

Research Article

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Derrida's *Donner – le temps* Session 6: what this previously unpublished session teaches us about *Given Time: I*

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Abstract: Derrida's *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* is one of his most celebrated works, though Volume II only came out in French in 2021. Volume I ends with Session Five of the seminar while Volume II opens with Seven, with Session Six only seeing the light of day in early 2024. My essay explains this missing session and goes into some detail examining the relationship of Derrida's project to Kant, briefly mentioned a few times in Volume I, as well as to some of Derrida's own earlier essays. As *Given Time* gives us his most concentrated and thorough discussions of the gift, this missing chapter is essential to grasp this important topic.

Keywords: Derrida, Kant, gift, deconstruction, post-modernism

The “I” in the title of Derrida's 1992 *Given Time: I. Counterfeit Money* has long called for a “II,” a second volume which would give us material from the other half of the seminar the book is based on. This anticipation was deferred until 2021's publication of the second half in French, but that did not bring the deferral to closure. Volume I ends with Session Five and Volume II begins with Seven, leaving out Session Six. The long-delayed publication of this missing session in *Derrida Today*¹ is significant given that *Given Time: I* presents among other things Derrida's most focused discussion of the gift, an important topic in recent continental philosophy as well as in his own work as Derrida highlights in the book's Foreword. The Session is very much worth reading, both for itself and for the light it sheds on Volume I's project.

My purposes in this article are threefold. First, I will lay out Session Six's basic structure to briefly convey its contents. While not among Derrida's most difficult works – a rather high bar to clear – few of his writings are particularly easy to read the first time. I hope to orient the reader by giving them a kind of road map to the Session, opening it up in particular to non-experts. Second, I will explain how this Session relates to the published and translated *Given Time: I*, one of Derrida's more widely read works.² Third, I will expand and elaborate on some of the points raised in the Session. I will try to indicate the differences between the first more recapitulating action and the other two which try to go beyond summation. Of course, these differences will become far more apparent once the Session has been published and, as Derrida insisted throughout his career, summarizing and commenting cannot be rigorously separated. This article will often interweave the three functions as I connect and elaborate on what I expound, and expound by connecting and elaborating.

¹ “Session Six” is scheduled to be published in *Derrida Today* Vol. 17.1, 2024. I was graciously given a copy of the translation by the translators. All citations employ this pagination.

² A satisfactory discussion of Session Six's relation to Volume II would surpass the limitations of this essay. Readers interested in this topic may want to consult Rosenthal, “On Derrida's *Donner le temps*, Volumes I & II.”

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In general, I have found that Session Six considerably enriches our understanding of *Given Time: I* which can, in turn, be used to appreciate it better – a process of reciprocal clarification I will be exploiting throughout this article. Specifically, Session Six gives the themes and topics of what came before it a unity that is not always easy to see or maintain in one's mind as one makes one's way through those readings and discussions. I believe we should see it as a continuation and sharpening of the project of exploring an alternate logic to our traditional metaphysical one. One of the best ways to appreciate this project is to examine the brief, often cryptic comments made in *Given Time: I* about Kant since he represents an important precedent and touchstone for the scheme of setting out concepts.

1 A Retrospective Unity

Session Six begins with a look back at the readings given so far and ends looking forward to what will be read over the rest of the course. Inside these borders, the session is largely devoted to disputing the idea that writing can have stable boundaries. The main topic in this neatly structured text is that it is “structurally impossible”³ for texts to maintain determinate structures. Paradoxically, this point about the intrinsic dispersion of texts retrospectively imbues *Given Time: I*'s various discussions and readings with considerable unity, a unity Derrida rarely indicates and, when he does, obliquely. Derrida's reading of himself in the opening pages of this Session represents a valuable analysis of Volume I that shows its readers why these particular texts and ideas all go together. It is united by the disruption of any apparently fixed unity.

This brief opening review claims that *Given Time: I*'s two major topics – an analysis of the gift in Chapters 1 and 2 and a reading of Baudelaire's story “Counterfeit Money” in Chapters 3 through 5 – both demonstrate the same thing. They establish “the disseminate divisibility... of each subjective or objective agency, therefore of every identity.”⁴ These discussions both undermine the idea of self-identical substantial entities or notions by challenging the more basic ideas of subjects and objects. They do this by presenting entities – gifts and stories – that possess the unusual property of essentially exceeding their own essence, intrinsically being ecstatic. They overflow any boundary determining what they are or mean determinately because, for one thing, the components that make them what they are continuously waver and change. The facets of giving that must be kept distinct for it to retain its meaning keep switching places with their opposites – give/exchange, *Gift*-gift, true/counterfeit money – while “all the positions” in the story “Counterfeit Money” such as the characters, their actions, even the status of the story itself, are “exchangeable there to infinity, in an endless circulation.”⁵

The point that Session Six is making overtly – one which remains more implicit in *Given Time: I* – is that these strange analyses parallel each other. Any attempt to give something to someone ends up entangled with incompatible actions such as selling and buying as self-interest inescapably seeps into generosity, while attempts to settle exactly what occurs in Baudelaire's story prove futile as its characters, objects, words, and status do not stand still but change and exchange places. These endless oscillations disrupt the traditional attribution of a stable identity to objects as well as to those subjects engaging with them. Giving a genuine gift, spending real money, writing words with a definite meaning, knowing what a story actually means – these all prove impossible once their objects have become too slippery to take hold of, which undermines attempts to define the subject as giver, spender, writer, or knower. These structures are “not subjective or subjectible,” worrying the “identificatory tranquility” with which we blithely apply these base categories and those built upon them to everything.⁶ Derrida concludes, in something of an understatement, “this multiplicity makes the grammar of the gift... very difficult to manage.”⁷

Those who followed the course of *Given Time: I* here will recognize that an object that *was* manageable, given by a *managing* subject, could not be a gift anyway, making this disruptive multiplicity the condition of

³ Derrida, “Session Six,” 2.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Derrida, *Given Time*, 150–1.

⁶ Ibid., 170, 37.

⁷ Derrida, “Session Six,” 4–5.

both its possibility and impossibility, a conceptual structure that appears frequently in Derrida's works. We must nevertheless endeavor to think about it, even if only – or especially if only – it only offers us unthinkable terms to think of it. “Even if the gift were never anything but a simulacrum, one must still *render an account* of the possibility of this simulacrum.”⁸ Thus, Session Six continues the project of *Given Time: I*: the pursuit of that which “gives itself to be thought as the impossible.”⁹ Derrida does not see an absolute dead end here. “Unthinkable” is an indexical term: an idea is unthinkable by *a particular* way of thinking; there is no unthinkability in-itself. Rather than end thinking, this conundrum can bring us to rethink thinking, to think new thoughts that *can* think these ideas so resistant to traditional logic and grammar.

Session 6 then announces its attempt at “a first motion which leads us to think beyond or below any discourse attempting to say the thing of the gift, the thing gift in terms of subject or object.”¹⁰ Derrida is straining against the conceptual structure that organizes philosophical thought and talk, “an ontological grammar that is exceeded by what we are trying to talk about here.”¹¹ What he is pointing out at the retrospective start of this Session, more explicitly than previously if one notes it, is that the readings and analyses that he has been giving are not fundamentally negative, intended merely to demonstrate limitations or induce puzzlement. Rather, they may help us speak and think otherwise. They can help liberate us from the stifling confinement of casting everything as subjects or objects since, e.g., “‘Counterfeit Money’ had refined the question of the thing.”¹² The story circulates around the questionable status of its titular object but it resists being categorized as an object for new reasons, not given in Volume I. Money can't be a thing because its purpose is to stand in for things in exchange, but it must have the physical properties that define the essence of things in order to be counterfeited. This financial insecurity leads us to rethink objects as well as subjective intentions, which brings the *other* main topic of Volume I – the gift – in its wake. “The question ‘what is money?’ comes back very quickly to the question with which it is obviously connected: ‘what is a thing?’ And that this question imposes itself with such necessity as soon as it is a matter of the gift is significant.”¹³ Derrida thus re-views his work until now as deeply interconnected.

