

*Invited essay*

**If Wittgenstein and Lyotard could talk with Jack and Jill: towards postmodern family therapy**

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This essay uses a literary device to create a transcript of an imagined conversation between postmodern philosophers Ludwig Wittgenstein and Jean-François Lyotard with two family therapy trainees, Jack and Jill, in order to explain key postmodern concepts as they might relate to family therapy. These include Lyotard's concepts of a differend, paralogy, meta-narrative, and Wittgenstein's concepts of a language game, language game confusions and family resemblance. Other postmodern theorists and therapists make cameo appearances in the conversation, tying their own ideas to the topics under discussion. The essay also addresses the criticism of postmodernism raised by Barbara Held.

**Introduction**

Once, when a book I wrote on sexuality first came out, I found myself chatting about it at an informal party. Later, a timid-looking man came up to me. He wanted to confess that he was a closeted gay. He told me that no one at the party knew he was gay and he asked me to keep his secret, but, still, he wanted to talk to me about the tragic consequences of gay people, like himself, living in closets. (Now, to understand the rest of my story, I must tell you that this was an American party and in America the word 'closet' is equivalent to the British word 'wardrobe'. The American pictures *closeted* gays keeping the truth of their homosexuality tucked away in a metaphorical *wardrobe*. Passing as a heterosexual is called 'living in a closet'.)

So there we stood, talking in hushed voices about the difficulties gay people have living in closets. We tried not to be heard, but the room was small and crowded, and it was impossible to talk as privately as we wished – but still we talked.

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Suddenly, we were both startled when a man whose smile could sell toothpaste entered our conversation. 'At last,' he told us, 'I have found some good people who are willing to talk about important stuff: "Closets!" I just love them! And, it just happens that I'm a salesman for closet organizers. Have you ever heard of them? You put these babies into your closet and, *voilà!*, total organization! I kid you not.'

At this point the gay man and I exchanged glances, but we were truly speechless – so we simply stood there in silence while the salesman with his wide smile talked on and on, oblivious, apparently, to his misunderstanding of what we had meant by 'closet'.

I remember this event with mixed feelings, but it will provide a good starting point for explaining Wittgensteinian postmodernism to family therapists. Although Wittgenstein's philosophy is not widely understood in family therapy, it is a major inspiration to a growing number of authors in our field, including Ken Gergen (who in a 1995 paper attributes the postmodern movement in psychology to Wittgenstein), Sheila McNamee, John Shotter, Harlene Anderson, the latest writing of Lynn Hoffman, Tom Andersen, Donald Carveth, Douglas Ingram, Rom Harré, John O'Leary, Fred Newman and Lois Holzman, as well as myself. Wittgenstein was also the inspiration for Jean-François Lyotard, whose book *The Postmodern Condition* is a key postmodern text. And, as you will see, Lyotard's work is also studied in this essay.

Now, let me go back to the conversation about closets that I described above.

### Part I. The problem of differends

Conversations like the one above are more common than you might think. What is troubling about them is that they can turn into *differends*, a remarkably exasperating kind of dispute described by Lyotard (1988). In differends people systematically misunderstand each other. In the real conversation about closets the gay man and I slunk into silence, but let me show what a differend might have looked like if it had happened.

*Gay man:* Somehow we have to get rid of closets. Closets cause people such misery.

*Shawver:* I agree! Closets screw people up.

*Salesman:* What would you two have folks do? Have everyone put all their private stuff out in the open?

*Gay man:* I just think closets are bad for people.

*Salesman:* If we didn't have closets, people's lives would be a mess.

*Gay man:* I think it's closets that screw things up.

*Shawver:* Closets do have their drawbacks.

*Gay man:* Don't you understand how horrible it is to live your life in the closet?

*Salesman:* Who lives in the closet? People just go into them when they need to.

*Gay man:* No, people live their whole lives in the closet.

*Salesman:* I can't believe that. You don't have to live in your closet, no matter how you define it. Closets are a convenience so you can put your best foot forward. Just go into them whenever you need to and then just step back out whenever you wish. It's as simple as that.

*Gay man:* No, it's not so simple. I wish it were.

Pretty funny perhaps, but this is only because you are on the outside looking in. When you are on the inside of a differend, it's another matter. What on the outside looks like a grammatical joke feels, on the inside, like a very troubling perplexity (Wittgenstein, 1963, sect. 111). Language is a minefield for such differends. Step into a different area of language from your conversational partner and your ability to make sense of each other will simply self-destruct (Wittgenstein, 1980: 18).

It is therefore important to learn to spot differends when they are happening. Unfortunately, they are not typically as easy to spot as the closet differend. However, if you take the closet differend as a model I will show you what more subtle differends can look like, and how they can undermine the meaning of a conversation. I am particularly interested in exploring such differends because I feel spotting them will teach us a new way to be helpful as family therapists. In addition, differends undermine the discussion about postmodernism in family therapy, leaving people such as Pilgrim (2000) confusing Wittgensteinian postmodernism with radical subjectivism and relativism.

