On Forming and Holding Opinions: A Case Study

By Prof. Connell Fanning

Forming opinions and expressing them – indeed *using* them – is something we do every day. Therefore, *how* we form opinions, *how* we hold them, and *how* we express them is fundamental to the quality of our individual daily conversations and in their aggregate to the quality of organisations and the tone of society.

This raises the question as to how do I decide to continue holding my opinion about an experience or to let it go when my opinion is different from the opinion of another person with whom I am in conversation about something?

In our time of fake-news, half-truths, and alternative facts it is becoming essential for genuine conversation for each of us to be aware, as perhaps never before, *how I hold my opinion,* the *intention with which I engage in discussion* with another, and whether *I am open to changing my mind* about the matter in a *reasoning dialogue* with the other or whether, from the outset, I am resistant to change, no matter how unreasonable my position turns out to be in the discussion.

> "Being sure of something is one thing; knowing *why* one is sure is another."
>
> Richard Skemp
> Mathematician

We can look to good examples to observe the methods and ethics relating to forming and holding opinions and to help us develop the attitude required for good conversation and dialogue. Here we look at a literary critic, M.H. Abrams, as a case study of good opinion making.

Abrams held an opinion about a poem, which became the subject of another interpretation in particular by another literary critic. Abrams had to decide whether to continue holding his meaning of the poem. The way in which went about his business is exemplary. We can learn much about our own reasoning and beliefs irrespective of any intrinsic interest in the particular task of Abrams. We are interested in the HOW (method) rather than the WHAT of his thinking.

JUDGMENTS AND OPINIONS

These matters raise four other questions about which we turn to some ideas of Hannah Arendt about opinions for guidance:

- **What is an 'opinion'?**

  Forming an opinion involves making a 'judgment' and, when we have made a judgment, we *express the judgment publicly* to others as our 'opinion'.

- **Why do we express our opinions to other people?**

  In addressing our opinion to others, we are making a claim on their attention *and* (at least tacitly) making a claim for their agreement to our opinion about an experience of something, *i.e.,* something about which we have made a judgment that it is good/bad, right/wrong, beautiful/ugly.

  "Every man prefers belief to the exercise of judgment."

  Seneca (4 BCE- 65ACE)
  Philosopher

  In doing so, although our judgment is subjective, *i.e.,* our own personal experience, we are appealing to faculties of mind which are inherently common to all minds. (A judgment /opinion which we keep to ourselves might be considered a 'thought', temporary or otherwise, passing through our minds.)

- **How do we form our opinions?**

  One of the main elements of Hannah Arendt's Theory is that

  (i) "....our decisions about right and wrong [our judgments] will *depend upon our choice of company*, of those with whom we wish to spend our lives"
  (ii) "...this *company is chosen by thinking in examples*, in examples of persons dead or alive, real or fictitious, and in examples of incidents past or present."

  Judgment is nurtured by the 'company we choose', the company we keep through our lives – 'those' with whom we spend our time and engage in dialogue.

- **How do we develop our power of judgment?**

  Choosing One's Company is the key to developing one's power of judgment. We can develop our power of judgment over time by engaging in direct (personal) or indirect (exemplary) experiences. We can move from simplistic or crude judgments to more refined and sustainable ones. We develop our inherited dispositions,

initially, by being exposed to examples by people who influence us and, later, by exposing ourselves to further examples.

Returning to the main question, about how we decide to continue holding an opinion or to let it go when it differs from the opinion of another, Arendt theory would suggest that exemplars ('company') help us think about that question.

> "If the cultivation of the understanding consists in one thing more than in another, it is merely in learning the grounds of one's own opinion."
>
> John Stuart Mill
> Philosopher

As a source of exemplars – *good company* - literary criticism provides many examples of how to judge claims about whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, beautiful or ugly. Specifically, following Arendt that we must think in examples, we look to observe an opinion being formed on the basis of a series of judgments.

We will look at a case of a critic exploring whether a particular poem has a right or wrong reading, or, more generally, dealing with the question: what is the meaning of a poem when there is no one way to read it?