He then previews where this points us in the rest of the Session. The story's topic of money moves us to the topic of the thing which, in Mauss and Heidegger, “is only thinkable in the gift, from or in view of the gift.”¹⁴ The unity of Volume I's topics (money, thing, and gift) leads us toward the authors he will spend this Session and the second half of the seminar reading. That will take up Heidegger's discussion of the thing as given or destined¹⁵ but Derrida is moving there in this transitional Session by way of Mauss' *The Gift* since that “is in its own way an essay on the thing” that “opens with and is organized according to a question about the thing.”¹⁶ Instead of reading Mauss directly,¹⁷ if there is such a thing, Derrida spends the rest of Session Six reading three readings of Mauss: Lévi-Strauss', Lacan's, and Mauss' reading of himself.¹⁸ He opened Session 6 by unifying the

⁸ Derrida, *Given Time*, 31, see also *ibid.* 76.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁰ Derrida, “Session Six,” 5.

¹¹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 18.

¹² Derrida, “Session Six,” 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 6–7.

¹⁴ 9. Connections with Mauss exceed the ones that Derrida mentions, if we pursue them. For instance, Mauss brings up the *Morgengabe*, the morning gift that gives the morganatic wife Madame de Maintenon discussed in *Given Time*'s Epigraph her titleless title (Mauss, *The Gift*, 171–2).

¹⁵ Derrida, “Session Six,” 8, 33.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 7–8.

¹⁷ It is hard to directly, unironically read statements in the Session such as, “I will read a sufficiently explicit passage on this subject, so that I can dispense with any commentary” (Derrida, “Session Six,” 20). One of Derrida's oft-repeated views is that we cannot fully separate commenting from reading, as he puts in financial terminology in *Given Time: I*: “we are no longer credulous enough to believe that we are setting out from things themselves by avoiding ‘texts’ simply by avoiding quotation or the appearance of ‘commentary.’ The most apparently direct writing... which is supposedly in direct contact with the ‘thing itself,’ this writing is ‘on credit’” (Derrida, *Given Time*, 100).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20, 29, 8, respectively.

two main topics of *Given Time: I*, and he spends much of the rest of it showing us how the same notions turn up in all of these disparate readings.

Derrida explains at the end of the session what he is seeking with these readings. He is looking at “the conceptual supports that organize, for Mauss, Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, this whole discourse on the thing and the gift or debt” for “the fuel to broach a thought that tries to think the thing as gift... without or on this side of concepts of subject/object.”¹⁹ The escape velocity required to think otherwise needs a highly combustible fuel, one powerful enough to restructure the conceptuality that supports traditional thought. These topics – “the thing and the gift” – both within these readings and applied to these readings may at least start the process so that we can, once again, “begin by the impossible.”²⁰ If these are unthinkable by an ontological grammar organized around subjects and objects, what kind of grammar *could* think it?

Our charge is “to render account and reason (*reddere rationem*) of that very thing, the gift, that demands an unheard-of-accounting.”²¹ Any gift that can be given an account of or a count (both senses of “*logos*”) stops being a gift because a gift that has a determinate value fixes what is owed in return, unavoidably bringing lawful reciprocity in its wake. Knowing that my present cost \$20 sets my expectations for how much gratitude I am due – more than for simply holding a door open, less than handing over a car. But perhaps a different *logos*, a language which uses another grammar to say thoughts of different concepts, could say and think this “unheard-of-accounting.” Any such thought could not but appear as an “*alogos*”²² to those ensconced in traditional thought as the sole legitimate, universally applicable reason. Arguments could not persuade them to alter their reasoning since the kinds of reasons that should be recognized as persuasive depends on the reasoning one employs, filtering out any incommensurable arguments from the start.

One way to read *Given Time: I*’s strategy is as an argument by accretion: it examines one familiar thing after another to expose the same structure operating in each – e.g., an intrinsic exceeding of boundaries which creates an inescapable indeterminacy, resistance to subjective intention and objective stability, an inability to present themselves as themselves without stopping being themselves while also somehow announcing themselves (as impossible), having conditions of possibility that are simultaneously conditions of their impossibility, and so on. As we work through these ideas in one context after another, their alarming strangeness rubs off. We no longer feel obligated to adopt the kind of outrage at an epistemological abomination that would prompt eminent philosophers to, say, protest the awarding of honors to a philosopher whose work they had not read. These new thoughts gradually become thinkable by changing thinking to accommodate them. “A plural logic of the aporia thus takes shape.”²³

Given Time: I can be read as Derrida’s attempt to work out something like a schema of concepts that can think certain (non)phenomena that remain recalcitrant to standard notions such as counterfeit, texts, or gifts. Incommensurable with the concepts we have counted with and counted on for so long, this unheard-of *logos* is able to address the topics calling for an account in Derrida’s writings. “One can only think, desire, and say the impossible, according to the measureless measure [*mesure sans mesure*] of the impossible.”²⁴ If these new disseminating units of measurement could be measured by standard measures, if one could evaluate or justify them by traditional thought, they would then not be profoundly new but just variations on the old. A dead end, the literal meaning of “aporia,” blocks your way only if you keep trying to go in the same direction. Such an obstacle could direct your attention to look in a different direction in which it would no longer present an insurmountable problem, a heretofore unnoticed dimension whose space is measured in a way that seems unaccountable at present but that could perhaps draw us into a new counting a little like what Einstein did in science. For his fuel, Derrida’s texts attempt “to transform concepts, to displace them, to turn them against their presuppositions, to reinscribe them in other chains, and little by little to modify the terrain of our work and thereby produce new configurations.”²⁵

¹⁹ Ibid., 33.

²⁰ Derrida, *Given Time*, 6.

²¹ Ibid., 35.

²² Ibid.

²³ Derrida, *Aporias*, 20.

²⁴ Derrida, *Given Time*, 29, translation slightly modified.

²⁵ Derrida, *Positions*, 24.

2 Kant's Impossible Schema

Along with Aristotle, the idea of drawing up a table of concepts invokes Kant. *Given Time*: I mentions or alludes to Kant a number of times but never gives an extended engagement, rarely giving much more than Delphic hints about his relevance to Derrida's project. For instance, one of the longer discussions (spanning over a paragraph) says that a topic “resembles an empty word or a transcendental illusion,” giving to his own “logic a form analogous to Kant's transcendental dialectic;” this leads him to tantalizingly suggest that “perhaps this analogy will help us and perhaps it has an essential relation to the problem of ‘giving-time.’”²⁶ When we look for Derrida to use this analogy to help us, however, its help consists largely in the claims that our analysis must be neither “a simple reproduction of Kant's critical machinery” nor “a matter of rejecting that machinery as old-fashioned,” for “we are implicated in it.”²⁷ There is a little more, but it is dense and cryptic in the extreme, consisting more of gestures toward analyses needed than given.

The reading presented in this article identifies Kant as a constant interlocutor, whether named or not. Among other things, the first *Critique*'s table of all possible categories employable in thought²⁸ presents both a precedent and challenge to Derrida's construction of aporetic concepts. Expanding on *Given Time*: I's unexplored connections is, in my opinion, crucial to appreciating the project of *Given Time*: I which, as I have been arguing above, continues into Session Six. The two are actually mutually illuminating. Session Six's more explicit statements and unifying summaries of Volume I shed light on its gnomic mentions of Kant while Volume I's sketchy connections to Kant help clarify what Derrida is doing in this session. Of course, I will only be able to touch on a few points here.

Many Derridean concepts emerge from his application of an aporetic process to standard or mundane notions. While this gets named and more overtly wielded in his later work, one can spot instances of it occurring much earlier.²⁹ One important element of them is the result of twisting Kant's transcendental inquiry into the conditions of possibility³⁰ into a strange, impossible shape – a conceptual Möbius strip.

For this is the impossible that seems to give itself to be thought here: These conditions of possibility of the gift (that some “one” gives some “thing” to some “one other”) designate simultaneously the conditions of the impossibility of the gift.³¹

Although the notion of conditions of simultaneous impossibility/possibility is itself impossible by normal standards, Derrida shows us how he reaches it step by comprehensible step, as well as how it is at work in a number of the topics he analyzes – part of his argument by accretion. His treatment of Kant's notion leads to what deconstruction generally does: “the irruptive emergence of a new ‘concept,’ a concept that can no longer be, and never could be, included in the previous regime.”³²

“Concept” is in scare quotes here since the whole point is to defy standard ways of conceiving of conception. In seeking not just new concepts but a new concept of concepts, Derrida finds in Kant a surprisingly helpful ally. The fact that even “if the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we

²⁶ Derrida, *Given Time*, 29–30.

