

*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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# 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,<sup>1</sup> 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

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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