Identity: Gaining It by Losing It? The Notion of *kenosis*

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In discussions about identity, it is sometimes said that one can only gain an identity by losing it. This way of speaking seems to be an echo of a very well-known statement from the Gospel, containing words of Jesus to his disciples about the difficulties one must face in order to follow him. In the Gospel of Matthew, for instance, the disciples are exhorted to prepare themselves because they will be hated and persecuted by their fellow men—but they are also told that they should not be afraid.

> Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from the will of your Father. So don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows.¹

Jesus makes it clear that he did not come to bring peace on earth, but that his way of acting will be the cause of conflicts among people. Directly after these words, we find the statement about finding and losing your life. Jesus says:

> Whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.²

These words can be interpreted in various ways, but in the background we always hear the meaning: whoever desires to find real life should not cling to what he or she has. On the contrary, one has to be prepared to give up something, maybe everything. It is remarkable that the formal structure of these words from the gospel can be found in many specimens of modern philosophy since Hegel’s attempts to formulate the road of consciousness to self-realisation. “To lose one’s life” means in the context of Hegel’s thought that on the road to embodied Spirit, subjective consciousness has to give up its unreflected particularity by confronting itself not only with the reality outside, but also with the other, as another self-consciousness whose existence

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² Matt. 10:39.
endangers my self-consciousness, and, ultimately, with the laws and institutions of the society it participates in.

Under the influence of Hegel, modern philosophy has become aware of the fact that the question of identity is a rather complicated one. When do we ‘have’ an identity? Do we ever have it, in the sense that we can be ‘sure’ of it? Or are we constantly looking for affirmation of our own identity in the eyes and the conduct of others? Does identity depend on the approval or disapproval of others? Needless to say, the gaze of the other can become something to fear the most, because we need it so desperately, to be sure that we exist and that the identity we think we have is not a solitary illusion.

What precisely does it mean to have or to gain an identity? In a certain sense, it seems to imply the existence of others. Not only the others who see and acknowledge us, but also the others we relate to by acts of imitation. Because we constantly learn from others by imitation: we imitate their conduct, we borrow things like a way of speaking and walking. To be a teacher or a nurse, to have the identity of a teacher or a nurse, implies that I have had the opportunity to learn from other teachers or nurses. Is this a kind of ‘gaining identity?’ In that case the process of gaining identity is never a pure gain, but also always a loss, because it is a loss of originality, and of being in touch with a ‘real self’ that was there before I gained the identity of a nurse or a teacher by imitating their models. The real self would then be the self we were before we entered this or that relation of imitation, before we went to school.

On the other hand, the idea of losing your identity is also complicated. When do we speak of losing an identity in a strict sense? The situations I am thinking of are drunkenness, enthusiasm, ecstasy, situations in which we tend to say that we were not ourselves anymore, we ‘lost’ ourselves, we were not there when it happened, it was like another person was in me, and I was gone. Don’t blame me, I wasn’t there.

1 Two Meanings of Losing One’s Identity

If this is true, then we have two meanings of losing identity. The first is relative, it is losing in the sense of losing an original identity (if it was ever there) to gain the identity of—say—a teacher or a nurse, by imitating other teachers and nurses. Here one could speak of an identity that I am ‘gaining by losing,’ in the sense of the opening lines of this articles. But this meaning of ‘gaining by losing’ is more in agreement with the idea of identity in the philosophy of Hegel and Ricoeur, than with the philosophy of Levinas.