²⁷ Ibid., 30.

²⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A80/B106.

²⁹ Indeed, one can read aporias as a variation of the basic deconstructive process, but showing this would take me far afield.

³⁰ Derrida ends his opening discussion of the epigraph with a clear allusion to Kant's transcendental inquiry, one inquiring into the conditions of the possibility of the diversity of readings he gives the epigraph: “How, where, on the basis of what and when can we read this letter fragment as I have done? How could we even divert it as I have done, while still respecting its literality and its language?” (Derrida, *Given Time*, 5). The diversity of readings of this sentence foreshadow those of “Counterfeit Money” later. Many commentators read Derrida as pursuing some form of transcendental inquiry. See Dews, *The Limits of Disenchantment*, 129; Moore, “Arguing with Derrida,” 362; Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 181; Rorty, *Essays on Heidegger and Others*, 93–94, 101; Wood and Bernasconi, *Derrida and “Différance,”* 64; Gasché, *The Tain of the Mirror*, 2, 147, 184, 198; Braver, *A Thing of This World*, 464–9.

³¹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 12, see also ibid. 24, 103, 122. Bennington has discussed why we cannot simply identify Derrida's ideas here with Kant's (Bennington and Derrida, *Derrida*, 118; Bennington, *Interrupting Derrida*, Chapter 13). I thank my reviewers for this reference.

³² Derrida, *Positions*, 42. Derrida had been insisting on this point from earlier: “no concept of metaphysics can describe” trace and *différance* (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 65).

desire it” is what “gives to this structure or to this logic a form analogous to Kant’s transcendental dialectic,”³³ which Kant calls a “logic of illusion.”³⁴ It is in fact by means of this analogy that Derrida frames his project at one point. “We are going to give ourselves over to and engage in the effort of thinking or rethinking a sort of transcendental illusion of the gift.”³⁵ If we are to understand what he is doing, we must engage as well.

The concepts of Kant’s transcendental dialectic – the Ideas of reason – are impossible because they are the results of reason’s demands for the absolute, the unconditioned, the perfect, while experience and the understanding give us only compromised, conditioned, and imperfect phenomena. Reason’s demands cannot be satisfied, but neither can they be ignored for they lie within the very nature of the understanding’s concepts, as the first sentence of the first *Critique* intimates.³⁶ The understanding’s conditioned concepts lead to the conditions of any entity being conditioned, and those conditions in turn being conditioned, and so on. Reason demands an unconditioned completion that can put a stop to this infinite regress and so yield genuine knowledge, but no such thing can be given in any intuition because our understanding can only yield the conditional. The Ideas transcend the conditions required for experience and understanding, a violation of the central lesson of the book which should get them ignominiously cast out of legitimate cognition, but instead, the transcendental dialectic gives them an essential role in thinking. In fact, they are “quite dispensable... even an impediment” to “rational cognition” and, at the same time, “necessary.”³⁷

An Idea defies comprehension by exceeding all limits that our concepts place on them. We cannot use our standard concepts to think it, “though we can have a problematic concept of it.”³⁸ Illusions have a logic – an illogical logic that works with problematic concepts and cannot conceive of the very Ideas that constitute them. “Reason, therefore, *restlessly* seeks the unconditionally necessary and sees itself compelled to assume this *without having any means of making such necessity conceivable*; reason is happy enough if only it can find a concept which is *compatible* with this assumption.”³⁹ While Kant’s overall intent is to wean humanity off of empty speculations about what lies on the far side of our comprehension, he does not forsake the territory entirely as cognitive no man’s land. He closes the *Grounding* by ending rather than concluding his discussion of freedom since an uncaused cause – the foundation of ethics – is another notion that does not fit our concepts. The final sentences of the book are extraordinary. “Even though we do not indeed grasp the practical unconditioned necessity of the moral imperative, we do nevertheless grasp its inconceivability. This is all that can be fairly asked of a philosophy which strives in its principles to reach the very limit of human reason.”⁴⁰ The former sentence could be slid into many a text by Derrida without attracting notice.

Derrida’s aporetic concepts are about the inherently, unstoppably excessive, as are the concepts themselves, as so must be any uncountable account of them.⁴¹ Kant’s “restlessly” seeking reason that continually

³³ Derrida, *Given Time*, 30.

³⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A293/B249.

³⁵ Derrida, *Given Time*, 30.

³⁶ “Human reason has the peculiar fate in one species of its cognitions that it is burdened with questions which it cannot dismiss, since they are given to it as problems by the nature of reason itself, but which it also cannot answer, since they transcend every capacity of human reason” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A vii). This conflict is what motivated the very writing of the book. Even though “metaphysics was called the queen of all the sciences,” people have come to doubt whether “it deserved this title of honor” (Ibid., A viii). Locke came close to settling matters but failed: “although the birth of the purported queen was traced to the rabble of common experience and her pretensions would therefore have been rightly rendered suspicious, nevertheless she still asserted her claims, because in fact this genealogy was attributed to her falsely” (Ibid., A ix). In other words, the queen was accused of being a commoner – who would only be capable of a morganatic marriage – until the genealogy that exposed her as counterfeit was itself exposed as counterfeit. Resonances of Derrida’s discussion echo throughout once one listens for them.

³⁷ “The ideas of reason, unlike the categories, are of no service to the use of our understanding in experience, but quite dispensable, and become even an impediment to the maxims of a rational cognition of nature. Yet in another aspect still to be determined they are necessary” (Kant, *Prolegomena*, 67/331).

³⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A339/B397.

³⁹ Kant, *Grounding*, 62/463, all italics added.

⁴⁰ Ibid., cf. Derrida, *Given Time*, 165n.31.

⁴¹ E.g., “the gift must always give more than one expects” (Derrida, *Given Time*, 155) while, both financially with counterfeit money within “Counterfeit Money” as well as literarily about “Counterfeit Money,” “one could speculate *ad infinitum*” (Ibid., 157, see also Ibid., 93, 145, 151, 158). “We are not through with this ‘logic,’ and what is more one is never through with it” (Ibid., 67).

pushes that which it seeks to grasp out of reach by reaching for it resonates with Derrida's endless deferral: "the desire of presence... carries in itself the destiny of its non-satisfaction. *Différance* produces what it forbids, makes possible the very thing that it makes impossible."⁴² However, like Kant,⁴³ Derrida insists that "the overrunning of the circle by the gift, if there is any, does not lead to a simple, ineffable exteriority that would be transcendent and without relation."⁴⁴ We are not to stare agape at the inconceivable but attempt to "grasp its inconceivability." These (non)phenomena give us an imperative to think the unthinkable, even while still maintaining them as unthinkable – at least by standard standards (this is one of the places where Derrida is closest to Levinas).

The effort to think the groundless ground of this quasi-'transcendental illusion' should not be either—if it is going to be matter of thinking—a sort of adoring and faithful abdication, a simple movement of faith in the face of that which exceeds the limits of experience, knowledge, science, economy—and even philosophy. On the contrary, it is a matter—desire beyond desire—of responding faithfully but also as rigorously as possible.⁴⁵

This rigor is one of the more frustrating features of Derrida's works – when those who do not bother reading him casually accuse him of lacking it.⁴⁶ Certainly, he ends up in strange places, saying and thinking peculiar things, but he arrives there on tremendously rigorous paths. We respond to this solicitation to think about the problems to be thought faithfully to how they behave by constructing deconstructive "problematic concepts" that are "compatible with this assumption" that they exceed present conceivability while enabling us to think these (non)things.