The more subtle differend I have in mind I will call the 'reality differend'. Just as the closet differend revolved around two meanings of the word 'closet', so the reality differend revolves around two different meanings of the word 'reality'. I want to show you the two definitions of reality that appear to get us in trouble. I took both from my pretty good electronic dictionary. I will call the first definition the 'everyday' definition. The second definition was labelled by the dictionary as a 'philosophical' definition. I have both definitions copied word for word:

- 1 [Everyday definition] The quality or state of being actual or true.
- 2 [Philosophical definition] That which has necessary existence and not contingent existence.

If the philosophical definition makes you feel dizzy, then read the following few explanatory paragraphs carefully. Understanding this concept of reality will be of great help, I feel, in understanding many philosophical discussions, but particularly those having to do with postmodernism. Although the original version of this philosophical concept of 'reality' was initially given to us by Plato (Shawver, 1998), the form that is important to understand, I feel, is the simplified version I gave you in the second definition above.

Look at those two meanings again. Then imagine it is true that I am holding a white teacup in my hand. According to the everyday definition of reality, this teacup is part of reality, but, according to the philosophical definition of 'reality', this teacup is not a part of reality. Why? Because this cup has only a *contingent existence*. Since I might have dropped it yesterday and shattered it, its existence can only be called 'contingent'. Philosophical realists try to look beyond the things that come and go and to imagine that something exists beyond perception that cannot be changed, something that we cannot observe but only discern through reasoning. According to philosophical realists, the things around us eventually crumble and disappear, but there is something beyond these passing objects that has more than a contingent existence.

If teacups are not part of reality, then, what is? The answer depends on what kind of *philosophical realist* you are. If you are a Platonist, reality consists of essences or forms, but for others it could be abstractions or eternal laws of nature. Whatever, it is only those things that exist necessarily that are 'real' – according to this philosophical definition of reality. The realist (who believes in this eternal reality) cannot see or sense reality with the body. Yet the reasoning of philosophical realists convinces them that this hidden reality is there.

Confusing? Then you can understand how it is that these two definitions of 'reality' cause so much confusion in conversations. People who grasp and appreciate the philosophical concept of reality are likely to talk past the rest of us, and if you do not want that to happen with you, you need to see how this definition sounds in a conversation. That is, you need to see a *reality differend* in action. I'll provide one for you.

I want you to picture a conversation between two friends, both family therapy trainees who have never studied philosophy. Their names will be Jack and Jill. Jill will use the term 'reality' in the everyday sense. Jack, on the other hand, has somehow picked up the philosophical concept of the term, and that is the meaning he uses. Do not presume, however, that Jack realizes he is using the word 'reality' in a specialized philosophical sense. People are not always aware of the sense in which they are using terms.

To imagine this conversation, I would like you to picture Jack and Jill sitting at a wooden picnic table on a backyard cement slab patio. It is Jill's patio and she has just served tea in china cups, dangerous enough to do on a cement slab. Up until now they have been gossiping about their mutual friends at school, but now the conversation takes a philosophical turn. See if it reminds you of the differend I showed you above concerning closets. Watch how Jack fights for his philosophical definition of 'reality', even insists on it, and see how blind Jill is to Jack's philosophical definition of reality.

*Jack:* [Making a broad sweep with an upturned palm] To me, all of this isn't even real. What is real is something eternal. I don't know what it is. Something, something like God, or maybe just something. Even this table, it's not really real. [There, do you hear it? Jack is using the philosophical sense of the term 'real'. ]

*Jill:* This table isn't real? [Jill knocks on the wooden table] What could be more real than this table?

*Jack:* [Sighs] The fact that you can knock on this table doesn't mean this table is real. I'm saying the table isn't *really* real. I see this table as just a kind of illusion. What if we set fire to it? Would it be a table any more? How can anything so fragile be real? See this teacup? That's not real. Watch. [Jack drops the teacup] See, the teacup broke, so it isn't real.

*Jill:* You broke the cup! That's the reality, you broke my cup!

*Jack:* You'll forget about the cup. It's not real.

*Jill:* [Shaking her head] You're crazy.

*Jack:* Five years from now you won't remember this happening. None of this matters. It's just illusion, just appearances.

*Jill:* Doesn't matter? Let me see if I get this straight, Jack. You are saying this chair you're sitting on isn't real. Is that right?

*Jack:* That's right.

*Jill:* So, if I kicked it out from under you, you wouldn't fall to the ground? [Jill laughs, then sighs and looks serious.]

*Jack:* Oh, come on. Try to understand this. Of course I would fall to the ground in your sense. But that's not what 'reality' is. All of this, the chair, the teacup, all of it, is passing stuff, flimsy passing appearances.

How can you call this flimsy stuff real? You have to admit it will be gone in a couple of hundred years.

*Jill:* You and I won't be here, either. Are you saying that we aren't real?

*Jack:* If you're an atheist and you think that our spirit will just disappear, then we're not real either. Surely our bodies are illusion.

*Jill:* Our bodies are illusion?

*Jack:* Of course, everything you see here is illusion because it can all die or disappear.

*Jill:* [Looking completely exasperated] I'll never understand you, Jack. To me, everything you say is crazy.

Can you hear the similarity between this conversation about what is 'real' and the conversation about whether closets are bad? In both situations, the disputes were caused by the different conversationalists using the same term in different ways and no one noticing. The closet dispute was the result of two different definitions for the term 'closet'. Here, Jack and Jill's dispute is caused by their two definitions of 'reality'. This is the way differends work. Different people enter the conversation with their own definitions and never imagine that others are using these terms differently.

