

I've dreaded giving a last lecture for a long time. So instead this is a lightly edited "(for length and clarity)" transcription of a conversation I had with my old friend William ("Billy") Wambsganss. Sometimes he asks questions and I try to answer them; sometimes I answer questions he didn't ask. Our conversation ranges over Metaphysics, Epistemology, Teaching, Ethics, Aesthetics, Politics, Religion, and Immortality. Takes about five minutes to read.

Metaphysics "A tree falls in the forest and no one hears it. Does it make a sound?" Sure. That's what you hear when you hear a tree fall in the forest. If it didn't make a sound, there'd be no difference between a sound and an auditory hallucination.

"Chicken or egg?" The theory of evolution is true enough and any competent biologist can take it from there.

"Glass half full or half empty?" Depends on whether you're drinking or pouring. Anon.

"Philosophy? All that thinking. Why bother? Why not just go by your gut?" Did you ever think about what's in your gut and where it goes?

You are what you are because you believe what you believe. That's why you do what you do and feel what you feel.

Don't confuse reality with the needs of bureaucracy.

Science is more art than science.

Epistemology Critical thinking? No such thing really. Think of something you believe then try to be critical of it. Seems silly, doesn't it? If you read or hear or see something that fits with what you already believe then you'll believe it; if it conflicts with what you already believe then you probably won't. Much more to say about critical thinking and liberal education but that's where to start.

Homer Simpson: "Takes two to lie, Marge. One to lie and one to listen."

Can you lie to yourself? You can do something that's sort of like that. You can say over and over, "I'm a good person." But you won't believe it. And you shouldn't.

The truth is that you can't lie to yourself and you can't love yourself either. Both for more or less the same reason that you can't tickle yourself. You can try I guess but it just won't happen. Hug yourself?

Don't ask: What's the definition of x; instead ask how should I distinguish x from y and why do I want to?

Every stereotype is true but none are exceptionless generalizations.

Teaching A life teaching. I met a woman at Homecoming. She said, "I took your course in 1975 and I remember the first day vividly. You were so young and we were all were sitting around the table. But we didn't know you were the teacher. People began to complain, where's the teacher? I remember it like it was yesterday. You were wearing cowboy boots and you had on a cowboy hat." --- That never happened. So that's what it's like to be a teacher for 54 years. I live on in the deluded memories of my former students. (But just between us, I get a kick out of thinking about someone thinking about me teaching a class wearing a cowboy hat.)

If it can be taught then it can be taught much better with AI. And much, much better than that with AI in the future. Philosophy, like many other things, can be learned but not taught.

“What does anyone get out of studying philosophy?” Nothing. Unless they learn something. In which case, they’ll understand something.

The value of the humanities (when there is any) happens right then when you read or think or write; when you see a connection or feel something deep. Then that experience gets buried along with all of the other good things you’ve ever done and felt and then forgotten. Sorry, it doesn’t happen later when you get a good job -- “because philosophy majors get good jobs!” – or because you became a “critical thinker”. But it, along with everything else, might have led you here and you wouldn’t be here otherwise.

Ethics “You’re a philosopher, what’s the secret of happiness?” Good drugs and low expectations. So I wouldn’t worry about it. Instead try to love the ones you love. And for god’s sake, clean the refrigerator!

Try to be good: good father, good mother, good son, good daughter, good teacher, good lawyer, good nurse, good police officer, good electrician, good friend ... You won’t succeed but it’s worth trying. And, who knows, maybe you’ll be happy now and then.

If you look back over your life and don’t have any regrets then you didn’t have much of a life. Or maybe you have a bad memory and no imagination.

If you’re wondering whether something is wrong don’t look for a harm that’s been caused, look for a relationship that’s been violated.

Some people seize the day by sleeping in. (Not me unfortunately.)

In explaining human behavior always consider stupidity before cupidity. Negligence is common; evil is rare.

“I’ve heard you used to have a drinking problem.” No, I had a drinking solution. The only drinking problem I’ve ever had was getting the bartender’s attention so I could order another drink.

Aesthetics I watch a hawk glide in the wind. Then I drive to the strip mall. So much that humans build is ugly. Imagine: no more human beings, no more of all the ugly things they’ve made. Just clouds and mountains, streams and oceans, trees and flowers. And hawks. All beautiful. – Actually no. Without human beings no beauty because nothing to see it.