In addition to his transcendental inquiry, Derrida's analyses of aporias such as the gift or hospitality bear more than a passing resemblance to Kant's antinomies, as he occasionally notes. "This aporetic 'logic'"⁴⁷ begins with a common, everyday concept that seems to function unproblematically in everyday usage, then develops its sense into a hyperbolic version of the notion, i.e., one that is absolute and unconditional. The hyperbolic version is impossible to fulfill and breaks the rules of the everyday sense, rendering it profoundly incompatible with our normal practices and understanding.

It is as though hospitality were the impossible: as though the law of hospitality defined this very impossibility,... as though the law of absolute, unconditional, hyperbolic hospitality, as though the categorical imperative of hospitality commanded that we transgress all the laws (in the plural) of hospitality, namely, the conditions, the norms, the rights and the duties that are imposed on hosts and hostesses, on the men or women who give a welcome as well as the men or women who receive it... In other words, there would be an antinomy, an insoluble antinomy, a non-dialectizable antinomy between... those rights and duties that are always conditioned and conditional⁴⁸

Yet the hyperbolic version, impossible as it is to enact or appear in experience, cannot be dismissed as unrealistic and irrelevant, for two reasons. The standard conditioned meaning entails it once fully examined and developed (that's how we arrived at it in the first place) and the absolute sense of the term gives the practice its orientation and ultimate sense. We can give up neither compromised nor uncompromised for the latter gives meaning to the former while the former gives concrete reality to the latter. Nevertheless, they are

⁴² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 143.

⁴³ "Reason should not flap its wings impotently, without leaving the spot, in a space that for it is empty, namely, the space of transcendent concepts that is called the intelligible world, and thereby lose itself among mere phantoms of the brain" (Kant, *Grounding*, 61/462).

⁴⁴ Derrida, *Given Time*, 30.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

⁴⁶ See Christopher Norris: "Where these objections [made by Derrida's opponents] miss the mark is in not discerning how rigorously Derrida argues his way in following out the various contradictory entailments of the texts he reads" (Dasenbrock, *Redrawing the Lines*, 194).

⁴⁷ Derrida, *Aporias*, 77.

⁴⁸ Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 75–7. Bennington has touched on this (Bennington and Derrida, *Derrida*, 286), as has Naas (Naas, *Derrida from Now On*, Chapter 1). I thank my reviewers for these references.

incompatible. “These two regimes of law, of the law and the laws, are thus both contradictory, antinomic, and inseparable. They both imply and exclude each other, simultaneously.”⁴⁹

Kant’s strategy in the *Grounding* is to start with “the common idea of duty and of moral laws”⁵⁰ and develop it all the way out. This leads to paradoxes and contradictions which require a thinking that transcends common sense as “ordinary human reason forced to go outside its sphere.... When ordinary practical reason cultivates itself, there imperceptibly arises in it a dialectic which compels it to seek help in philosophy.”⁵¹ The dialectic that results from the full unpacking of our shared understanding of duty sets up two radically contrasting systems of behavior. These are distinguished by whether or not the actor is motivated by self-interest, i.e., if something comes back to the actor – precisely the focus of Derrida’s analysis of the gift.⁵² “In willing from duty the renunciation of all interest is the specific mark distinguishing a categorical imperative from a hypothetical one.”⁵³ A moral act done from duty can never be present. It is impossible to appear as an object or perform as a subject in the world of experience for everything there must be causally determined and this gets cashed out in terms of self-interested inclinations in the psychological realm. In fact, Kant tells us that language resists us here since our attempts to talk about duty often end up inadvertently talking about something else. “There must never here be forgotten that no example can show, i.e., empirically, whether there is any such imperative at all. Rather, care must be taken lest all imperatives which are seemingly categorical may nevertheless be covertly hypothetical.”⁵⁴

However, science and everyday empirical sense’s interdiction presents no impediment to its legitimacy or obligating force: “reason unrelentingly commands actions of which the world has perhaps hitherto never provided an example and whose feasibility might well be doubted by one who bases everything upon experience.”⁵⁵ The two systems are incompatible, giving rise to what he calls “a dialectic of reason, since the freedom attributed to the will seems to contradict the necessity of nature” but philosophy “cannot give up the concept of nature any more than that of freedom.”⁵⁶ We are obligated to do our duty even though it is, strictly speaking about the world we experience and know, impossible. Moreover, it is the unconditional duty that gives any moral meaning to actual behavior, just what Derrida says about hyperbolic virtues.⁵⁷

49 Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, 79–81.

50 Kant, *Grounding*, 2/389.

51 Ibid., 17/405.

52 “For there to be a gift, there must be no reciprocity, return, exchange, counter-gift, or debt. If the other gives me back or owes me or has to give me back what I give him or her, there will not have been a gift” (Derrida, *Given Time*, 12).

53 Ibid., 38/431.

54 Kant, *Grounding*, 28/419. “If we look more closely at our planning and striving, we everywhere come upon the dear self, which is always turning up, and upon which the intent of our actions is based rather than upon the strict command of duty (which would often require self-denial)” (ibid., 20/407). “If the gift is another name of the impossible, we still think it, we name it, we desire it. We intend it. And this even if or because or to the extent that we never encounter it, we never know it, we never verify it, we never experience it in its present existence or in its phenomenon. The gift itself – we dare not say the gift in itself – will never be confused with the presence of its phenomenon” (Derrida, *Given Time*, 29). “The link between morality and the arithmetic, economy, or calculation of pleasures imprints an equivocation on any praise of good intentions. In giving the reasons for giving, in saying the reason of the gift, it signs the end of the gift” (Ibid., 148).

55 Kant, *Grounding*, 20/408. In discussing some philosophers’ attempt to give an empirical source for ethics, Kant once more has recourse to the notion of counterfeit pedigree: “everything empirical is not only quite unsuitable as a contribution to the principle of morality, but is even highly detrimental to the purity of morals... In a dream of sweet illusions (in which not Juno but a cloud is embraced) there is substituted for morality some bastard patched up from limbs of quite varied ancestry” (Ibid., 34/426).

56 Kant, *Grounding*, 56/456. Derrida’s counterpart would be “the impossibility or the double bind of the gift” (Derrida, *Given Time*, 16).

57 “That no human being will ever act adequately to what the pure idea of virtue contains does not prove in the least that there is something chimerical in this thought. For it is only by means of this idea that any judgment of moral worth or unworth is possible; and so it necessarily lies at the ground of every approach to moral perfection” (Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A315/B372). This comment occurs in the midst of Kant’s appropriation of Plato’s Ideas as “something that not only could never be borrowed from the senses, but that even goes far beyond the concepts of the understanding (with which Aristotle occupied himself), since nothing encountered in experience could ever be congruent to it,” an appropriation enabled by the hermeneutic principle that “it is not at all unusual to find that we understand [an author] even better than he understood himself” (Ibid., A313/B370, A314/B370). For more

Only critical philosophy's examination of the structure of our minds can deliver us from the puzzles contained within these everyday notions. "Ordinary human reason... tries to obtain information and clear instruction regarding the source of its own principle... so that reason may escape from the perplexity of opposite claims.... Peace will be found only in a thorough critical examination of our reason."⁵⁸ And yet, Kant concludes that this investigation ends up depriving us of the very information that would bring it closure, indefinitely deferring any peaceful rest. "The satisfaction of reason is only further and further postponed by the continual inquiry after the condition."⁵⁹ The way these ideas differ from themselves and the understanding's concepts perpetually defers completion of the critique that teaches us these differences.

The freedom that ethics is based on radically surpasses all of our efforts to explain it not due to contingent limitations of our comprehension, but to its nature.

Reason would overstep all its bounds if it undertook to explain how pure reason can be practical. This is exactly the same problem as explaining how freedom is possible. For we can explain nothing but what we can reduce to laws whose object can be given in some possible experience... Therefore, the idea of freedom can never admit of comprehension or even of insight.⁶⁰

Its incompatibility with experience prevents it from even being conceivable. "But this freedom is not a concept of experience, nor can it be such, since it always holds, even though experience shows the opposite of those requirements represented as necessary under the presupposition of freedom."⁶¹ Freedom is inexplicable since it violates the meaning of what it is meant to explain. Accounts of actions have to appeal to their causes in motivations whereas morality directly removes the possibility of all such appeals, thus sawing off the branch it is thinking on. Its explanation eliminates the grounds of all explanations. "The subjective impossibility of explaining freedom of the will is the same as the impossibility of discovering and explaining an interest which man can take in moral laws,"⁶² which would contradict morality's disinterestedness. Being moral – and so being free – surgically removes its own intelligibility. Freedom is thus the condition for the possibility of explaining moral action – we must attribute freedom to ourselves to account for our capacity to act morally – while at the same time being the condition of its impossibility.

