ELASTICITY OF CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Stephen Curkpatrick
scurkpatrick@stirling.edu.au
Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Jemaat Kristus Indonesia - Salatiga

ABSTRAK


Key words: identity, formation

Whoever seeks to secure life will lose it ... whoever loses life ... will gain it

(1) Identity, loss of loss, Christology and formation

What conditions give the possibility of pliable identity that is sustained through change? Following Hegel, identity is inherently differential in its determination within a movement of encounter, contradiction, assimilation and growth. Identity is elastic, always changing as already mediated by immanent relation with what it is not—by analogy, as the determination left is inhabited by right, yellow by blue or some other colour etc.—identity is, because it is not. Immanent differentiation within human identity invokes dialectical moments of negation (contradiction) and double negation (assimilation) in a movement of elevation (sublation). Accordingly, gain emerges from loss—so experience and finer determinations of identity within encounter and relation. Sublation is a moment of becoming as a dialectical mediation of contradiction (alien) and assimilation (integrated) in incremental change that is intrinsic to formation—in education, maturation and competency—so elasticity of identity and growth in the capacity for relationality and empathy. (With reference to Science of Logic;
Phenomenology of Spirit; Philosophy of Mind; Lectures on Logic; Philosophy of Right)

According to the gospels, a certain divestment or loss is gain; there is nothing to lose but a perception of loss—yet real loss necessarily prefaces loss as gain; loss of loss is losing the fear of loss (Phenomenology of Spirit). These dynamics are christological: God relinquishes presumed inviolability as kenotic and is paradoxical in disclosure by divestment within the theological scandal of Christ crucified (loss) that prefaces superlative creativity and gift. Christology represents a radical new possibility for human subjectivity—as the formation of specifically Christian identity through loss and gain that correlates with death and resurrection. Losing the fear of loss is a freedom to reinterpret perceptions of loss within life. Loss of loss is non-grasping at identity, especially by tribal determinations; human freedom is open to new mediations of self and therefore relationality, with space for (re)formation within the most adventurous narrative of human existence—the unnerving venture of loss (negation) and gain (double negation) in (trans)formation. This impetus is pervasive in Hegel (especially Philosophy of Religion: The Consummate Religion).

By reference to Hegel and Hegel's interpreters, the following aphoristic sequences present (2) tribal scenarios of presumed gain that is loss, (3) peculiar loss that is gain, (4) though recognized retrospectively, even as (5) the truth of predication in dialectical moments and movement is a dynamic site of (6) creativity in (7) continual formation within the elasticity of Christian identity and so human possibility.

(2) Tribal gain without loss

Contrary to asserting and presumably securing determined identity, identity assertion is already implicated in differentiation. Hegel posits identity as identity and non-identity by negation and relation: any entity is by reference to its negation—a is, because there is non-a, so b, c, d, etc.; recognizing this inherent differentiation within identity is also the possibility of relation—that a relates to non-a within self-reflexive determinations of identity. This evaluation contrasts with assertions of identity that demand tribal immunity from any possible negation—a is only a; therefore b, c, d represent potential threat. Tribally, a is invariably amplified to A. (Science of Logic; Lectures on Logic)
(2.1) Identity politics and identity reticence

In making an appeal for the inviolability of any tribal identity, identity politics presumably promotes mutual toleration and affirmation of all tribal entities. Yet any tribal assertion of immunity from critique concerning its valuations and practices effectively isolates that tribe from all other tribes and any recognition of our fragile, anxious and invariably fractured humanity. With each tribe claiming priority marginal status and invoking political privilege as imperative, identity politics generates an unexpected nemesis—resentment, even open antagonism.

A paradoxical principle of identity reticence and so continuity with all humanity is here necessary. Christian testimony to fractured human existence, so incomplete identity, articulates the perennial elusiveness of wholly integrated identity, which contemporary identity politics presumes to establish. Contrary to any privileged claim to inviolable tribal identity, this theological recognition is a prerequisite for reticence in tribal assertion. By contrast to the multiplication of tribal identities, each competing for exclusive regard as intrinsic to particular identity, our fractured humanity is potentially kenotic as intentionally self-deferring. This is Christian, following Paul’s rejection of any privileged claim to tribal identity—as neither Jew nor Greek (Žižek Interrogating the Real). Conferred and received as a gift, identity exhibited within generous self-deference for others is a specifically Christian perspective.

(2.2) Contradiction: with or without formation?