A word to the reader who identifies with Jill. You cannot really avoid the philosophical concept of reality. Jack's philosophical definition of 'reality' is just as established as your everyday definition, just as historically based, and lots of people use Jack's philosophical term. You cannot avoid this term just by avoiding philosophers and philosophy books. The perplexing truth is that our language is full of terms with multiple meanings like this that can catch us and send us into differends. In fact, the two definitions I gave you for 'reality' are only two of many possible ones.

However, I believe there is a solution: we can learn to talk together in a different way.

### **A postmodern conversation**

As I said, my purpose in this essay is to offer an introductory account of Wittgenstein and Lyotard and give at least a glimpse of what these two postmodern authors offer family therapy. My challenge has been how to do this without triggering differends for the reader.

I have an idea how that might be possible. I think people can get past these differends if they invite speakers to define their terms and notice it when they do so.

I am going to create such an imaginary conversation for you in which the gracious student 'Jill' (you remember Jill from her conversation above with Jack) talks with Wittgenstein and Lyotard, together with a few other interesting authors for postmodern therapists. These imaginary people will all be sitting on Jill's patio drinking tea. However, Jill has changed a little since her conversation with Jack. Let us imagine that she – in fact everyone taking part in this conversation – has read this very essay you are reading up to this point, and that they all want to avoid differends and maximize Jill's ability to understand them. Jack will be on the patio too, but he is in the background waiting to serve tea. I would like you also to imagine that neither Jack nor Jill have read Wittgenstein or Lyotard and also that they have not read any of the other authors who will enter into this imaginary conversation; however, we will suppose they have heard about some of these authors or read about them in secondary sources. Please also recall that both Jack and Jill are family therapy trainees.

It is this imaginary conversation that will provide the substance of this essay. To structure this informal style a little, I will insert some subheadings through the conversation and offer a few words of commentary within brackets.

Here is how the conversation goes:

*Jill:* Wittgenstein, do you believe in reality?

*Wittgenstein:* [Laughing] Reality?

*Jill:* [Also laughing] Yes, I was just reading Barbara Held's book, *Back to Reality* [1995], and she said postmodernists were anti-realists. I take it that means postmodernists don't believe in reality.

*Wittgenstein:* What is the reality that she claims anti-realists don't believe in? [Notice how they are now tying down the local meaning for 'anti-realist'.]

*Jill:* [Shrugs] I think it just means that anti-realists wouldn't believe that this teacup is part of reality, just as Jack didn't.

*Wittgenstein:* Wait a minute. In a philosophical sense, Jack is a realist, not an anti-realist. He is a realist because he believes in the reality of eternal and transcendent forms or laws. Remember him saying that there had to be something more eternal than this flimsy table?

*Jill:* Yes.

*Wittgenstein:* That meant he believed in something eternal that isn't everyday. That's what he called 'reality'.

*Jill:* So, Jack's a realist?

*Wittgenstein:* Yes, a philosophical realist, and many philosophical types would simply call him, for short, 'a realist'.

*Jill:* Then what am I?

*Wittgenstein:* Well, I don't know. Do you believe in the transcendental forms that Jack believes in?

*Jill:* I have never thought about it, but frankly, I don't know how you could ever know if there were such forms.

*Wittgenstein:* Then, I think most philosophers would call you an anti-realist.

*Jill:* Jack's a realist? And I'm an anti-realist? This is so weird!

*Wittgenstein:* Yes, it is. It's counter-intuitive. But that's partly because you're not used to talking this way. If a woman pointed to her shoes and called them 'flowers', that would seem pretty crazy, but if a certain brand of shoes were called 'flowers' it would soon make sense to talk that way. Right?

*Jill:* Right. [Turning to Jack] Is that what you're saying, Jack? That there is another realm more real than the world around us?

*Jack:* Yep, that's what I was trying to tell you.

*Jill:* And that makes him a realist?

*Wittgenstein:* It's a standard philosophical definition of 'reality'. Shawver gave you the definition from her dictionary. Look it up in yours. Of course, it is just one of the definitions you'll find under 'reality' or 'realism'.

*Jill:* I'll never get this straight. So, Jack's a realist, in the philosophical sense. And I'm probably an anti-realist. Weird!

*Wittgenstein:* Yes.

*Jill:* So, what are you, Wittgenstein, a realist or an anti-realist?

### *Wittgenstein's view on what we should do about our language confusions*

*Wittgenstein:* I came to the conclusion that the whole philosophical concept of 'reality', with its odd kind of meaning, caused a lot of confusion.

*Jill:* That's what I think, too!

*Wittgenstein:* Yes, the problem is that we don't have a clear view of how our language works [1963, #122]. It's really quite a mess, especially when we try to do philosophy. Philosophers try to break realism and anti-realism up into many different types and they don't agree on how to define these types, and their disagreement confuses them.

*Jill:* I think people should just stop using these philosophical definitions.

*Wittgenstein:* [Laughing] But we can't pass a law to forbid it, can we?

*Jill:* No, of course not.

*Wittgenstein:* It's hard to get people to change, especially if they don't see the problem. Besides, the problem isn't just with other people. We do it, too. We wander into philosophical definitions of terms and cannot find our way about [1963, #203].

*Jill:* Me, too?