AN EXEMPLARY CASE OF OPINION FORMING

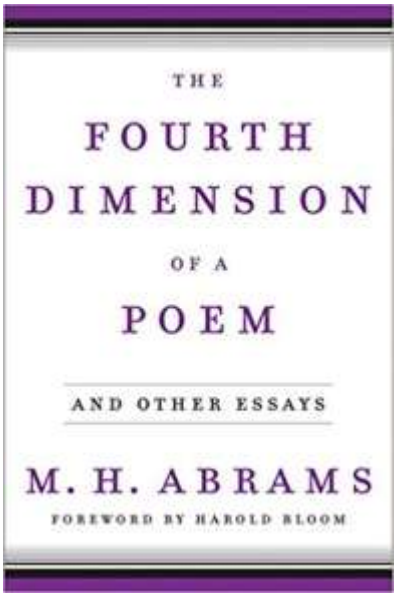
Figure 1. Cornell University Photography

As the example to think about opinion forming and holding, we are taking the case of an essay by the literary critic M.H. Abrams, entitled 'How to Prove an Interpretation' from his *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem and Other Essays* (Norton, New York, 2012: 106 – 129).

This essay shows Abrams working through two contrasting interpretations of a short poem by Wordsworth which had been subjected to different interpretations by a number of literary critics to come to a conclusion to express as an opinion to influence others. The scrupulous way in which he goes about the business of reaching judgments about the poem and testing his opinion is exemplary of the way opinions should be reached and held.

An outline summary of Abrams approach unavoidably lacks the life, sparkle and colour of Abrams own essay and a first-hand acquaintance with his essay is highly recommended to get the feeling of the attractive mind with which we are engaging when reading it. (Page references are in parentheses. Emphases are added unless otherwise noted.)

Approach



Abrams starting point is the claim, which is central to literary debates, that a poem cannot have a *determinate* meaning and that no one reading of a poem can be *the correct* reading. (106)

Abrams holds the contrary view that it is usually possible to reach an interpretation that "approximates the central or core meanings that the sentences of a poem were formed to convey" and that "valid reasons which support such an interpretation against a proposed alternative" can be adduced (107).

In other words, he holds to what he calls a traditional view, namely, that there is a right reading as against a misreading. He sets about assessing this position in the way he must for making judgments, *i.e.,* by examining a particular concrete example – in his case, a specific poem – rather than in generalities.

Abrams starts by clearly identifying the matter at issue - in Wordsworth's poem the reference to 'she' - in the debate about the meaning of the poem and carefully sets out how he intends to proceed:

- Isolate essential features of its meaning that have been disputed by *competent* readers
- Identify the procedures for resolving the dispute. (107)

The meaning of the poem selected had been broadly accepted for some time until a radically new interpretation was presented which, Abrams says, was modestly and very well argued with many sound and detailed reasons. The result is that Abrams is 'forced' to "entertain seriously an interpretation [he] had rejected out of hand" (109).

Abrams explains that he and the other critic share "a frame of reference – a tacit set of principles and procedures – that we automatically put into play in making sense of the text" and carefully details what he means by this. He also points out that it is only because of these presuppositions, a "tacit participation in a common interpretive practice", that the different arguments can engage with each other in "the same plane of discourse". (109)

We may note that, while the shared philosophy avoids the problem of incommensurability, whereby people can end up talking past each other, Abrams task is also made harder by this commonality because he cannot appeal to having a different 'religion', 'values', or 'philosophy' as is often made the end of discussions .

The final aspect of his preparatory method is to note that the respective reasons each gives for their opinions "pretty much exhaust the inventory of the kind of evidence available" to resolve the disputed interpretations. (110)

A point, unmentioned by Abrams, to note at this stage is that he selects a strong case against his own view to take on his task.

Another observation is that Abrams at no point impugn the character and motives of the other person or question their intelligence or goodwill. He acknowledges people who disagree with him as being qualified readers. He does not use unsupported, vague or superficial statements to criticise other positions. He focuses on the issue, not *ad hominem*, criticism. In other words, Abrams does not behave as an 'Anointed'.

Reasoning

1. Abrams first considers the 'for and against' of the references for the alternative interpretation and diligently concludes that further evidence is required.

Thus, Abrams does not stop at the first stage or at his own position, something that is quite common in 'debates'.

