

Even So, Too Soon: Michael John Scriven (28 March 1928 – 28 August 2023)¹

Gene V. Glass
Arizona State University

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Robert Stake hired me to Urbana in 1965. At the time, he was editing the AERA monograph series on curriculum evaluation (1967). He shared with me a copy of a manuscript he was considering. It was “The Methodology of Evaluation.” Up to that point, evaluation for educators was about not much more than behavioral objectives and paper-and-pencil tests. Finally, the author of this new manuscript was writing something I could get excited about. At that point I only heard rumors—some true, some not—about the author: He was a philosopher; he had a PhD from Oxford; he was Australian; his parents were wealthy sheep ranchers; he was moving from Indiana to San Francisco; he told a realtor that he wanted a very expensive house with only one bedroom.

I met Michael in person two years later. I had moved to Boulder, and he was attending a board meeting of the Social Science Education Consortium. He had helped start SSEC back in Indiana in 1963, and it had moved to Colorado in the meantime. I had nothing to do with SSEC but somehow was invited to dinner at the Red Lion Inn. I knew Michael would be there, and I was eager to see this person in the flesh. He arrived and a dinner party of a dozen or so commenced. As people were seated, Michael began to sing in Latin a portion of some Catholic mass. I had no idea what it was about, but it was clear that he was amused by the reaction of his companions. At one point in the table talk, someone congratulated an economist in attendance on the birth of his seventh child. “A true test of masculinity,”

someone remarked loudly. “Hardly, in an age of contraceptives,” said Michael sotto voce. It was 1969, after all.

We next met in 1970. I had the contract from the U.S. Office of Education—it was not a department yet—to analyze and report the data from the first survey of ESEA Title I, money for the disadvantaged. The contract was large, as was my “staff.” I was scared to death. I called in consultants: Bob Stake, Dick Jaeger; but Michael was first. He calmed me down and gave me a plan. I was grateful.

We met again in February 1971. It was at the AERA annual meeting in New York. He invited me up to the room to meet someone. It was Mary Anne. She was young; she was extraordinarily beautiful. I was speechless. Those who knew Michael only recently—say, post 2000—may not know how handsome and charming he was.

I saw Michael rarely after 1980. His interest in evaluation became his principal focus, and my interests wandered elsewhere. One day when I found myself analyzing the results of other people’s analyses, I thought of Michael and “metaevaluation”—literally the evaluation of evaluations. I decided to call what I was doing “meta-analysis.” Very recently, I wrote him and told him that he was responsible for the term “meta-analysis.” I was feeling sorry for him; it was the only thing I could think to say that might make him feel a bit better. Perhaps I overestimated.

¹ A previous version of this piece was first published on the author’s blog:
<https://ed2worlds.blogspot.com/2023/08/still-done-too-soon.html>

In the late 1990s, Sandy and I were in San Francisco and Michael invited us to Inverness for lunch. Imbedded in memory are a half-dozen hummingbird feeders, shellfish salad, and the library—or rather, both libraries. Michael and Mary Anne had separate libraries, carefully organized, as would be necessary if references were consulted regularly. Later when the house burned down and virtually everything was lost, I remembered the libraries. When Michael's *Primary Philosophy* was published in 1966, I bought a first printing. Unknown to Michael and many others, apparently, there was an interesting typo. Each chapter's first page was its number and its title, e.g., III ART. However, on page 87, there was only the chapter number IV. The chapter name was missing: GOD. After the house burned down and the libraries were lost, I sent him my copy of *Primary Philosophy*; "Keep it." He was amused and grateful.

There was a meeting of Stufflebeam's people in Kalamazoo around 2000, perhaps. Michael was in charge. I was asked to speak. I can barely remember what I said; maybe something about personally and privately held values versus values that are publicly negotiated. I could tell that Michael was not impressed. It hardly mattered. It was so rewarding just to spend those moments with him again. He invited Sandy and me to see his house by a lake. There were hints that his

health was not good. Years before that day, I wasted an hour playing anagrams with some friends' names, and sharing them with them. Stufflebeam ... "Meets a bluff." That works. Mike Scriven ... "I'm never sick." He assured me that it was not true. It certainly was not true in later years.

I can't let go of the notion that there are some things inside each of us that drive us and give us each a sense of right-and-wrong and good-better-best that one might as well call personal values. They are almost like Freud's superego, and they are largely acquired in the same way, by identification with an object (person) loved or feared. I know I have a very personal sense of when I am doing something right or well. A part of that sense is Michael. I doubt that he would ever have shared memories like these. Frivolous.

Chapter V, MAN—"man" the synecdoche, not the gender—in *Primary Philosophy* is where Michael appears to enjoy himself immensely, debunking a host of myths: the soul, reincarnation, ghosts, and the like. At one point, he drops in a truth felt by so many now:

Sometimes the smashing blow of death is softened by stressing the sense in which a man can be said to live on in the memories of him that friends retain or in the monuments his hands have wrought. (p. 176)

References

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