*Wittgenstein:* Absolutely. When you just said that there might possibly be a

transcendental reality but if so you didn't know how people would know it, you were using a philosophical concept of reality. So, even though you say you want to give up philosophical definitions and just keep everyday ones, you are already slipping into philosophical definitions. We all do it.

*Jill:* That's hard to believe. I'm not a philosopher type.

*Wittgenstein:* It's easy for everyone to slip into philosophical definitions and confuse them with everyday meanings of terms – and get confused in the process. Still, I think there are things you can do to keep from sinking into this kind of confusion.

*Jill:* Please tell me.

*Wittgenstein:* OK. I'd advise you to not let yourself think that there is only one correct meaning (or use) of a word, because there are really many, a kind of family of possibilities [1963, #67]. As soon as you start searching for the one true definition, you'll be searching for essences, just like Plato, and it will be like trying to find the artichoke by divesting it of its leaves . . . [1963, #164].

*Jill:* [Laughing] Or like peeling an onion until all its layers are gone?

*Jill:* Yes.

*Wittgenstein:* But that doesn't mean that the words have no meaning [1963, #163]. It's just that the meaning seems to dry up when we study it. This drying up of meaning happens even with quite ordinary words, words we use all the time. I like to quote St Augustine on this. He said, 'What therefore is time, if you don't ask me, I know. If you do ask me, I don't know' [1963, #89]. Do you know that feeling, Jill? You think you know something very well, but then when you're put on the spot and the meaning seems to evaporate?

*Jill:* Yes! I didn't know other people felt this, too.

*Wittgenstein:* Yes, and isn't that interesting? The meaning of a term seems to disintegrate when we follow its trail, asking not only what a term means, perhaps, but what the terms of our definitions mean, or, especially, asking what terms mean out of all context [1963, #164] or saying the word over and over again [1980, #194]. Meaning just seems to disintegrate.

*Jill:* It's not a good feeling.

*Wittgenstein:* When words lose their meaning like this, I call it 'language going on holiday' [1963, #37].

*Jill:* I hate these philosophical meanings. Why do we have them?

*Austin:* May I step in?

*Jill:* Are you the real J. L. Austin?

*Austin:* That's me. I don't know if you want to call me 'real'.

*Jill:* Funny! And I've heard of you! You wrote a little later than

Wittgenstein, didn't you? But you're also dead now. Right?

*Austin:* That's right.

*Jill:* Aren't you what has been called an 'ordinary language philosopher'?

*Austin:* Right again. I was always more interested in everyday meanings than in philosophical meanings.

*Jill:* [Nods]

*Austin:* But, Jill, you just asked, 'Why do we have these philosophical meanings?' It seems to me that the reason we can't make everything completely simple is that our vocabularies are inevitably 'finite; and the variety of possible situations that confront us is neither finite nor precisely foreseeable. So situations are practically bound to crop up sometimes with which our vocabulary is not already fitted to cope in any tidy straightforward style' [1964: 73–74].

*Wittgenstein:* You, of all people, I thought would be arguing that we should not tamper with ordinary language meanings?

*Austin:* Of course [1964: 63]; but I also feel we can't possibly have enough words to cover every case so we just have to borrow words here and there. We are making a limited vocabulary serve for many more situations than would otherwise be possible.

*Wittgenstein:* I think that's a good point. Jill, let me say that in my youth I was like you. That is, I, too, was thinking of ways to make language work better. I didn't talk about laying down laws and sending people to gaol, but I did want to lay down some rules to keep language working well. But eventually I decided that was a dead-end. I even came to feel that philosophy should not interfere with the way we use language [1963, #124].

*Jill:* I wish we could get rid of these philosophical meanings and make every word have just one meaning.

*Wittgenstein:* I must say I always have had mixed feelings about keeping these philosophical meanings, too. It is just that I came to think that the answer wasn't cleaning up the language to get rid of them.

*Jill:* You said I should remember that every word has more than one correct meaning, but that's not enough? I can't tell which meaning is being used? What else can I do?

*Wittgenstein:* I think we have to expect to get confused, to confuse our language games. We simply have to learn new methods to work our ways out of confusion. It's like finding ways out of a flybottle [1963, #309].

*Jill:* [Looking very puzzled] You mean, you think we should use word games with people? Isn't that just playing with people's minds?

*Wittgenstein:* Oh, no. I don't mean that at all. Remember the story of the closet differend at the beginning of this essay?

*Jill:* Yes.

*Wittgenstein:* Well, we can say they were in a differend or we can say there was a confusion of language games. The gay man was using the term 'closet' within one language game and the salesman was using it inside another language game. Think of a language game as like a little

language within the larger language. It is like a poem within a book of poems. Each poem has its own rules but some of the rules are used in multiple poems, that is, you might have more than one sonnet. Similarly, in one of the many language games, some of the words will have distinctive meanings while many of the words are used the same as they are used in other games.

*Jill:* [Nodding] I think I see what you mean, Wittgenstein, but why did you choose the word 'games'? That makes me think of 'word games' or 'playing games with people'.

*Wittgenstein:* Playing games with people? Is that a twenty-first-century idiom? I don't think it was around in England when I wrote. Back then, 'playing games with people' just meant doing things like playing ball with them, or chess [1963, #66].

