsbewegung*, 1936; Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 1947 | *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 2002; Adorno, *Minima moralia*, 1951 | *Minima Moralia*, 1978. See also Ferrarese, *Precarity of work*, 2017.

83 Gruschka, *Bürgerliche Kälte und Pädagogik*, 1994, 38.

84 Idem, 42-43.

People in the lower class must begin to look at themselves as if they were bourgeois. They must also look at themselves soberly, because that makes it easier for them to live with the contradictions and tensions with which they live.⁸⁵ It also increases their indifference to the difficult fate of others.

Adorno criticizes the exporting of this portrayal of human beings from one class to another and criticizes the tendency to turn it into an ontology.⁸⁶ More recently, Nicolas Duvoux has shown that this disdain itself can be researched. This French sociologist has conducted empirical research of social work. He has shown the actual effects of this disdain and how ‘swallowed policy’ affects the self-image of the so-called lower class in various ways.⁸⁷

I think it is very important to ensure that the position of the critics themselves remains under criticism as well. Adorno did this explicitly. To him, a person who criticizes the bourgeois cold gaze and the transfer of this cold view to a lower class, is not a better person occupying a morally superior position.⁸⁸ To conclude this critique of the critique, Adorno takes the metaphor of cold (versus warm), and looks at what is included in the analysis of the metaphor and what is not. Metaphors are enthralling. The opposite of cold is not warm, *ergo* good.⁸⁹ If the situation in question consists of a cold gaze and the attempt to have this internalized by a lower class, then Adorno thinks that all that can

85 Idem, 57.

86 Hammer, *Adorno and the Political*, 2005, 107.

87 Duvoux, *L'autonomie des assistés*, 2009. Duvoux shows that people who receive social services react in three ways: they swallow the idea of autonomy and constantly notice the tension with their actual vulnerability; they use autonomy by foregrounding their illness and impossibilities, which can put the care providers in a quandary (p. 108); they refuse help in response to the appeal made to their autonomy.

88 Gruschka, *Bürgerliche Kälte*, 1994, 51.

89 On cold and warm as a political metaphor see also Hartmut Rosa in Gertenbach et al., *Theorien der Gemeinschaft zur Einführung*, 2010, 40ff.

be done is to look for what is in the interests of that class. This brings us very close to what I have called ‘thinking along’.⁹⁰

4.3 Significance for the ethics of care

As I said in my opening remarks, the ethics of care arose from a feminism that made a stand against, and continues to make a stand against, the elision of gender, class and color. Perhaps the patient study of survivors through phenomenology and social theory can be one gateway to talking again about gender, class and color, all three. For present purposes, I will limit myself to class.

The distinctions of cultural class and bourgeois coldness are important for care ethics. First of all to ensure that we do not go down the path of idealized representations. Secondly, to see through the subtle hegemony exercised by one cultural class over another, but – thirdly – to prevent us from subsequently criticizing that hegemony with our own, alternative, fundamentally ‘better’ and ontologically ‘more accurate’ anthropology. A similar issue of strategy is at play in desensitization. As we have seen, Adorno exposed the demand for desensitization that exists in bourgeois culture. It does not seem right to me to argue for the opposite, for sensitization. ‘Counter thinking’ must start by dealing with desensitization, with the issues to which this gives rise, with the cracks that are apparent in desensitization.

It seems to me that both Reckwitz’s idea of the bourgeois cultural class which looks at a different, precariously living class with a pedagogical gaze, as well as Adorno’s analysis of desensitization are of great importance for the ethics of care. The insights of care ethics will have to run the gauntlet of these criticisms, as it were. Are ethical ideas about relationality not class-specific? Is the care-ethical plea for attentiveness and sensibility thorough and critical enough to face up to the discipline of desensitization? I am doubtful about this, because it is impeded by the ‘power-equals-oppression approach’,

⁹⁰ Editors’ Note: See footnote 27.

which relocates what is regarded as wrong to the outside. This is very practical when care-ethical ideas about relationality are confronted with care formulas such as advance care planning, shared decision making, tailor-made care, and with care policies aimed at promoting the self-reliance of citizens while holding them to the associated requirements (for instance, punishment if they fail to do what the policymaker wants them to)⁹¹, the so-called *Fordern und Fördern* (demanding and promoting). The social policy of the City of Rotterdam is a good example of this.

In creating these care formulas and care and welfare policies, authorities are doing their best to solve a problem. I do not doubt the good intentions invested in this. It may be a paradox, but I believe that it will be necessary for the ethics of care, which wants to think along with policymakers but also to appropriately ‘counter think’, to think much more thoroughly about its own insights. These insights currently seem as if made of wax: this has been the strength, but also the weakness of the ethics of care. The extremely benevolent ideas of reform in care and welfare and their sometimes rigorous translation into executive policy are served by ‘counter thinking’, not by an all too uncritical blending in of or amending by relationality. This helpful form of ‘counter thinking’ can only succeed if one’s own insights are more institution-proof, and if the claim that care ethics thinks on the basis of practices is deepened. In my opinion, the concept of life form can provide that depth: it brings practices and lifeworld together.