Kant created antinomies as an innovative form of argumentation to be able to think these strangely shaped ideas rather than just dismissing them or dismantling them by settling on one or the other side of the conflict. Rather than fleeing that boogeyman of all logic, contradiction, he found a way to harness its power, opening the door for later thinkers such as Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche to explore what this formerly forbidden underside of logic can teach us. Kant insists that there is no contradiction since the two sides actually represent a switch in viewpoints, with morality taking us as noumenal and science as phenomenal. He solves the illusory contradiction by demonstrating that we have two radically incommensurable aspects which are so heterogeneous that they require entirely different kinds of *logos*. Rather than dissolving our aporia, this solution explains why we "reason should be burdened with an idea which involves us in a perplexity."⁶³ It is by introducing an interminable difference at the heart of our reason, a "disseminate divisibility" into our subjectivity, that Kant deals with his "dialectic of reason, since the freedom attributed

on this hermeneutic appropriation, see Braver, "Introduction: Why (Heidegger) Scholarship is Generational" and "Eternal Return Hermeneutics in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida."

⁵⁸ Kant, *Grounding*, 17/405.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 62/463.

⁶⁰ Kant, *Grounding*, 58/458–9.

⁶¹ Ibid., 56/455.

⁶² Kant, *Grounding*, 59/459–60. "An incentive must in this case be wholly absent; this idea of an intelligible world would here have to be itself the incentive or have to be that in which reason originally took an interest. But to make this conceivable is precisely the problem that we cannot solve. Here then is the extreme limit of all moral inquiry" (Ibid., 61/462).

⁶³ "An unavoidable problem of speculative philosophy is at least to show that its illusion regarding the contradiction rests on our thinking of man in a different sense and relation when we call him free from when we regard him as being a part of nature and hence as subject to the laws of nature. Hence it must show not only that both can coexist very well, but that both must be thought of as necessarily united in the same subject; for otherwise no explanation could be given as to why reason should be burdened with an idea which involves us in a perplexity" (Kant, *Grounding*, 56/456).

to the will seems to contradict the necessity of nature.”⁶⁴ One can read this, as Kant tells us to, as an innovative way to resolve a difficult contradiction; one can also read it as branding a contradiction rational, thereby altering reason to accommodate it. After all, Kant himself tells us, as he adopts and adapts Plato’s ideas, we can understand authors better than they understood themselves.

Derrida too finds ways of thinking otherwise than what has been traditionally sanctioned which emerge “if one pursues the consequence of these strange propositions.”⁶⁵ He thinks ethics against ethics which leads to new ways of conceiving of obligations. “This unconditional law of hospitality, if such a thing is thinkable, would then be... a law without law” that expresses a “duty beyond duty.”⁶⁶ This rethinking reflects back on the nature of thinking itself. The mundane/hyperbolic concepts undergo a perpetually volatile self-deconstructing with no stable identity or boundaries, their components continuously switching back and forth with each other. This demands a new understanding of the concept, a new concept for concepts, a problematic concept. “No concept remains in place any longer. This is about the concept of concept.”⁶⁷ A paradoxical thought for thinking paradoxes is only logical. Derrida’s reasoning on the limits of reasoning follows Kant’s closely: since the morality of (for Derrida) the gift cannot be motivated by interest, which bit by bit takes over all possible reasons one would have, giving blocks our practice of giving reasons. “The gift would be that which does not obey the principle of reason: It is, it ought to be, it owes itself to be without reason.”⁶⁸ The condition for the impossibility of traditional reasoning, the gift can simultaneously give us the possibility of a new way.

Thus, when Derrida finds gifts functioning paradoxically, he can draw on his great intellectual forbearer, one of the greatest defenders of reason in the canon, as inspiration for his own aporetic logic whose satisfaction is forever deferred due to an intrinsic self-differing. Rather than the invasion of outrageous irrationality into the staid tradition that many philosophers see here, his ideas result both from a rigorous following through of everyday ideas and of Kantian ideas. In fact, Derrida invokes a long tradition of philosophers “from Aristotle to Heidegger”⁶⁹ who find themselves irresistibly drawn into paradoxical thoughts and statements when they take up topics such as being and time. Reading the texts of our tradition then proves to be a subterranean source of some of the thinking of Volume I that is continued in Session Six. With all of this in mind, let us now turn to the three readings of Mauss that make up most of the session.

3 Readings of Mauss

Derrida begins with Mauss’ reading of Mauss’ *The Gift*. Applying the “disseminate divisibility” of subject and object to author and text keeps us from tranquilly identifying the author who wrote the book with the author who reads it but can be treated as a reader. Derrida focuses on a concern that Mauss has with his own work and which he tries but fails to contain, which then destabilizes matters. Although this problematization “is apparently held within limits,” we find “some movements” that “disturb the order of a certain reading—even if this reading is that which the author does of his own text.”⁷⁰ The disturbing problem is one of the topics he identifies as uniting Volume I which he is now using to transition to the second half of the course: the problem of the thing.

The Gift begins by puzzling over the notion of *hau* – gifts’ internal force that compels their return. An object that is animated can only be puzzling, Derrida points out, on the assumption that things are inanimate, inert matter. Mauss treats this understanding of objects as given, i.e. self-evident, but Derrida points out that it is actually given in Heidegger’s sense: a particular understanding sent to a specific historical epoch. The change-over from Aristotelian things which were self-moving to Cartesian-Newtonian inert objects is a featured moment in Heidegger’s *Die Frage nach dem Ding*, one of the two of Heidegger’s works that Derrida

⁶⁴ Kant, *Grounding*, 56/455.

⁶⁵ Derrida, *Given Time*, 156.

⁶⁶ Derrida, *Of Hospitality* 83; Derrida, *Given Time*, 69n.23, 156.

⁶⁷ Derrida, *Acts of Religion*, 364.

⁶⁸ Derrida, *Given Time*, 156.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁷⁰ Derrida, “Session Six,” 8.

promises to take up in coming sessions.⁷¹ This lecture course, translated as *The Question Concerning the Thing*, largely focuses on Kant.

While *hau* is foreign to the dominant form of contemporary Western thinking, Mauss notes that our history does contain anthropomorphic precedents for something quite like it, precedents which remain even now as “relics” or “residues” of the notion.⁷² This has two important implications. First, since “living principles of a law anterior to the opposition person/thing”⁷³ exist within our own culture, Derrida’s attempt to “think beyond” subject/object can draw on aspects of our own intellectual heritage that do not operate with “this common opposition... in its immediate obviousness.”⁷⁴ One can see Kant’s antinomy as offering something of a model for dealing with opposing binaries without simply accepting one and denying the other.

Derrida does not state this, but bringing these now mutually exclusive qualities together both aids and disrupts Mauss’ primary aim of inspiring us to aspire to certain qualities possessed by the archaic societies he studies. The session’s comments on Mauss are brief, so I want to elaborate on how I see them interacting. Continuing the theme of unstable changing of places, I would argue that the procedure of *The Gift* resembles the “specular reversal” of “Counterfeit Money” when the narrator and friend tell each other, “*Vous avez raison.*”⁷⁵ This phrase colloquially means, “you are right” but literally – and *Given Time* I repeatedly emphasizes the importance of taking literality into account⁷⁶ – it means, “you have reason.” Demonstrating that his strangely behaving subjects in fact possess rationality is one of Mauss’ central goals, as he shows us how behavior that seems mad is perfectly reasonable once one grasps the rules governing it. This identification of a gamelike system underlying and explaining behavior is what makes *The Gift* as a pioneering attempt at structuralist anthropology for Lévi-Strauss.⁷⁷ Even something that seems absurdly wasteful such as the islanders destroying their own belongings represents a reasonable investment of capital that they can expect to get paid back with interest in the form of enhanced status or placing others under obligation. They have reason, Mauss is arguing, because they reason as we do – from rational self-interest.