*Austin:* Yeah, as I said, words do get borrowed and transferred to other contexts. It isn't just philosophers who introduce these new meanings.

*Jill:* Ordinary people cause this confusion, too?

*Levi-Strauss:* Yes, I was talking about the same thing when I said that language was bricolage [1966].

*Jill:* That's French?

*Levi-Strauss:* Yes, it's the French term for using something that was made for a different function, like using a brick for a hammer.

*Wittgenstein:* Yes, there is nothing planned out about language. It is just invented a little bit at a time to serve local needs. I think 'Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses' [1963, #18].

### *Liotard's concept of postmodernism*

*Liotard:* I loved that metaphor, Wittgenstein, and I cited it [1984: 40] – [Turning to Levi-Strauss] I also talk of bricolage [1984: 44].

*Jill:* Thank you for joining us, Liotard. I have been thinking about you. What I wanted to ask you was how anti-realism is tied to postmodernism. Held says that they are the same thing.

*Liotard:* Well, *that* was Held's definition. She didn't look up mine, which has nothing to do with anti-realism.

*Jill:* OK, let's talk about your ideas about postmodernism. You are really the key figure in postmodernism aren't you?

*Liotard:* My work has gotten a surprising amount of press. However, my definition of postmodernism is certainly not the only one, and not the only legitimate one.

*Jill:* Why do you call your definition 'legitimate'? You coined your definition, didn't you? How legitimate is that?

*Lyotard:* What do you mean? Of course it's legitimate. Remember, Held made up her definition of postmodernism, too.

*Jill:* It just seems to me confusing to have so many definitions floating around.

*Lyotard:* When I invented my definition of postmodernism (in my 1979 French edition of *The Postmodern Condition*) this was not a popular term with a well-established definition. Since then, people have used this term in a variety of ways.

*Jill:* Yes, well that's my point, really. It seems so confusing to have so many definitions floating around, having everybody coining their own version. And even more confusing is the fact that there doesn't seem to be a single thread that ties all the definitions together. Is that the case? That there is no single thread tying together all these different meanings of postmodernism?

*Lyotard:* Probably.

*Jill:* Well, that just doesn't seem right to me. I can recognize that there are different kinds of things, just like there are different kinds of animals, but I think there should be some single feature that justifies putting similar things in the same category.

*Wittgenstein:* Perhaps I should take this question.

*Lyotard:* You're right. This really is a question for you, isn't it Wittgenstein?

*Wittgenstein:* It really is.

*Jill:* [Turning to Wittgenstein] So what's wrong with me thinking that there should be some kind of a common thread among all the objects of a category? I just can't find any common thread among the many different ways people use the word 'postmodern'.

*Wittgenstein:* I have been tempted to think that way, too, but I became convinced there does not need to be this common thread [1958: 17; 1963, #66]. I would ask myself things like 'what is the central definition of a "game"?' Then, I would study all the different kinds of games looking for a common feature. Chess and football seemed very different, I thought, but they were all games in which people play to try to win. But then I thought, what about games like ring-a-ring of roses [1963, #7]? There seemed to be no winning and losing to that. And then I thought, maybe what is common among all kinds of games is that there are always rules. But then I thought about the games in which we thought up the rules as we go along [1963, #83]. Eventually, I decided that there was no common thread of meaning among the things we call games.

*Jill:* Yeah, but there is something similar between the various games. It's hard to put my finger on it, but I sense that it is so.

*Wittgenstein:* Oh, yes. There is something similar between the different meanings. And there is something similar, it seems, between any two kinds of games. But what is similar need not be the same thing! That's the issue. To use Levi-Strauss's analogy, people borrow a word from one

context and use it in another, kind of like they borrow a brick to use it as a hammer. But then they might borrow the brick to hold down the tent, and next time they might borrow a jack, or a stone, to use as a hammer. Just because there is a similarity between any two words doesn't mean that there is a common thread running through all words in a category.

*Jill:* Hmm.

*Wittgenstein:* And so the metaphor that came to my mind to describe this situation is the metaphor of a family resemblance [1963, 67].

*Jill:* I don't understand.

*Wittgenstein:* Well, you know, in a family how the brother might have a nose like the father and eyes like the mother? And the daughter might have eyes like the father but a mouth like the mother and hair like her granddad?

*Jill:* Yes.

*Wittgenstein:* Well, that's a family resemblance relationship. There are similarities between any two elements, cross-similarities, even some overlap, but there is no single thread running through the whole category.

*Jill:* There should be, shouldn't there?

*Wittgenstein:* Maybe there should be, but there often isn't. Language is too haphazardly constructed for that.

*Jill:* So, in a nutshell then, what do you think we should do about our differences, and all our language confusions?

*Wittgenstein:* I think we should learn new and better ways of getting along with an imperfect language, ways to work our way out of confusion rather than ways of fixing the language.

*Jill:* So, you believe, then, that it is legitimate to have a term with all these different meanings, meanings that don't fit under a single definition?

*Wittgenstein:* Yes.

*Jill:* And, I suppose, it's like you were saying, language is constructed like an ancient city with streets attached haphazardly, and we can't really purify the language; we have to learn to cope with it.

*Wittgenstein:* Yes, that's exactly what I think.

*Jill:* It just seems hard to believe, that we would be able to think in a language that is so poorly organized.