In assertion of identity, negation is immanent within identity (a implies non-a). (Hegel) Derrida suggests that identity is deconstructed, negated by what it excludes in assertion—for example, in assertion of white by exclusion of black, white is nevertheless already defined by black; in deconstructing identity, the derivative entity becomes visible (Writing and Difference). Tribal assertion exhibits the response of a derivative identity subsequently reversing and repeating the same oppositional posture—therefore invoking negation (deconstruction) without self-reflexive double negation (sublation). Hegel’s dialectic of negation and double negation exhibits identity as also non-identity, so movement and growth by contradiction, recognition, assimilation (change) and empathy. (Logic; Aesthetics)
(2.3) Human dignity and identity politics

Desire for integral human dignity as meaningful work, health, education, belonging, positive relationships, recognition and freedom is perennial. Yet this common concept of human dignity has paradoxically, been displaced by contemporary identity politics to the detriment of dignity applicable to all. Consequently, nothing can be critiqued. Any common concept of human dignity is invariably scuttled; if one tribe can decline such dignity, so can another. In Paul’s neither Jew nor Greek, so non-tribal identity, all are equal as to humanity in Christ (Žižek Universal Exception). The realization of a common concept of universal human dignity was made possible through such Christian influences.

(3) Question and answer, loss and gain

The sustained question concerning human identity (What are we?) implies a substantive answer. Yet every instance of announcing it (We are this!), eventually lapses (as not this either). Presumed substantiations of identity are invariably negated—so precipitating continual crises of seeking identity (Are we this?). The perennial differential between question and answer is crucial to human life as dynamic not static. (Hegel Logic) We do not need to answer the unanswerable identity question (Who are we?). Paradoxically, distinctive identity is received as also pliable in continual transformation by loss and gain within the difference between recurring question and elusive answer.

(3.1) "I am not this either"

Within a sustained encounter with a particular focus as to life’s meaning—whether religious, political or traditional—a person may finally respond, “I am not this”; what I am is something else. This can occur several times in a lifetime. Every pursuit of identity in something else—as a modification, supplement or new choice—is eventually recognized too as inadequate. Within every person is a tacit void that is expressed in conceding, “I am not this either”.

Inasmuch as a symbolic order is invested so as to bind or stabilize a composite identity, this is never wholly encompassed by a particular symbolic reality. (Lacan) Crisis occurs in recognizing that identity inscribed in any symbolic reality is finally “not this".
Recognition—that I am “not this” is an implicit critique of any focus by which I can say, “I am this”.

Within Christian messaging concerning humanity, an essential identity cannot be secured, for human identity is either elusive as continually deferred or clearly fractured. Within Christian faith, my identity is no longer sought, for the human reality of being fractured as consciously “not this”, is intrinsic to specifically Christian identity received as gift. (With reference to Žižek Indivisible; Less than Nothing)

(3.2) Loss within peculiar relationality

Force is exhibited by counter-pressure; it is relative to and sustained by resistance. If force prevails, movement occurs; without resistance, force is converted into change, ceasing to be force. Force is a moment mediated by resistance. Force and resistance are dialectically interactive; each is implicated in the other. Actual force is only sustained by not prevailing over resistance. (With reference to Hegel Phenomenology of Spirit) What implications emerge in identity being mediated dialectically—quintessentially through a peculiar resistance within relation as by experiencing visceral loss in turning the other cheek and by vulnerable relationality with an antagonist (love for enemies)?

(3.3) Identity mediated through loss

What is lost in losing life is a particular grasp on presumed identity that is always already contested. Re-cognizing loss prefaces gain in going beyond self-determination to engage the mediation of loss by reconciliation with the elasticity of human identity—so self-reflexive pliability in personal formation. (With reference to Hegel Lectures on Logic)

(4) Retrospective elasticity

We generate narrative by selecting specific causes from among the myriad tacit causes for the effects that we desire among many implicit effects. What is made explicit about the past, so cause, exists within interpretation toward certain effects. There can be alternative narratives for the relationship between past and present.
(4.1) Retrospective necessity

A decision might not have occurred. Something else might have been decided, but this did not happen. By its occurrence, one option among many possible options has turned out to be decisive.

We are free to choose among many possibilities. In making a decision by a process of selection, we whittle down these possibilities to a single choice; this final choice among several choices becomes a necessity; it was the only decision that could have been made. Even a “wrong” decision can prove to be necessary in terms of subsequent discoveries or creative modifications, which would not have occurred if that particular initial decision had not been made.

If a decision was necessary, it also had to emerge as such through encountering the contingency of many choices; this is retrospective necessity (Žižek Monstrosity).

Necessity is not determinism. Having freely chosen something, we feel that this particular contingency was necessary—that this contingent choice with its contiguous commitments could not have been otherwise; it was seemingly always necessary. Similarly, with a vocational choice, betrothal or a decision of faith, a specific decision as an act of trust and commitment, retrospectively, colours everything leading to its unique occurrence and subsequent possibilities.