2. His next step is to review the evidence of the author's intention adduced for the alternative reading, first within the text, which proves inadequate, and then outside the text. He does not find direct external evidence but does point to indirect evidence. Having weighed this evidence carefully Abrams concludes that the arguments for the alternative interpretation is a case of 'special pleading'. (112-6)

He still, however, allows that the question of the right interpretation is still an open one and asks where to turn for further evidence. (116)

3. The alternative case is developed by taking 'parallel' passages of a similar nature to the disputed one from the poet's other poems to support the alternative claim. Abrams reviews the *three strongest* of these passages in detail and assess that they 'lie askew' to the alternative interpretation of the poem being advanced. (116-9)

This brings Abrams to the other critics procedure of 'parallel passages' used to argue for the alternative interpretation and to object on the grounds that, to "argue by parallels justly", the selection must not be biased. The passages must satisfy a number of criteria he lists and argues that there are other passages not selected which offer closer parallels to the standard interpretation. (119-0)

At this point Abrams concludes that the "weight of evidence has tipped decidedly to the standard reading". Nevertheless, he still allows that the alternative interpretation is "an open, though greatly diminished possibility". Despite holding a different opinion, Abrams

diligently proceeds to test it against further possible grounds in support of the alternative reading to his. (120-1)

4. Describing the next test as an "important remaining resource", Abrams "entertains each reading in its turn as a hypothesis, in order to determine which one best fits the semantic aspects of the poem in its entirety". (121)

As always, Abrams very carefully sets out the issues involved in this procedure by noting that the semantic aspects of the poems language are not hard data which decisively accept or reject a hypothesis: "They are soft data, malleable enough to adapt themselves to each of two hypotheses, however divergent. Different potential ranges of significance in each component of the poem come into play, and fall into a different configuration, as we alter our interpretive vantage." (121)

Nevertheless, he continues, the situation of deciding between two conflicting hypothesis "while difficult, is not desperate" and expresses what could be regarded as **an ethic of dialogue** between two opinions:

> "The possible meanings of the phrasal elements [of the poem], although adaptive to each hypothesis, are not so malleable but that some elements resist one or other interpretation, cry out against too drastic a manipulation of it semantic possibilities – not with any public outcry, but within the *sensibility of a qualified reader* of [a poem of the type in question]". (121)

In this way, he asses that the alternative interpretation demands "pulling at what the *expert reader*, by his *(sic) internalized norms* of linguistic practice, *intuits as the normal range* of semantic possibilities" and gives rise to "semantic strain" when appraising the "total poem". (121-3)

Abrams shows us here the mode of a good conversation across viewpoint and now he comes to the key question: "Taking into account all the evidence and counterevidence, which interpretation of [the] poem are we justified in choosing?" (123)

5. Again, at this point in his reasoning, Abrams is scrupulous in pointing to another difficulty for his task: "The reasons for or against each reading are diverse, uncodified, and lacking in sharp criteria by which to measure the evidential weight. Furthermore, the diverse reasons are not only immeasurable; they are incommensurable with each other." (123)

The question Abrams asks - *how are we to judge the weight of such a reason against another such reason*? – is exactly the question at the heart of forming an opinion that is, making a judgement which is expressed publicly as an opinion.

While this would seem to make hopeless the attempt to achieve a valid interpretation, as Abrams says, he nevertheless suggests that: "As a matter of common practice, however, we are usually able to come to a firm decision about the purport of a poem." (123)

Abrams now explains further his approach and thereby illuminates the roles of judgments, as the basis for opinions in matters of right/wrong, beautiful/ugly, good/bad, and the emergence of judgments from the totality of a person's experiences, indeed, one could say, of the person.

He points out that: "We normally interpret a poem *not only by reasoning* about it, but by *applying our interpretive tact*, which is the seemingly *intuitive product of all our prior engagements* with poems." (123)

6. Admitting that his procedure in this essay has been "artificial" made necessary by the disagreement with another literary critic, he says:

> "It is only when this intuition is challenged by a drastically divergent possibility that we feel the *need to separate out, as explicit arguments, factors that are simultaneous and implicit* in our tactful decisions." (123-4)

Separating out elements for purposes analysis is a standard method of reasoning. Thus, "having assimilated the results of all the arguments pro and con", Abrams is now in a position to draw his conclusion that his "interpretive tact" finds the standard reading the valid one. (125)

7. Even at this point Abrams further tests his position by asking which of the readings "would do the author the greater justice, and ourselves as readers a clear benefit – to choose the reading which yields the better poem". (124)

