

Michael Ruse (1940-2024)



With the death of Michael Ruse on 1 November, the field of philosophy of science has lost both an intellectual giant and perhaps its most engaging member.

Michael was born near the beginning of the Second World War, on 21 June 1940, in England and brought up in a Quaker environment. His father was a conscientious objector, which wasn't easy at the time, and his mother died when Michael was 13, which he unsurprisingly found very tough. Michael attended Bootham School in York, a Quaker school, and then went to the University of Bristol to read philosophy and mathematics. There, he had something of an epiphany when first hearing about Descartes' *Meditations* in a lecture. I can remember him telling me that by the end of the lecture he knew what he wanted to spend the rest of his life working on: philosophy. Actually, it's easy to remember many of Michael's stories. A great conversationalist, he did not hesitate to recount the same tales to different audiences – and sometimes to the same audience. But he told them so well!

After his undergraduate degree, Michael did a Master's in philosophy at McMaster University in Ontario before returning to Bristol to do his PhD in philosophy of biology. It is difficult now to recall, let alone believe, how boring much published philosophy of biology was at the time. As an undergraduate biologist in the late 1970s who was interested in philosophy, I remember reading some interminable articles on the philosophy of speciation which even I realised failed to engage with the really interesting issues. Michael's PhD was on 'The Nature of Biology' – Michael was always good on the Big Questions, never the shy scholar capable of devoting eight years of his life to barnacle phylogeny – and around the time of its completion in 1970, he fired off about eight manuscripts which helped reignite the field of philosophy of biology.

On the strength of his PhD and the accompanying publications, Michael gained a position at the University of Guelph in Ontario. It was during that time, in 1978, that his 1967 marriage to April Steele came to an end: “The bloody woman left me”, as he put it, showing both his command of the vernacular and his ability to get to the heart of an issue succinctly. Michael then brought up the two children and in 1985 he married Lizzie née Matthews, whom he met as one of his students and who survives him along with their three children and his elder two.

Michael was incredibly proud of his five children and never tired of speaking of their achievements and goodness. However, having three younger children – he once said to me that he “loved teenagers” – made him realise that he needed a regular income after Guelph would have enforced its statutory retirement age. So, he moved in 2000 with the family from his professorship at Guelph to take up the position of Werkmeister Professor of Philosophy at Florida State University, from which he only retired a couple of years ago.

Michael was extremely well known in the academic community and had a string of academic honours. He held various honorary doctorates, was a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, won the John Templeton Book Prize in 1999, was Herbert Spencer Lecturer at Oxford in 1994, Gifford Lecturer at Glasgow in 2001 and was named The Bertrand Russell Society's award winner for 2014 for his dedication to science and reason.

However, it was his appearance as one of the expert witnesses in the 1981 test case *McLean v. Arkansas*, dealing with the state law permitting the teaching of so-called creation science, that brought him to much wider prominence. Thanks in no small measure to Michael's clear articulation of the nature of science, the teaching of creation science in the Arkansas school system was ruled unconstitutional by the U.S. federal court, with national ramifications. Remarkably, some of Michael fellow philosophers subsequently criticised him for too explicit a defence of the demarcation criterion. One shudders to think what the result of the trial might have been had some of these experts, rather than Michael, been called to give their more ‘nuanced account’.

Michael was a long-time Fellow of the ISSR and, thanks to Fraser Watts' arts of persuasion, played a major role in one of our large TWCF-funded grants, a role into which he threw himself with characteristic whole-heartedness. A near-lifelong atheist, Michael, unlike many atheists, had an excellent understanding of religion. Indeed, he seemed to get on better with many religious believers than with some more strident atheists. He could not abide some well-known atheists who disparaged religion and he was personally hurt by the way some atheists had attacked him, likening him to Neville Chamberlain or describing him as a quisling.

Michael produced books with the frequency with which most academics produce articles. I can recall his commenting favourably on the several he spotted on my shelves when he first visited me at my place of work. I feel deeply honoured to be co-author with him of *The New Biology: A Battle between Mechanism and Organicism*, which was published by Harvard University Press last year. Given that he was over 80 by the time we finished writing it, I

wasn't surprised that he repeatedly told me that that would be his last book. I was also not surprised that he produced a number of excellent books since then.

A gifted teacher, the internet is now awash with moving tributes from former doctoral students and colleagues of the time and care that Michael lavished on them. A truly larger-than-life character, I doubt we shall see his like again. He is very much missed.

Michael J. Reiss