*Lyotard:* Interesting, isn't it? But if you can see that we function reasonably well anyway you are beginning to be more postmodern, at least in my sense of the term.

*Jill:* I almost hate to ask. What is your sense of the term, 'postmodern'?

*Lyotard:* Very simple. I defined postmodernism as an 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.

*Jill:* A what? I know what the word 'incredulity' means. It means 'being sceptical' – but what are 'metanarratives'? That is, what is it the post-moderns are sceptical about?

*Liotard:* Metanarratives are grand theories like Marxism or Freudianism [1984: xxiii]. As David Pocock [1995] says, these are big systems of thought that pretend to have no exceptions. Whenever anyone repeats the ideas contained in the metanarrative, their words are made legitimate just by pointing to the original statement of it [1984: 34]. A psychoanalyst might point to a passage in Freud's writing, for example, to prove that she is right on some clinical point. In postmodern times, people have stopped using authorities to legitimate their statements [1984: 22]. Remember that conversation about closets earlier in this essay?

*Jill:* Yes.

*Liotard:* Well, suppose you had gay people talking about closets with one definition and closet salesmen using another definition [1988: 42]. They want to say different things, of course, about whether closets are good or bad. How can it be decided which one is right?

*Jill:* I don't know.

*Liotard:* No, because there are no procedures, no general rules, to make such a determination. This is what causes differends [1988: 27]. I believe that both the gay man and the closet salesman can both be right, in their own way, using their own definitions, engaging in their own language games – because there is no general rule that determines which language game was correct [1984: 10, 65]. In postmodern times, people have stopped thinking that there is one correct way to define things.

*Jill:* So postmoderns just don't care what other people think of what they say?

*Liotard:* Sure they care. They know that a 'self does not amount to much, that [each self exists] in a fabric of relations' [1984: 15]. They can't forget that. They can't just go off on their own and not worry what other people think. They listen to each other. They are not barbarians with each other [1984: 41].

*Jill:* So, how do they decide which theories are right?

*Liotard:* It is not a matter of deciding which theory is 'right'. In postmodern conversations, 'Knowledge ceases to be an end in itself' [1984: 5]. What makes something worthwhile to postmodern people is that it generates exciting and revolutionary ideas [1984: 65], ideas that break out of old, stagnant systems of thought.

*Jill:* How do they come up with these new ideas?

*Liotard:* In a special kind of conversation I call paralogy.

*Jill:* Paralogy?

*Liotard:* Paralogy, as I define it, is a conversation that tries to break out of old systems of thought [1984: 61]. 'Innovation' is inventiveness within the same old framework. It is like creating just another cake. 'Paralogy' as I define it is like creating ice-cream for the first time, because the idea can be used in a new production of another flavour of ice-cream. It

would be merely an invention to devise just another flavour. But, if no one has yet thought of ice-cream, the innovation would be 'paralogy'.

*Jill:* And paralogy isn't worried about truth?

*Lyotard:* It is not that truth doesn't matter. It's that truth can be trivial. Old truths within the system are no longer very interesting. The postmodern is no longer looking for more factual truths within the system. The post-modern wants 'know how', new and better ways to live, knowledge about how to listen [1984: 18]. You can't get that just by collecting more facts. You can get it sometimes through paralogy.

*Jill:* Can you give me an example of paralogy?

*Lyotard:* Indeed. The conversation we are having here on your patio today is a good example of paralogy. We aren't legitimating our ideas by pointing to authorities and their metanarratives. We're advancing our new vocabularies and we're thinking things through together. Most importantly we are struggling against the language together.

*Jill:* I haven't had any new ideas yet. Have you?

*Lyotard:* Good point. But I think we might. First, however, we have to negotiate our language, decide, for example, how to use the word 'game' in our local language. We'll use it differently, of course, if we go to a ball game. Our agreement is provisional. But if we set up our local language this way, I think the new ideas are likely to come [1984: 66]. And, if they do, it will feel great. In paralogy, 'Great joy is had in the endless invention of turns of phrase, of words and meanings' [1984: 10].

*Jill:* Why are 'new ideas' given such priority in postmodernism? Why is it more important than uncovering new facts?

*Lyotard:* Well, imagine a group of scientists trying to figure out the causes of cancer, for example.

*Jill:* OK.

*Lyotard:* And try as they might they just can't make any progress. They keep collecting more and more facts, but none of these facts help them find a cure.

*Jill:* Sounds like the way it is.

*Jack:* In therapy, too. Just gathering facts about people doesn't solve problems.

*Lyotard:* [Nodding to Jack] Facts are seldom exciting. But revolutionary ideas, ideas that break out of an old system of thought, that's usually exciting! The new idea might even be wrong or unworkable, but if it can provide us with an inventive kind of bridge to a different way of looking at things that will eventually lead us to a cure, that's exciting. What post-moderns want are new ideas, new ways that help them make better sense of the world, so they gravitate towards communities in which a special kind of conversation is taking place that will generate new ideas.

*Jill:* And this kind of conversation is what you call 'paralogy'?

*Lyotard:* Yes.

*Jack:* I think something like paralogy is important in therapy, too. The therapist introduces new ideas, sometimes, because they shake up old systems of thought, not because the new ideas are actually correct. I think Bateson [1979] talked about something similar which he called a stochastic process.