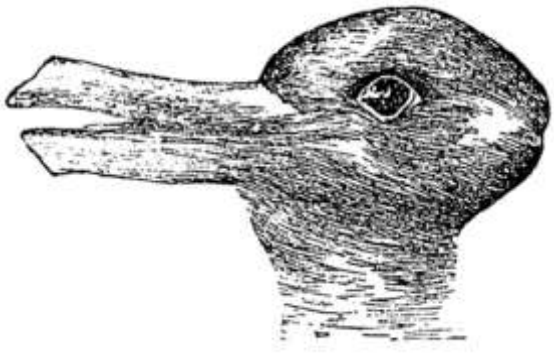
Considering the poem as a whole with this further criterion yields the conclusion that the alternative reading minimizes the significance of shifts within the poem and dissipates the power and strength while the standard reading has a more effective dramatic structure and achieves much greater emotional power. (124)

8. There is one final consideration which, for some reason Abrams deals with in his penultimate section, and seemingly out of sequence. We will take it at this point of his argument as it fits better for our purposes of observing an exemplar at work. (127-8)

Referring to the influence of William Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1930) on the climate of critical opinion, Abrams introduces the idea of 'ambiguity' – signifying multiple meanings – and the implication that the 'either/or' approach should be converted into a 'both - and' approach. (127)

He points out a necessary condition for this and other instances of multiple meanings: "the meanings, no matter how diverse, must be mutually compatible". (128)

He uses famous 'duck-rabbit' to illustrate the point: looked one way we see a duck; looked at again we see a rabbit. One drawing but two images in our mind. However, we cannot hold the two incompatible images simultaneously in our minds, *i.e.*, as both duck and rabbit at the same time. (128)



Finding

On this basis he finds that the two contested meanings are "drastically incompatible" and that the standard reading is the correct interpretation. (128 -9)

Complimenting the other literary critic for running "a very good race", but "mindful of Wittgenstein's insight that the kind of certainty is the kind of language game", Abrams asserts "without hesitation" that the alternative interpretation is "certainly wrong". (129)

Disconcerting Discovery

As he approaches the end of his reasoning, and although confirmed in the assurance that the traditional interpretation is correct, Abrams finds as "the upshot of all these considerations" that he is "confronted by a disconcerting discovery".

Although certain that the standard reading is right and the alternative reading is wrong, **he recognises and acknowledges that others disagree with him**, including his onetime colleague with whom many years before he taught jointly the graduate course in which this poem was introduced for the purpose of testing diverse interpretations. (125)

Admirably, Abrams asks himself:

> "What to do when, myself so certain, I am confronted by a contrary judgment by indubitably qualified readers?" (125)

What do many of us do?

Abrams confesses that his first and "very human impulse is to get angry."

Probably a common reaction.

Nevertheless, he resists this impulse, goes over all the reasons he has formulated for holding his opinion as to the meaning of the poem and, it would seem reasonably, concludes:

> "When I have done this, I can do no more; I have reached the point in giving reasons at which, as the philosopher Wittgenstein put it, 'the spade turns'." (125)

He feels at this point, as he says, that "I can only wait, with what patience I can muster, for an infusion of grace – an interpretive conversion – that will get the reader to see what to me is so evident". (125)

Still, Abrams is unable to rest at this point as, on considering the matter, he realizes that

> "… such a reader feels the same way about my stubbornness in maintaining my interpretation. So I have to admit that in this, and in **similar instances of interpretive deadlock**, some qualified readers' certainty will be contradicted by the certainty of other qualified readers." (125)

Having put himself into the position of the other person, he sees that he seems to have reasoned himself into the position he set out to disprove, namely in interpreting poems no one reading can lay claim to being the right one, and makes an honest admission not often made in debates. (125)

Dilemma

Now Abrams has reached the stage in reasoning where he has to clarify *how he holds his opinion* about the interpretation of the poem.

He turns to Wittgenstein's idea of 'language games' formed to a diversity of human purposes with each 'game' operating according to a set of rules. Some rules cover a number of 'games' while other rules are specific to a particular 'game'. In the quest for certainty, quoting Wittgenstein, "the kind of certainty is the kind of language-game". Thus, the certainty in mathematics is specific to its language game while the certainties in the physical sciences depend on the application of rules specific to each. (125 – 6)

Noting that the commonality among these types of sciences - that their language games are highly specialized being "designed systematically to **exclude any role by individual human differences**, in order to achieve universal agreement among all those who are competent players in each game" – brings Abrams to the nub of his discourse: the difference between these sciences and the "enterprise we call literary criticism". (126)

Enterprises such as literary criticism, which we can broaden into what is called the 'humanities' and to which we can add related human endeavours like business, politics, and law, is "specifically organised to allow room for the play of individual differences". (126)