So he says, “I only like *authentic* Italian food.” Really? Authentic as of 1910 or as of 1500?

I know you won’t believe it but *Mike’s Amazing Real Mayonnaise* is better than Hellmann’s. I always substitute limes for lemons. The limes taste better and they’re parthenocarpic, which is amazing. Songs, poems, jokes, cartoons, recipes. Pot roast isn’t a recipe; it’s a way of life.

When it comes to art, either you like it or you don’t. “So you’re saying the Beatles might be better than Beethoven and Vasti might be better than Vonnegut?” No, I’m asking questions: Better for whom, when, on account of what? Art isn’t a contest.

‘Lullaby’: the most beautiful word in the English language. (What about ‘rhinoceros’ or ‘anorexia’?) In case you have any doubts: <https://wordsmarts.com/beautiful-words/>

Politics Complaining about lying in politics is like complaining about tackling in football. “WTF, they’re tackling!” “Not to worry. We’re blocking.” Likewise: “OMG, they’re lying!” “That’s true but we’re catching them. And anyway, we’re lying too.”

Politics is a Rorschach test
That most people fail
Because they see monsters
When no monsters are there.

Democrats and Republicans. Democrats believe America is our future; Republicans believe America is our past.

Democrats have been in the front seat driving the car since 1932: Banking Reform, Glass-Steagall (look it up) FDIC, Social Security, collective bargaining, 40-hour work week, minimum wage, Medicare, Medicaid, Obamacare, Civil Rights Act, Voting Rights Act, Equal Opportunity Act, ADA: Americans with Disabilities Act, paid overtime and unemployment insurance, protections for child labor, EPA clean air, clean water, CFPB consumer protection, OSHA protection against hazardous working conditions, Head Start, disaster relief, FEMA, CDC to prevent and control the spread of disease, the FDA to ensure food and drug safety and someday maybe a Child Care Tax Credit.

Republicans are in the back seat complaining that the Democrats are going too fast. Sometimes the Democrats *are* going too fast.

Those last three comments were true from 1932 to 2024.

Capitalism is the democracy of dollars.

Democracy: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifwtWF485HU> Vain hope? Probably. But it keeps me going.

“States are a fiction.” That’s true. Borders aren’t an inherent part of nature like rivers and mountains. But states, for better and worse, were a step beyond the political forms that preceded them: tribes, villages, cities, city-states, colonies, empires. And I don’t believe a decisive step beyond them is possible. So peoples, organized by governments, need to figure out a way to live with one another.

“Peace through strength?” No, that’s the promise of a tyrant. Sure, peace is better than chaos but it’s not enough. We need justice so no one is oppressed.

“Peace through strength?” Endless fear; endless escalation. Until what?

“Trust but verify?” That’s senseless: either trust your wife or hire a private detective. If you’re verifying you’re not trusting (and vv.). Trust but verify isn’t the way to the durable agreements that we, as peoples, need if we’re going to live with one another. But unfortunately trust is a long way off and it might even be impossible for human beings. So for now, well to remember that “if you’re not at the table, you’re on the menu.”

Religion The least important (and least clear!) question about God is whether He exists.

The Greek gods are obviously goofy projections. The Hebrew God obviously isn’t.

The idea of God is an attempt to make the questions stop. But they won't stop. Maybe "God" doesn't want them to.

"Der mentsh trakht un Got lakht." Men plan; God laughs. Yiddish Proverb.

My religion? I'm a Napist. Napism is a heretical form of Buddhism. Buddhists try to achieve a higher state of consciousness by meditating. Napists nap.

The Fourfold Way of the Nap:

1. Anytime is nap time.
- 2.
- 3.

Immortality "Time to end this ridiculous charade!! William Wambsganss doesn't exist. No one with that unpronounceable name ever existed and this isn't a "lightly edited" conversation between you and him."

Actually "Billy" (as I like to think of him) did exist. He played second base in the 1920's for the Cleveland Indians baseball team.

Triple plays are rare. (Three outs in one play.) Perhaps the rarest plays in baseball. Much rarer than "perfect" games. *Unassisted* triple plays are rarer still: Only 15 have been recorded in the entire history of "Major League" baseball going back at least to the 1890's. 15 in more than 350,000 "Major League" games. (Gemini is guessing here.)

Billy completed an unassisted triple play in the fifth game of the 1920 World Series. The only one in the World Series ever. He saw his chance and seized it and so, in a way, became immortal. There he is.



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