The conclusion that *The Gift* builds toward, however, differs from this. It pushes us to realize that we modern capitalists can have richer lives if we emulate these cultures which would amount to a deep transformation because they have a *fundamentally different* gift economy. “One part of humanity... has known, and knows now, how to exchange significant things, under other forms and *for reasons other than those with which we are familiar.*”⁷⁸ Their ethical stance demands a distinct kind of reasoning and holds out its promise to us. But this fundamental move that the book makes is complicated by the fact that its two claims have to move in opposite directions. 1) Mauss spends most of the book dispelling the idea that their economy is substantially different from ours. He must do so because he can only render their actions reasonable by showing them to be motivated by self-interest, the one rationale that we *homo economicus* can acknowledge as rational, as Kant said.⁷⁹ 2) On the other hand, Mauss also spends considerable time establishing that our own economy is not strictly self-interested but rather contains remnants of *hau* and moments of genteel generosity that defy capitalistic calculation. Mauss’ *Gift* generously gives rationality to the madly giving tribes while they offer to give us the generosity we already have.⁸⁰

⁷¹ Ibid., 8. A fairly clear though tacit reference to *Die Frage* occurs at ibid., 11.

⁷² Mauss, *The Gift*, 14. “Have they [our own civilizations, dating back to the Semitic, Greek, and Roman civilizations] not practiced these very same customs of the gift (*don*) exchanged, where persons and things merge? The analysis of some traits of Indo-European legal systems will allow us to show that they have indeed undergone this metamorphosis. In Rome, there are still traces that can be found” (Ibid., 146). Mauss both criticizes these tribes for mixing topics that are actually separate (Ibid., 94, 105, 119, 149, 193, 105) and praises their mixtures, comparing them to his own central notion of total prestation (ibid., 58, 186; the latter is quoted at Derrida, *Given Time*, 55).

⁷³ Derrida, “Session Six,” 14.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁷⁵ Derrida, *Given Time*, 155, 32, the latter is referred to at Derrida, “Session Six,” 3.

⁷⁶ See Derrida, *Given Time*, 49, 84, 129, 144, 155.

⁷⁷ Derrida, “Session Six,” 35, 41.

⁷⁸ Mauss, *The Gift*, 108, italics added.

⁷⁹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 77, 155.

⁸⁰ “Thus, from one end of human evolution to the other, there are not two different kinds of wisdom. So let us adopt as a principle of our lives that which has always been – and will always be – a principle of action” (Mauss, *The Gift*, 184).

Claim #1 puts the archaic societies in our place by depicting them as good self-interested capitalists; Claim #2 puts us in their place by allowing that we can and do give without self-interest. Mauss begins by saying, “you are like us” and ends by saying, “we are like you,” a double mirroring that produces a specular reversal that contradicts itself. The two sides – modern capitalists and archaic givers – are initially presented as mirror images of the other, but identifying the two undermines its identification. The book works hard at dispelling any appearance that the archaic people act from true generosity, engaging in acts with no rational self-interested motivation, essentially burning up goods for no reason, for such behavior would deprive them of reason by our understanding of it. It is only if the tribespeople are acting from self-interest that they do have reason. But then Mauss’ other overarching goal of changing our economy into one of generosity by emulating them no longer makes sense, for they don’t actually have such an economy. His attempts to either differentiate or unify the two groups, to draw a boundary between them by identifying essential characteristics that define and distinguish the two, have become unstable, infected with “disseminate divisibility.”

The second point that Derrida derives from Mauss’ discovery of *hau* within his own culture comes from the observation that Mauss is writing *from within* the culture that he is writing *about*. The meta-language of *The Gift* presents itself as a neutral party outside those involved in the study, but Mauss has in effect conceded that the book is in fact a product of a culture charged with the *hau*-force it is studying. Any investigation of *hau* will simultaneously be investigating its own investigation, turning on itself like an ouroboros.

Mauss assumes the ontology of inert objects as simply objective fact, the given self-evident truth, while his study reveals that “a very late, a very narrowly determined, concept of the thing... configures Mauss’s whole meta-language.”⁸¹ The ethnologist’s study is as culturally and historically situated as his subject’s and so, by the precepts of ethnology, equally in need of study, which Mauss dutifully gives us by “doing the genealogy of this metalanguage.”⁸² This gives us another exchange of positions, as occurred with gift and exchange (both here and in *Given Time I*) and the characters in “Counterfeit Money.” The subject of the study now reflects the studying back onto the studying subject, the examined switching places with the examiner. This marks another way that Mauss’ cannot but fail to contain his problematization. “Mauss cannot limit himself to the study of these other ethno-linguistic zones that he calls archaic or backwards.... He must in some sense return to his meta-language itself.”⁸³ His attempt to limit it must exceed any limits it puts in place since those limits automatically form part of that act of limiting, like all other actions undertaken by the ethnologist.

I believe we can tighten the reflexive arc further by examining how Mauss is using these topics in order to think about themselves, forming a reflexive rebound that recurs in the very discussion of returning. As *The Gift* traces the return of *hau* from our past, it turns from the studied into the studying, emerging now in the practice of a cutting-edge science. “The themes of the gift (*don*), of the freedom and the obligation inherent in the gift (*don*), of generosity and of the interest one has in giving, are *coming back to us*, as if to *restore* a dominant motif too long forgotten.”⁸⁴ Mauss analyzes the impetus to return in the gift by examining the impetus’ own impetus to return in *The Gift*, showing its coming back to us from our own tradition as something that can improve our lives and re-form our reasoning. *Hau*, the topic he begins by finding so puzzling, becomes part of the method that renders his topic understandable, the incomprehensible switching places with the comprehending.

Along with giving these archaic societies reason, *The Gift*’s other main objective is to facilitate the return of gift ethics in which things are charged with *hau*, i.e., the return of gifts. This ethics is based on an ontology that does not recognize a clear distinction between person and thing, subject and object – some of the same distinctions that Derrida is attempting to elude. Since it forms a part of our tradition, Mauss’ calling for *hau*’s presence in modern society is a call for its return, as we can see in portions of the text beyond what Derrida cites. “All this moral thinking and legislation corresponds... to a *return* to rights.... We are *reverting*, therefore, to a group morality.... Thus, we can and should *come back to the archaic*, to its elements: we will

⁸¹ Derrida, “Session Six,” 12.

⁸² Ibid., 13.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Mauss, *The Gift*, 181, all italics added, see also Derrida, *Given Time*, 66.

rediscover the motives of life and action.”⁸⁵ Of course, since *hau* is defined as the force of returning, this retrieval amounts to the return of returning itself. *The Gift* attempts to come back to coming back, with *hau* both a topic within the study and the study of the topic. Part and whole simultaneously, it recalls the *mise en abyme* (anti-)structure of “Counterfeit Money” where counterfeit money is both an item within the story and the story of the item. This unstable exchange ruins attempts to draw a defining boundary, including Mauss’ attempt to contain his problem within the limits that Session Six begins with.

But if it is returning that is returning, we should ask what exactly it is that returns. Along with the subject giving, returning, and studying, what is the object given, returned, and studied? According to standard reasoning, in order to return there must have been an original giving – it occurs only by recurring – but here it is recurrence that is recurring. There can be no first time of a repetition *itself* (if we can say that) for the first time has by definition not repeated; the returning creates the returned qua returned. Returning could not have pre-existed being returned to have been initially given but if it did not already happen then, by traditional thinking, it cannot return and since it is the returning that brings the returned into existence, it cannot happen. The first time needs the second but the second time needs the first, as returning marks the condition of both the possibility and impossibility of itself.

Elsewhere Derrida lays out this logic as central to conventional reasoning.