(4.2) Retrospective valuation; prospective effect

Forgiveness creates a new future, retrospectively, by changing the past; evaluation of a particular event is changed, which effectively changes its impact on the present and future. A presumably just valuation of a past event is exchanged for another, seemingly unjust valuation, opening an entirely different future. Forgiveness suspends just rendition of a past action. The retrospective effect of forgiveness is also prospective. In this way, forgiveness is entirely creative, even with the past. By contrast to “poetic justice” as the righting of cosmic imbalance, God forgives, for they do not know what they do, throwing everything out of balance. (Žižek Parallax)
(4.3) Retrospective loss of loss

Loss of loss is a continuous attitude—as no longer clinging to a presumptive determination of self to discover through loss, dynamic alterability within formation. This is often only recognized after the fact—so recognizing that the process itself is the real goal of arrival. (With reference to Hegel Lectures on Logic) Implications for this extended formation of Christian identity include: continuous non-arrival, while arriving at new places of human possibility by surprise and gift in grace; continuous redemption so that retrospectively, the past transformed is no longer loss but prefaces human flourishing; continuous pliability as to context, exhibiting dynamic ethics of intelligent generosity not ambit prescription.

(5) Truth and predication

Truth is now commonly cast in binary antagonism with relative perspective. Yet truth is dialectically dynamic. Contemporary relativity of any assertion is consistent with skepticism’s variegated but sustained perspective on our inability to know the whole and so voiding any assertion of truth; accordingly, there is only relative opinion. Hegel’s dialectical thought affirms the universal truth of something (e.g. goodness); particular expression of goodness is true as a moment within a universal concept. Even if negated as only particular, relative to a context, this expression contributes to truth—for all phases of particularity contribute dialectically to a universally true concept. (Lectures on Logic; Phenomenology of Spirit; Philosophy of Right; Philosophy of History)

(5.1) Dialectically true and non-true

A margin of difference exists between perceptions of any particular thing and what anything actually is. Simultaneously, something can be true and non-true. (Hegel Science of Logic) This would be contradictory if awareness were merely static. Precisely because life and time exhibit movement, contradiction and assimilation, awareness is dynamic—dialectical, so movement too within expanding acuity. Within time or between each other, we experience change in our perceptions of many things. This is not an invitation to inert indifference whereby we can make a vacuous appeal to my truth and your truth.
There is tangible existence so also, dialectical engagement between self and life and so between others, self and life. Within this movement, tension between true and non-true is absolved as known deeply, assimilated within communities of shared purpose, even if finely variegated perceptions of self, others and life are never finally harmonized. We presuppose and posit what is true as we encounter tangible hard edges of life with others who also presuppose and posit what is true. What is true is exposed to being non-true, not only among others but also at another time for oneself. This is the possibility of learning, formation, enhanced perception and empathy.

(5.2) Truth: moments and movement

Truth is dynamic as moments and movement. For example, hunger negates my present equanimity; sustained hunger can negate my existence. By eating, the negation of hunger is negated and sublated as nourishment. Truth here is composite, dialectical, exhibiting variegated moments—truth of need, nourishment, provisioning and acquisition—as moments of negation and double negation within the dynamic movement of living, economics and ethics. Truth is represented by moments and movement—here by hunger and its negation, so nourishment as an impetus to provisioning and variegated modes of acquisition—with implications for negotiating any composite ethical formation. (With reference to Hegel Lectures on Logic; Philosophy of Right)

(5.3) Pliable predication and dynamic identity

We often describe someone by a particular predicate (K is humorous, honest, tacitum or lazy etc.), which may or may not be accurate. When we assert that someone is good, this description is not necessarily illuminated by the predicate goodness. A predicate can become a focus of interrogation, for example: What is goodness? Within what circumstances is goodness being ascribed?

A singular predicate can dominate our perception of a person. There is also equivocation in ascribing any predicate as to how someone is truly this or not quite that, perhaps devolving into diverse opinions or disagreement.
Even if minutely, our sense of self is always changing in renegotiating some received or attributed predicates, while also exploring and honing new ones. This phenomenon exhibits our capacity for dynamic identity within time amid life's contingencies. (Hegel *Lectures on Logic*)

Within contemporary identity politics, tribal identities are readily asserted as inviolate, each presumably substantiated by fixed predicates as immune to critique, so generating self-justification and assertive demand for recognition or resources amid equally competing tribes.

Precisely within its incompleteness, identity is dynamic by continual formation through pliable predication that is reinterpreted through change, challenge, critique, surprise, anticipation and creative reception as gift. This dynamic is normative within Christian experience.