5 Surviving as a form of life

What is a form of life? As has been said, various propositions already exist with regard to survival as a form of life, although none of them have been sufficiently operationalized or empirically examined. I have

91 When demands and punishments are made in health care policy, Andries Baart speaks of the ‘punitive’ in *De Zorgval* (2013, 58ff.).

already mentioned the ideas of Rancière (*raw life*) and Agamben (*bare life*). Moreover, both Rancière and Agamben speak of ‘form of life’.⁹² There is a lot to learn from this for researchers. Rancière, for example, has pointed to a sobering reality for any researcher. To put it even more strongly, his point serves as shock treatment for researchers who conduct policy-supporting research of ‘vulnerable target groups’ and who think they know what that life is like and what needs to be changed. Experts should not explain the world to others, says Rancière. In his eyes, those who explain stand in opposition to ‘the ignorant’ who are supposedly unable to understand their own lives. The latter are expected, after listening to suitable explanation by experts of what their lives ‘are really like’, to take the actions that the experts consider desirable. And yet – and this is my belief too – the objects of research are as intelligent as the researchers.⁹³ But I will now leave most of these propositions for what they are, as a *piste de travaille* [a possible avenue to be explored].

I will focus mainly on Rahel Jaeggi’s idea of a form of life, and this for three reasons. I consulted her work because she (1) explicitly views forms of life – always in the plural – as an everyday practice, as a ‘inert ensembles of practices’.⁹⁴ Moreover, she is interested (2) in the messiness and contradictions in any form of life; forms of life do not necessarily have to be thought as consistent. This is in line with care ethics (and also various other types of ethics, such as that developed by Mary Midgley), which is interested in realities and not in

92 See for instance: Scheu, Giorgio Agamben, 2011.

93 Rancière, *Le spectateur émancipé*, 2008 | *The Emancipated Spectator*, 2009.

94 Jaeggi, *Kritik von Lebensformen*, 2014, 94 ff.; 69: ‘ein Interesse daran ... wie Menschen leben, was sie tun und wie sie es tun’ | *Critique of Forms of Life*, 2018, 55ff.; 36: ‘an interest in how people live, what they do, and how they do it’. See also: *Towards an immanent critique of forms of life*, 2015, 16: ‘Forms of life ... contain the cultural and social reproduction of human life. It follows, then, that I am asking about forms of life in the plural’.

the building of systems.⁹⁵ Jaeggi does not assume that every form of life is morally good. My last reason is (3) that she believes it is possible to argue on the basis of reasons about the morality of forms of life. I cannot here examine the full implications of this last argument. Finally, (4) it is important for the ethics of care to go beyond the ‘constraining distinctions between “ethics” vs. “morality” or “the good life” vs. “moral principles” or “the right” vs. “the good”’.⁹⁶

Jaeggi describes forms of life as follows: a form of life is a bundle (or ‘ensemble’) of practices and orientations related to the collective way lives are lived, without, however, being strictly codified or obligated by institutions. They are “at once given and made”. As they have a certain depth, duration, extension and inertness they are different from fashions. But above all, a form of life is a form of life because there is an issue or a problem, and the form of life constitutes a way to move forward with the issue by making it livable. A form of life is not about a problem with a solution, but about a way to move forward with the problem. That is where the normativity is located in this conception of forms of life: a life form has a tenor that makes it possible, to a greater or lesser extent (or not at all), to move forward with the issue.⁹⁷

95 By way of contrast: I am not appealing to the concept of form of life as developed by Martha Nussbaum. Nussbaum places her version of ‘form of life’ within her larger design of ethics, with three pillars: liberal thinking, realism as understood by Putnam, and Aristotelian teleology. Donatelli, *Manières d’être humain*, 2014, 149-173. These pillars also are my three reasons for not adopting this view: her urge to universalize ways of life (and thus move away from lived life practices), her ultimately highly liberal idea of autonomy, and the lack of any rethinking of teleology (something Mary Midgley did do, on account of the breach in Aristotle’s *causa finalis* caused by Modernity). Editor’s Note: Vosman already thematized the change in the meaning of teleology in his monograph *De orde van het geluk*, 1997, 53-56, referring to Midgley, *Teleological theories in morality*, 1988.