*Jill:* Good point, Jack. Tell me, Lyotard, more about what makes a conversation something you'd call paralogy?

*Lyotard:* Paralogical conversations have rules, but they are rules that allow for the greatest amount of flexibility [1984: 17]. They are conversations that destabilize traditional understandings so that we begin to notice new puzzles, new questions because only then can new revolutionary ideas begin to emerge [1984: 61]. Because the participants don't believe in metanarratives, they are freer to listen to ideas that break with tradition. Paralogical conversations don't require consensus. It can be a kind of brainstorming, or a competition, even to produce a different way of seeing things.

*Jill:* I still don't understand what's so appealing about new ideas?

*Lyotard:* I'll explain. Take yourself. What will you be doing next weekend?

*Jill:* I have to start work on a school paper.

*Lyotard:* Do you have an idea for your essay?

*Jill:* Not yet. I thought I'd go to the library and maybe I could get an idea.

*Lyotard:* An idea as to how to approach the essay?

*Jill:* Yes.

*Lyotard:* See the value of a 'good idea'?

*Jill:* [Chuckling] Yes.

*Lyotard:* What's valuable is not just 'new facts'. We can have endless supplies of seemingly meaningless facts. What we want today is the rearrangement of those facts into more meaningful patterns – and for that we need 'ideas'.

*Jill:* Just for writing essays?

*Lyotard:* Oh, no – new ideas for anything – for investing money, for starting a business, for developing a better therapy approach, anything. Paralogy is a way of finding those new ideas.

*Jill:* Just people talking together?

*Lyotard:* Yes, in ways that inspire ideas. Paralogy is a quest for new and imaginative ideas. . . . That's the quest of the postmodern, this search for imaginative ideas. See, I argue that in our computerized age facts are increasingly available to everyone. 'As long as the game is not a game of perfect information, the advantage will be with the player who has knowledge and can obtain information. . . . But in games of perfect information . . . the best performativity cannot consist in obtaining additional information in this way. It comes rather from arranging the data in a new way [1984: 51]. So, when facts are readily available we stop being obsessed with finding them. What the postmodern wants is an

imaginative way to arrange the facts we have, a helpful way, a helpful theory or narrative that would make sense of those facts [1984: 51]. And the postmodern even wants this new inventive set of ideas to be hammed up, if necessary, so its relevance and importance is underscored [1979: 33].

*Jack:* Perhaps doing therapy is largely a matter of generating new ideas that take people out of old frameworks.

*Jill:* But so what if we have a lot of new ideas. What good do they do?

*Liotard:* The point is not just to have new ideas, but to inspire listeners with new ideas, ideas that can be marketed to others because these new ideas can be used by others in still another production [1984: 4–5]. When you go to the library, for example, looking for a good idea, it will be the idea that inspires you to have new ideas, ideas that weren't even contained, hopefully, in the original work.

*Jill:* That sounds great!

*Liotard:* Sure it does. That's what the public wants, ideas that inspire still newer ideas of their own.

### *Wittgenstein and Lyotard talk*

*Wittgenstein:* That makes sense to me, Lyotard. I'm not advocating people search for more facts, either. I think our work should consist not in informing people of new truth, but in reminding them of what they already know [1963, #121].

*Liotard:* You were trying to find ways out of philosophical confusion. That's certainly a worthy goal, but this isn't what makes something postmodern, to my mind. To my mind, one becomes postmodern in order to cope with the scepticism about metanarratives that your philosophy of language games generated after you died. Postmodernism is about how to get along in the world, how to talk with people, how to make life better. I see a new utopianism emerging out of postmodernism. Postmoderns are no longer nostalgically searching for authoritative answers [1984: 40].

*Wittgenstein:* Thanks Lyotard. I had no idea what postmodernism is.

*Liotard:* Well, this is my view, but I must remind you that my voice is being channelled through the mind of Lois Shawver.

*Jill:* Aren't your published works still your living voice?

*Liotard:* Yes, in a sense, but remember my words can be variously interpreted. All understanding is interpreted through some local and current context.

### *What does Wittgensteinian postmodernism offer family therapy?*

*Jack:* Excuse me, but I wonder if there is any way to connect all of this more to therapy. It seems to me it would be possible.

*Jill:* Yes, I would like to think about the implications of your ideas for therapy, too.

*Jack:* Is there any way to use your work to improve the way we do therapy?

*Lyotard:* I don't know. I was never a therapist. Hmm. Do you think that you and Jill can have a better relationship if you keep in mind that your disputes may be differends?

*Jill:* Yes, I think so. We had that reality differend earlier, remember. Differends can be disruptive.

*Lyotard:* Yes, especially, perhaps, when they are about personal issues.

*Jill:* For example?

*Lyotard:* Remember the closet differend?

*Jill:* Yes.

*Lyotard:* Suppose one person used the word 'open' to mean 'gullible' and the other used it to mean 'forthcoming'. I think that could cause a differend type of dispute. Don't you?

*Jill:* I see what you mean.

*Lyotard:* But, notice, we weren't caught up here today in differends.

*Jack:* That seems right. How did we avoid them?

*Lyotard:* Partly by 'talking-in-order-to-listen' [1979: 71].

*Jill:* What do you mean?