(5.4) Predication and identity

A *doodad* eludes specific description as to what it is—like a *thingamajig*. With the addition of a personalized doodad, an object assumes a subjective character. (Crites) Fashion offers small gratuitous modifications to a consumer item; a superfluous but enamouring feature is added, a doodad, which makes the item personally compellingly. By the addition of a doodad, an objective thing becomes subjective—through investment of subjective feeling—as a tacit predicate or facet of identity after Hegel's *objective becoming subjective* through predication (*Phenomenology of Spirit*). Whether by default or decision, the assumption or adoption of selected predicates—significant or trivial—effectively defines identity.

(5.5) Christian predication

A Christian has a singular defining identity, which is Christ. Within this identity, all predication is subsumed *in Christ*. We no longer seek out selected predicates in asserting that I am *this* or *that* so as to define identity; our predication is received in grace. This singular predication—*Christian*—offers our truest qualities. This name represents a person who has relinquished the task of determining identity by earnest self-predication; self-designation as *Christian* now sutures the qualities of any I—so I *no longer live but Christ lives within me*. This is our dynamic identity in Christ. (With reference to Žižek *Less than Nothing*)
(6) Creativity

Creativity invokes resistance because it brings into being something previously not existing. Creativity negates non-being, arousing awareness of non-being, which otherwise remains latent and undisturbed within the way things are. By arousing awareness of non-being, creativity is also a tacit negation of the status quo; within its capacity to generate something new, it represents the possibility of disturbing or displacing a present state of virtual somnambulism (sleepwalking). Creativity that invokes something genuinely new does not threaten existing circumstances that are dynamic in their continuing expression—as growing, changing and developing—so with continual iterations of transformation. (With reference to Hegel Phenomenology of Spirit)

(6.1) Action as spira mirabilis (in formation of identity)

An action is initiated and executed with a purpose, having its intentional origin within. Yet an action is unknown as to its possible reception among others and effects within life.

Reflexively, we are acted on by an action that we have initiated. An action initiated with purpose is further discovered through acting. This could appear to be circular; it is like the expanding spiral of a screw—a spira mirabilis—that turning increases its grip—gaining further understanding of an action within life.

Purpose is through acting—dynamic—further illuminated, refined and advanced beyond its initial conception. Without initiation, an intended action is empty. Without action, engagement with life remains undeveloped within specific challenges and generally depleted as to imagination.

If the purpose of an action is mistaken, flawed in its execution or misunderstood by others, this action is nevertheless already dynamic. Stirring personal commitment, an action can also invoke a spira mirabilis of intelligent evaluation, development and further applied possibilities among others. (With reference to Hegel Phenomenology of Spirit)
In terms of character formation and possibilities among others, it is better to act and perhaps to fail than perpetually to hesitate and so not to act at all.

(6.2) Time and acting

While time is familiar, our momentary now is an enigma, advancing and receding as always self-cancelling. (Hegel *Phenomenology of Spirit*; *Philosophy of Nature*)

We are suspended between what is not yet and what is no longer over a differential now from which we anticipate a future and reflect on a past. By both desire and nostalgia, we seek to possess our elusive now. In yearning for a now that is not yet and longing for a now that is no longer, our now is a mobile stage on which paradoxically, we engage a future that might not be and a past that has ceased to be.

Now is truly known and inhabited when received as a gift, yet by a particular appropriation—by acting. If an act is intended but does not occur, nothing occurs. By acting, a new sequence of events is inducted into human life, invoking present responsibilities and continuing commitments that occur within every new now of life.

Here too, neither future nor past are negated, for present actions underpinned by gratitude are nourished by anticipation through memory—of having received generously through the tangible actions of others, so anticipating a future in which we can also act generously, creatively, out of gratitude.

(6.3) Identity between past and future

Is identity an aggregate of past experiences or is it constituted by expectation? It is both, yet the weighting placed on one or the other can have very different effects on present identity. Identity by aggregation is the sum of influences and decisions that now provide stock ingredients for present demands and future challenges. Identity constituted by expectation is continually rejuvenated by anticipation on the cusp of new decisions and commitments. There are similar volitional dynamics present in both aggregation and expectation; yet one impetus to identity inclines toward a receding past, while the other leans into an approaching future.
(7) Conclusion: Elasticity of Christian identity

Identity is inherently differential—a spectre that traumatizes identity politics! Immanent differentiation and relation within identity is exhibited in dialectical movement as moments of contradiction, assimilation and change. With reference to Hegel (and interpreters), human identity encompasses differentiation as negation that is intrinsic to the elasticity of affirmative identity determinations—expressed as becoming through encounter, relation, experience and growth. Identity determinations are elastic within any exploration of negation of negation or sublation—expressed as self-reflexive discovery, intelligence and creativity in continual formation. Christian identity formation is this elasticity—through dynamic christological loss and gain toward relationality and empathy within life.

Hegel references


Elasticity of Christian Identity | Stephen Curkpatrick


Additional references