96 Jaeggi, *Towards an immanent critique*, 14.

97 Jaeggi, *Kritik von Lebensformen*, 77ff; 119; 142 | *Critique of Forms of Life*, 2018, 41ff., 73, 89.

These are all characteristics that can be applied to survival. The issue at stake in the life form of survival is to keep standing or to get up again in the face of steepness and slipperiness. A form of life makes life ‘inhabitable’, as Jaeggi puts it.⁹⁸ Jaeggi goes deeply into the contradictions that can occur within a form of life and ultimately creates a lot of space to accommodate these. Contradictions should not be celebrated, but forms of life live from learning, from gathering ever more repertoire and in the meantime enduring the primal issue.⁹⁹

Sensibility: the care ethicist Sandra Laugier has added a very important aspect in her approach to forms of life. She points out that forms of life, and in my opinion this is also largely true for the practice of survival, revolve around sensitivity to what matters: small things or everyday moments when ‘punches’ or ‘collisions’ occur, all this with a view to carrying on.¹⁰⁰ To give micrological examples: despite all the noise, you were able to find your ear plugs and catch some sleep, meaning you didn’t feel like a wreck again in the morning; or even though you are embroiled in conflict with your neighbors or colleagues, you keep saying hello to them, thus easing the tensions a little. Precisely this sensibility itself, this ability to apprehend, is very vulnerable, Laugier thinks. It is important for the life form of survival to regain this sensibility and switch from major to minor and back, from the steepness that occurs to the little things that help to endure it without trivializing anything, and then back again from minor to major. This kind of responsiveness is what makes survival into a form of life of its own. The steepness and slipperiness are located within survival, they do not constitute an outside world, but survivors manage to fall and carry on as long as they manage. ‘As long as they manage’: this raises the question what helping actually is in a late modern society.

98 *Idem*, 227 | 153.

99 *Idem*, chapters 8 [*Crisis-Induced Transformations*] and 9 [*Problem or Contradiction?*].

100 In Lovell et al., *Face aux désastres*, 2013, 168-169.

‘As long as they manage’ also raises the question what, politically speaking, *Verelendung* (impoverishment) means. For now, I must let this rest – important as it is for the future of care ethics.¹⁰¹

Contrast III: The ideal of self-development as epistemic practice

Survival contrasts with self-realization. Here the care ethicist wishes to engage in conversation with humanistic studies. While the leading humanist Hanne Laceulle tries to escape the profound ambiguities of Late Modernity, she describes self-realization as ‘a process of moral self-development aimed at the optimization of one’s potential for moral agency’.¹⁰² The survivors that have been outlined above do not live within the tension of a moral condition that has to be stepped up and improved, they live within different tensions. I will return to the emphasis on morality and the other tensions in a moment. Survival does not present itself as a locus for change from above and from outside, but instead as a locus for the opposing of this. In her dissertation, my colleague Hanne Laceulle has proposed a design of self-realization, while criticizing idealization and the dominant late modern, ‘seizing’ form of self-realization. She advocates ‘strong moral agents’ and people who take hold of value-oriented leadership in their lives. Careful as she is, she checks the objections that have been raised against self-realization discourses, such as the objection that the self-realization discourse is moralizing and that it unduly emphasizes the individual.¹⁰³ It is highly

101 On the question of help and *Verelendung*, I recommend taking a look in the mirror held up by João Biehl, an anthropologist at Princeton, *Vita*, 2005.

102 Laceulle, *Becoming who you are*, 2016, 317.

103 Idem, 324-333.

laudable – more scholars should do this – that she herself also deliberates and weighs the objections to her alternative proposal.

I would like to present a different objection from the ones she raises in her commendable self-criticism. My suspicion is that a revised idea of self-realization will also function as an ideal. Could this be correct? My objection is of an empirical and epistemological nature, and I formulate it in the form of a question. Is it not important that we know, through empirical research, and more specifically at least through qualitative empirical research, what the consequences of living with the ideal of self-realization are? Could we not, by identifying cultural classes, also discover how class determines the ideal of self-realization? Perhaps there is an ‘*erreur de cadrage*’ [framing error] here, as Sandra Laugier calls it.¹⁰⁴ Maybe one’s own alternative conceptual frame is unwittingly also class-related. And would this not also be a way for us to find out what ambiguities exist in actual lives with respect to the ideal? Would this not give us food for thought? Could it be possible that there are groups of people who live in a humanizing way that is nonetheless far removed from self-realization?

Of course, my objection revolves around the creation of an ideal, including a purified one. The term ‘ideal’, just like ‘spontaneity’, ‘egoism’ and ‘altruism’, is an invention of the 18th century, the century of Modernity. An ideal stages, erects a stage, with leading and supporting roles, a backstage, a script, and all that can be seen. But spectacles like these dispel the phenomenality of life and survival. Lived life is de-realized. This entails the danger of obscuring the phenomenality of survival and of groups that live accordingly.