Repetition, classically, repeats something that precedes it... Repetition succeeds a first thing, an original, a primary, a prior, the repeated itself which in and of itself is supposed to be foreign to what is repetitive or repeating in repetition. As it is also imagined that a narrative relates something that would be previous and foreign to itself, or in any event independent of it... In the classical hypothesis, repetition in general would be secondary and derivative. But sometimes, according to a logic that is other, and non-classical, repetition is “original,” and induces, through an unlimited propagation of itself, a general deconstruction: not only of the entire classical ontology of repetition, along with all the distinctions recalled a moment ago, but also of the entire psychic construction... insuring the integrity of the organization... Two logics then, with an incalculable effect.⁸⁶

While not discussed here, as repetition itself *hau* can present us with a particularly pointed form of this aporia. Thinking it through can form another step toward “a logic that is other” which deconstructs “distinctions” and “the entire psychic construction,” a change that can literally have “an incalculable effect” by moving us away from our *logos*.

The passage quoted above mentions narratives, and while paradoxical, this structure turns out to be well suited to literature, as Derrida explains in his reading of Baudelaire’s “Counterfeit Money.”

One generally thinks that narrative discourse reports events that have taken place outside it and before it. Narrative relation, so one thinks, does not recount itself; it reports a content that is given outside it and before it. Here... it is the narrative that gives the possibility of the recounted thing.⁸⁷

“The enigma of this simulacrum” not only applies to “Counterfeit Money” but also to counterfeit money.⁸⁸ Among other things, “the circulation of the counterfeit money can engender, even for a ‘little speculator,’ the real interest of a true wealth. Counterfeit money can become true capital... Is there a real difference here between real and counterfeit money?”⁸⁹

This logic also applies to the gift. If returning is what returns, then there is nothing that is getting returned, only empty returning without anything that returns. This structure responds to Heidegger’s attempts “to think a thing... that would be Being and time but would not be either a being or a temporal thing.”⁹⁰ As nothing that appears can be given, this could be the only (no)thing that can. “If giving implies in all rigor that one gives nothing that is... if the gift is the gift of the giving itself and nothing else,”⁹¹ then perhaps the return of returning is one of those measureless “things” that can be, impossibly, given.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 180–2, all italics added.

⁸⁶ Derrida, *The Post Card*, 351–2; see also Derrida, *Dissemination*, 191–2.

⁸⁷ Derrida, *Given Time*, 121–2.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 59.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 124.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 20.

⁹¹ Ibid., 28.

This is, we could perhaps say, the very plot of *The Gift*. Employing *hau* in its method, *The Gift* itself is an instance of *hau*. In generously giving the islanders back their rationality once they have given us their generosity, Mauss' *Gift* returns to modern society the returning of gifts in an understanding of being that slips through the subject–object dichotomy. The study itself is the return it calls for, the analysis bringing the analyzed into being by forming a return that is the original. Perhaps, by generating a replication without an original, Mauss follows the impossible success story: “the counterfeiter... will have figured out how to break indefinitely the circle or the symmetry.”⁹²

Now, we move on to Lévi-Strauss and Lacan's readings of Mauss that Derrida reads as he makes his way toward Heidegger, the “two paths to follow, two paths, rather, that follow, that pursue the opening inaugurated by Mauss, if one can say this, each one in its own way, but in the *traditio*, if one can say this, of Mauss.”⁹³ Derrida focuses on two features the readings share: their indebtedness to Mauss' work and their attempts to systematize *The Gift* “each time into a logic of the signifier.”⁹⁴ I will limit my comments to the former feature and focus on Lévi-Strauss, as Derrida does.

Lévi-Strauss' *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* criticizes Mauss' analysis of things as too substantial, too thing-like, whereas they should be volatilized into relations – a topic relevant to Derrida's concern with objects. For Lévi-Strauss, this flaw is what leads to one of Mauss' problematic combinations of antithetical notions in a single word: “he has to add to the mixture an additional quantity which gives him the illusion of squaring his account. This quantity is *hau*.”⁹⁵ We can link *hau*, both extraneous (“additional”) and necessary (Mauss “has to add”), to “the new logic of the ‘supplement’” in *Of Grammatology*.⁹⁶ Mauss must add it to his account in order to pay back the conceptual debt that the problematic *hau* – the notion of paying back – puts him under, but his friend Lévi-Strauss declares the payment a counterfeit gift which only “gives him the illusion of squaring his account.” Lévi-Strauss pays his own unpayable debt to Mauss (“no acknowledgment of him can be proportionate to our debt”⁹⁷) by paying off Mauss' debt, which he does by dissolving thingness into relations to fix Mauss' system. It is thus a different way of thinking about objects that gets him out of the bind.

Derrida shows how the tribute that Lévi-Strauss' pays to Mauss repeatedly commits the sin that Lévi-Strauss attributes to Mauss – combining antithetical operations within the same words. Over and over again, indeed many more times than Derrida mentions, Lévi-Strauss simultaneously praises and criticizes Mauss.⁹⁸ Nor is this a simple conjunction of distinct actions that might be separated or dialectically resolved,⁹⁹ his praise is a criticism and it is so *because* it is praise, and *vice versa*. It is Mauss' great brilliance that makes his shortcomings so glaring; Lévi-Strauss is objecting to or going further than Mauss but only by means of Mauss' great discoveries; Mauss was more right than he knew, which is what makes him so wrong, and so on.

In this tribute, Derrida concludes, “one doesn't know who leads and who is led.”¹⁰⁰ On the one hand, Lévi-Strauss is following the pioneering thinker, portraying himself as a faithful successor who only applies Mauss' ideas, if perhaps more consistently than their originator.¹⁰¹ On the other hand, he corrects and supersedes Mauss, leading him to the structuralist ethnology that Mauss should have given, a rather Oedipal move, appropriately enough.¹⁰² Another unstable switching: Mauss' greatness as a leader consists in his enabling

⁹² Ibid., 150.

⁹³ Derrida, “Session Six,” 19.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 20.

⁹⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction*, 47, quoted at Derrida, *Given Time*, 77.

⁹⁶ Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 7.

⁹⁷ Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction*, 1.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 14, 21, 38, 42, 47, 49, 56, 64, 72n17.

⁹⁹ Derrida, *Given Time*, 35.

¹⁰⁰ Derrida, “Session Six,” 24.

¹⁰¹ “That conception seems to me to be rigorously faithful to Mauss's thinking. In fact, it is nothing other than Mauss's conception, translated... The translation is not of my making, nor is it the result of my taking liberties with the initial conception. It merely reflects an objective evolution” (Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction*, 64).

¹⁰² “Mauss poses a problem which he does not resolve, but which we can try to explore in his footsteps” (Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction*, 14).

Lévi-Strauss to lead *him*; Lévi-Strauss is only able to lead him because of how well *he* led Lévi-Strauss.¹⁰³ The point, I believe, is that Lévi-Strauss pays tribute to Mauss for giving him the ability to criticize Mauss' merging of antithetical operations, while his critical tribute does just that. Thus Lévi-Strauss is employing this feature of Mauss' work that he is rejecting in order to be able to reject it in this distinctive way. Like *hau* for Mauss, the very double-sided concept that Lévi-Strauss criticizes, the double-sided move becomes both object and form of Lévi-Strauss' criticism.

Moreover, this instability is taking place around and through the topic that exercised Mauss' reading of Mauss too. "This whole history of inheritance [*héritage*], this whole dramaturgy of tradition, seems compelled by the very thing that Lévi-Strauss claims to speak of with the rigor of scientific objectivity. It is the *reus* of what he received and of which he is trying to acquit himself, by ridding himself of it or appropriating it absolutely."¹⁰⁴ Having received *The Gift* from Mauss, Lévi-Strauss feels compelled to return it and to do so with interest – by correcting and improving it. Even as he criticizes Mauss for his notion of *hau*, Lévi-Strauss' reading embodies it as a compulsory return of *The Gift* which combines the opposing operations of praise and blame.