*Lyotard:* You asked questions of me and of Wittgenstein, and that was you talking-in-order-to-listen. You also gave us your objections to our arguments so that you could hear our answers. That is also talking-in-order-to-listen. Any time you speak in order to invite others to speak, so you can listen, this is talking-in-order-to-listen.

*Jack:* What do you contrast with 'talking-in-order-to-listen'?

*Lyotard:* Good question. I think it should be contrasted with 'listening-in-order-to-talk'. When you listen in order to talk, you listen for something to criticize, or for a way to insert your own opinions. I think Jill, however, was talking-in-order-to-listen.

*Jack:* I can see that.

*Jill:* [Nods and smiles]

*Wittgenstein:* So that's why you think the conversation went so well? Why it avoided what you are calling differends?

*Lyotard:* Maybe so. And we have to avoid differends, if we are to have parody.

*Jack:* What is parody again?

*Lyotard:* It is a conversation that allows us to break out of old systems of thought, to discover new ways to arrange the knowledge we have so that we can utilize it better for new and more interesting productions, either in conversation or in writing.

*Sheila McNamee:* Perhaps our conversation also worked because Jill did not use an argumentative and blaming approach. I think blaming is one way we bewitch each other with language.

*Wittgenstein:* Yes, it is all ‘a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of a language’ [1963, #109].

*McNamee:* I was thinking of that. Blaming sets up certain language games that block us from going on together.

*Harlene Anderson:* I agree with you, Sheila. Blaming is a kind of knowing. In Lyotard’s terms, it prevents us from talking-in-order-to-listen and leaves us listening-in-order-to-talk.

*Lyotard:* Interesting. That makes sense to me, too. Does that relate to the way you do therapy, Harlene?

*Anderson:* Indeed.

*David Pocock:* Hi, Harlene. May I step in here?

*Harlene:* Hello, David.

*Pocock:* Lyotard, I have been wondering if your critique of Luhmann means that a postmodern therapy would break with system’s theory?

*Lyotard:* In my experience, systems theory tends to stabilize itself and then turn itself into an authoritative system [1984: 61]; in other words, a metanarrative.

*Jack:* I thought systems theory tried to help families break out of their systems of scapegoating and other pathological ways of interacting.

*Lyotard:* Just because you help break out of one system doesn’t mean you don’t get caught in another.

*Jack:* But the original one was pathological.

*Lyotard:* The replacement system could be oppressive, too.

*Jack:* Are you saying there is no way out?

*Lyotard:* I think postmodern communities that have discovered paralogy have found the best way out I know. It helps us break out of one system without getting caught in another.

*Pocock:* How does that work?

*Lyotard:* Well, in paralogy, the metanarrative, or the system, is negotiated openly in the moment. This is part of the process. And it is understood from the beginning that it is local and provisional, so it is less likely to put an enduring system in motion [1984: 66].

*Anderson:* That is my point of view, too. Harry Goolishian and I felt that the answer was for the therapy system not to have its own agenda. Without a committed agenda, new and revolutionary ideas can arise in a way that I think you would call paralogical, Lyotard.

*Lyotard:* I see. No system is finalized forever. It is taken as provisional.

*Pocock:* I can see the similarity with your thinking, Harlene. There are provisional rules, but the rules are never finalized.

*Lyotard:* The system is self-constructing, always improving itself.

*Ken Gergen:* I don’t know about always improving. It depends on your tradition of values. But we can continue to reflect on the rules, negotiate them, undermine them and change them – especially where suffering is the outcome. This is my feeling about the individualist tradition, and

the way it creates heroes and villains from what is better seen as a relational process.

*McNamee:* Yes, and conversation like this can deconstruct the traditional blaming cycles that result in people listening-in-order-to-talk.

*Pocock:* So true.

*Gergen:* And, once we see this possibility we approach the heart of what to me is social constructionism.

*Lyotard:* Social constructionism?

*Gergen:* Yes, meaning that we are all constructing our forms of life by deliberately creating our social structures and processes together.

*Wittgenstein:* [Smiling] I recognize my term there, 'forms of life'.

*Gergen:* [Nodding] Yes, I thought you would.

*McNamee:* Once we realize that we are constructing our forms of life, then we have the chance to change things, to improve them. If we don't realize how much the system is a result of our own creation, we can hardly act to improve it.

*Pocock:* I do agree.

*Lyotard:* [Laughing and turning to Jill] See? You wanted some revolutionary ideas to emerge from our conversation. Thanks to all of you for providing a paralogical demonstration. I must say, however, to all of you, that you are just getting started. This is just the beginning, not the end. You have already gone past Wittgenstein and myself, but you have, I feel, much you can still do. You are still in a postmodern period of revolutionary ideas. This is just the beginning of rethinking things.

*Eddy Street:* Just the beginning? Where on earth did Lois Shawver go?

*Shawver:* I'm right here, in the background.

*Street:* Well, as editor of this journal I am going to insist that you end this postmodern tea-party now. You're way beyond your word length!

[And with that, the imaginary postmodern conversation comes to an abrupt halt. But it is, as Lyotard's imaginary voice suggests, just the beginning of a postmodern rethinking of things.]

*Street:* End quickly, Lois.

*Shawver:* [Sigh] So, to all you postmoderns: see you later in this grand postmodern adventure!

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