104 In Lovell et al., *Face aux désastres*, 2013, 170.

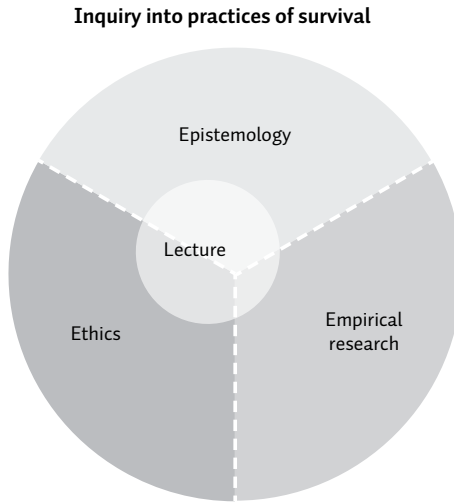
Ten years ago, the French philosopher Guillaume le Blanc pointed out that there is something like ‘the logic of invisibility’, which causes those who are invisible to the idealist to become alienated from their own everyday lives.¹⁰⁵ Idealism is not innocent. We are in the epistemic register here of perceiving and knowing, of knowledge that counts and knowledge that is rejected or discredited – we are not in the register of normativity. Due to its proximity to political policy, we could speak of ‘epistocracy’. It is seemingly mild epistocracy. ‘Ideal’ does sound beautiful, like self-realization does. It is inherent in ideals, however, that everyone has thoughts about it. The following thoughts, for example: yes, but reality is different. Or: the ideal will never be truly realized. If they do not suit us, we take ideals with a grain of salt. If they do, we strongly emphasize the ideal as worth striving for. This also means: an ideal is an ever-receding horizon. There is something gratingly wrong with moral idealism that rules through knowledge that may or may not become valid. The feminist Jackie Stacey has beautifully designated the epistocracy of moral idealism; she calls this ‘wishing away ambivalence’, that is, wishing away the ambiguity that is actually present in the ideal, such as the built-in impossibility of the ideal.¹⁰⁶

105 Le Blanc, *Soi-même comme un étranger*, 2008, 127.

106 Stacey, *Wishing away ambivalence*, 2014.

Conclusion: A glance forward

What I have done so far is sketch a small part of a larger project of research. One that entails epistemology, political ethics and empirical research.



We have had a modest glimpse of the latter in a vignette. A vignette is literally a grape leaf on which text is written. Then the leaf perishes, thus also ending the underlying facts and words. That is fine if the purpose of the vignette was to bring a reality to the fore. There is still much work to be done in all three areas – epistemology, ethics and qualitative empirical research – to ensure that the practice of surviving is not lost sight of.

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A more complete bibliography, including publications in German and Dutch, can be found at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.33187.07205>.

Frans Vosman's academic career

Frans J.H. Vosman (* June 18, 1952) was Professor of the Ethics of Care at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht from 2013 to 2018. He founded the website *Ethicsofcare.org*. He was Professor of Christian Ethics and Spirituality at Tilburg University from 2006 to 2013, where he, Annelies van Heijst and Andries Baart initiated care-ethical research. There they set up a Master's programme in Care Ethics and Policy, which he and Baart took with them when they moved to Utrecht. Van Heijst decided to stay in Tilburg. Vosman was Professor of Moral Theology at the Catholic Theological University in Utrecht from 2000-2006 and was an Assistant Professor and Associate Professor from 1990-2000. He did his doctoral studies in Rome and Paris (1978-1981), and obtained his doctorate under Louis Vereecke C.S.S.R. He worked in the discipline of moral theology and medical ethics in Nijmegen (1986-1990), and studied moral theology under Theo Beemer, of blessed memory, the theology of social action under Arend van Leeuwen, of blessed memory, and philosophy at Nijmegen Catholic University (Radboud University) from 1971-1977. Frans Vosman died on June 10, 2020.

A more detailed biography can be found at <https://ethicsofcare.org/frans-vosman-1952-2020-a-concise-sketch-of-his-life-and-work/>.

Do all people live with the ideal of self-development?

Frans Vosman shows that there is a cultural class of people who are concerned with something completely different: survival. Survival means difficult everyday living with the steepness in life.

Vosman advocates using the concepts of 'form of life' and 'cultural class' in political-ethical research. 'Form of life' helps to move away from the ontological turn in the ethics of care, which speaks of 'the relational human being' and of the human being as a 'caring animal'. 'Cultural class' helps to counter hegemony through ideals.

Survival, as a phenomenon, is so close by that we fail to acknowledge it as a life form, blinded as we are by ideals that suppress this reality. In this lecture Vosman shows us this reality with intellectual lucidity and with deep empathy for those who live in conditions of survival.

Frans Vosman (1952–2020) was Professor of Care Ethics at the University of Humanistic Studies in Utrecht, the Netherlands. This book presents the full text in English of his valedictory lecture on June 15, 2018, and a bibliography of his publications in English. Per Nortvedt wrote an introduction.



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