Lévi-Strauss also comments on the *mise en abyme* of *The Gift* because "in a science in which the observer is of the same nature, as his object of study, *the observer himself is a part of his observation*."¹⁰⁵ The total social fact "imposes itself on sociologists" in a distinctive way because of "the intrinsic character of the object of study, which is that it is object and subject both at once,"¹⁰⁶ another instance of the union of opposing terms that Lévi-Strauss criticizes in Mauss. Here however he does not find it problematic; he cannot since it applies to his own writing. As with Derrida's treatment of the subject-object distinction, Lévi-Strauss sees that "that easy and effective dichotomy is denied to the sociologist."¹⁰⁷ Lévi-Strauss repeatedly pays tribute to Mauss for how much sociology he learned from him, giving them the same scholarly nature as practitioners of a science that studies their shared nature. As occurred with Mauss, what Lévi-Strauss says of the subject he is examining rebounds back onto his examination of it. "The situation particular to the social sciences is different in nature; the difference is to do with the intrinsic character of the object of study, which is that it is object and subject both at once" (*ibid.*). Thus, Derrida observes, "it would naturally be tempting to submit the reading of this whole scene of inheritance, of gift-gift and of family, to the laws that one claims to be analyzing (*nexum, familia, res, traditio, reus*)."¹⁰⁸

Looking for "a first motion which leads us to think beyond... terms of subject or object,"¹⁰⁹ Derrida finds in Mauss *hau*, an idea that transcends this distinction. Mauss tries to limit it to the object of his study but it seeps into the subject studying it. His studying and calling for the return of *hau* in fact constitute its return – in the form of the study itself. Mauss is thinking about this non-binary phenomenon with non-binary thinking, making *The Gift* transcend the dichotomy as much as the gift does. The gift's *hau*, a teleological force residing within an object, may help our transition from contemporary background beliefs in the inert nature of things that made *hau* a puzzle at the start. That would be *The Gift's hau*. Lévi-Strauss, leading in the footsteps of his teacher, locates "the unconscious" as "the meeting place of the objective and the subjective" on which their opposition can be "surmounted."¹¹⁰ He sees these "unconscious forms of mental activity" as the bridge "between a subjective and objective self, and... between an objective self and a subjective other."¹¹¹

¹⁰³ "No doubt some will judge that digression imprudent; but by letting myself be drawn to and even beyond the extreme limits of Mauss's thinking, I only meant to show the richness and productiveness of the themes he offers to his readers' or listeners' meditation" (Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction*, 21).

¹⁰⁴ Derrida, "Session Six," 23–4.

¹⁰⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction*, 29, italics in original.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction*, 30.

¹⁰⁸ Derrida, "Session Six," 25.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹¹⁰ Derrida quoting Lévi-Strauss at "Session Six," 20.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 22.

“Counterfeit Money” is, as a fiction or set of false symbols, a piece of counterfeit money which calls for speculation both “inside” of it (financially by the beggar and narrator) and “outside” (theoretically by Derrida and the reader). Lévi-Strauss’ objection to Mauss’ contrary meanings in single words both praises and criticizes him in the same words. *The Gift* is taken as a gift by Lévi-Strauss which, having the self-contradictory *hau*, calls him to return it. This obligation is what motivates Lévi-Strauss’ *Introduction* while, at the same time, ruining the gift he is attempting to reciprocate precisely by reciprocating it. Perhaps, this is why his testimonial to an unpayable debt must be a *Gift-gift*, both admiring and poisonous.¹¹² Like the friend’s gift to the beggar in Baudelaire’s story which could be a true gift precisely because it could be counterfeit, the effect of Mauss’ book cannot be fixed as positive or negative, making the *hau* owed and given essentially indeterminate. With this indeterminacy, the infinitely indebted pupil may also “have given himself the chance of escaping in this way from the mastery of reappropriation.”¹¹³ Perhaps, this was the true lesson he learned from Mauss.

The third reading, which receives the least attention, shows Lacan returning the same pattern. “The Mosaic paradigm that I evoked a bit earlier (debt and inheritance with regard to the one who must lead [*conduire*] to the promised land and whose successors must see to it in his place), this Mosaic paradigm is also in place and it reinscribes the metalanguage in the structure of debt that is the object of the discourse.”¹¹⁴ Within the conflicted structure of inheritance, leader and led crisscross the boundary “separating” the language studied from the metalanguage studying it.

4 A Supplemental Reading

We will complete our reading with a supplemental reading that traces out the outlines of Derrida’s possible reading of his own readings. At one point in “Session Six,” he turns his reading of Lévi-Strauss’ *Introduction* back toward his earlier analysis of the same text in his 1966 “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences.” “It is a matter of an important passage – which I had tried to analyze from another point of view elsewhere – to which I return now.”¹¹⁵ Returning to Lévi-Strauss’ passage returns Derrida to his own prior reading of it which deals with, among other things, Lévi-Strauss’ notion that ethnological writing must share the structure of what it is writing about: “structural discourse on myths – *mythological* discourse – must itself be *mythomorphic*. It must have the form of that of which it speaks. This is what Lévi-Strauss says.”¹¹⁶ Derrida’s reference retrieves this notion from Lévi-Strauss to now apply to the way Mauss and Lévi-Strauss’ discussions of *hau* take on its form, thereby disrupting the borders of both subject writing and object written on.

This recalls Derrida’s recall of his 1968 “*Différance*” in *Given Time: I*, where he is working out “this ‘logic’ and this ‘aporetic’ of the gift.”¹¹⁷ That essay also wrestles with an impossible schema of a non-concept, exploring “*différance*, which is neither a word nor a concept.”¹¹⁸ *Différance* both “interrupts every economy”¹¹⁹ and the notion of copy and original.¹²⁰ Moreover, that essay explicitly employs methodologically the topic it is discussing.

¹¹² Look at the mixture in the *Introduction*’s second and third sentences: “no acknowledgment of him can be proportionate to our debt, unless it comes from those who knew the man and listened to him. Only they can fully appreciate the productiveness of his thinking, which was so dense as to become opaque at times; and of his tortuous procedures” (Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction*, 1).

¹¹³ Derrida, *Given Time*, 150.

¹¹⁴ Derrida, “Session Six,” 31.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

¹¹⁶ Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 286.

¹¹⁷ Derrida, *Given Time*, 127n. 12.

¹¹⁸ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 7.

¹¹⁹ “I am speaking of a relationship between a *différance* that can make a profit on its investment and a *différance* that misses its profit” (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 19).

¹²⁰ “We may see the site of a reinterpretation of *mimesis* in its alleged opposition to *physis*” (Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 17).

Turning these propositions back on themselves,... the efficacy of the thematic of *différance* may very well, indeed must, one day be superseded, lending itself if not to its own replacement, at least to enmeshing itself in a chain that in truth it never will have governed.¹²¹

The effect that this methodological *différance* has on the discussion of *différance* is to ensure that the future significance of the essay cannot be predicted or controlled. Transgressing any definitive defining borders, it can always be placed into a new context where it will say something new that the author could not have anticipated. This is precisely what *Given Time: I*'s footnote on the footnote of “*Différance*” does.

Given Time: I points out that the earlier connection of *différance*, the gift, and Heidegger was anticipating further discussions of its topic: “here, rather, we are marking the necessity of a future itinerary.”¹²² Looking backward at it, we can now see it looking forward to a future backward look at it. At the time, this phrase could have been just a casual indication of the complexity of the topic which could not be adequately dealt with there, quite possibly an empty promise that Derrida would never return to. The fact that *Given Time: I* does return to it, fulfilling the promise made there, retroactively changes its meaning.¹²³ “Session Six” quotes his earlier promise word for word but instead of producing a copy, this iterates it – changing it *by* repeating it. For now, it returns as a fulfilled promise, fulfilled by the very discussion that iterates it, the way *The Gift*'s returning of returning first creates what it returns to. This occurs in accord with the temporality described there that disrupts notions of pure reproductive return of “a ‘past’... whose future to come will never be a production or a reproduction in the form of presence.”¹²⁴ The sense of the 1968 vow was indeterminate at the time – it might get fulfilled or it could remain simply one of the many intriguing paths Derrida glimpsed but passed by. Returning to it in 1978 collapses that wave of indeterminacy into an itinerary that did in fact get followed – by the return. Without this, it would have remained undecided whether he would follow out that future itinerary or not, at least up until his death when his inability to write would have settled matters. Except that, we see here that that determines nothing, as we re-view his readings in light of this new posthumous publication.

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¹²¹ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 7.

¹²² Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 26n. 26.

¹²³ On the topic of retroactive meaning change, see Braver, “Eternal Return Hermeneutics in Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida.”

¹²⁴ Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, 21.

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