Since readers will bring their "diverse sensibilities, ranges of experience, and individual temperaments" to bear on their interpretations of things, the consequence is that "…in

some interpretive judgments, one's certainty about an interpretation, however supported by valid reasons, will remain open to disagreement by other qualified readers". (126)

He concludes that the poem in question falls into this category. (126)

Values

This brings to Abrams bottom line – his values:

> "… in this *openness to disagreement* consists the validity, as well as the vitality and enduring interest, of literary criticism. The *inevitability of disagreement* in this, as in so many other humanistic pursuits, rests on a basic value: **the rich diversity of individual human beings**",

and, from that value, it follows that:

> "… the **way to wisdom** is to proceed rationally, to strive for maximum consensus, and – when all possible evidence is adduced to no avail – to *agree to disagree*, in the recognition that some disagreements in basic humanistic enterprises are ultimately unresolvable". (126 - 7)

IMPLICATIONS and CONCLUSION

We have now reached a point with Abram's conclusion where we see him showing his 'liberal outlook', as Bertrand Russell described it. The essence of this outlook:

> ".. lies not in *what opinions are held, but in how they are held*; instead of being held dogmatically, they are held tentatively, and with a consciousness that new evidence may at any moment lead to their abandonment" (1950: 26; emphases in original).

Abrams, in searching for truth about the poem, comes to a conclusion which, for all his obvious belief in it, he does not present as certainty.

The distinction between 'truth' and 'certainty' leads to viewing 'science' as the search for truthfulness in contrast to 'authority' as the claim to certitude.

The way Abrams concludes his reasoning is, in Russell's words:

> "…the way opinions are held in science. Science is empirical, tentative, and undogmatic; all immutable dogma is unscientific. The scientific outlook,

> accordingly, is the intellectual counterpart of what is, in the practical sphere, the outlook of Liberalism" (1950 :…).[1]

Referring to the philosopher John Locke's views on liberty and tolerance, Russell says that Locke:

> "… never tired of emphasising the *uncertainty of most of our knowledge* ….with the *intention of making men aware that they may be mistaken*, and that *they should take account of this possibility in all their dealings with men of opinions different from their own*" (emphases added).

Abrams not only embodies the scientific outlook but also demonstrates how the 'Scientific Attitude' or 'Scientific Outlook' (as Waddington and Russell, respectively, call it) extends beyond what is often narrowly referred to as 'science', *i.e.*, the natural-physical and experimental sciences. The way in which he went about addressing his question can hardly be denied the label 'scientific' in any reasonable discourse.

A related implication we can draw is that holding in mind the key distinction between the meanings of *certainty* and *truth* can shape our orientation to issues, including social-political stances broadly conceived as well as about business generally and management and strategy in particular. There is a connection in Russell's view to business: "What we may call, in a broad sense, the Liberal theory of politics is a recurrent product of commerce" (1950: 25). Travel and trade broaden minds.

Karl Popper (1994) echoes the approach of Russell when he says that all scientific knowledge - as a type of knowledge and way of knowing is tentative: there is no absolute certainty and no certain knowledge; science is a search for truth not certainty; and science as a body of knowledge is not a body of certain knowledge. Science, as Keynes said about Economics, is a *method* not a *doctrine*.

Our review of Abrams method - how he forms his opinion and how holds his opinion - brings to our attention the opposite of the scientific outlook/attitude. There are many manifestations of non-scientific, unscientific, and anti-scientific attitudes exhibited in all walks of life. We see it most especially in media commentary, in the competitions that are a dominant feature of politics in democracies today, and in business and its representation where 'spin' has come to predominate. The economist Thomas Sowell has memorably characterised one of these attitudes as the 'Anointed'.

The Scientific Outlook can be difficult to keep in mind and to live it: habits are powerful and 'efficiency' is an imperative. The 'Anointed' is an infectious practice today when short

[1] The term 'liberalism' has different connotations today and in different countries from what Russell meant in 1950.

attention- spans and media sound-bites are such influences on acquiring and holding opinions. While it can appear to be efficient in time, and even effective in influence, the impact is not to enhance understanding among people.

As an element in our meaning-making, the attitude of the 'Anointed' constitutes a barrier to developmental movement, as can be observed when specific examples, *e.g.*, a prominent international banker, of the 'anointed' are viewed over time. Ideas, methods and roles will be unchanged and they will 'pop up' when opportunity arises. Rather than contributing through originality of ideas and openness to conversation, the Anointed is a form of suppression, if not oppression. Unwillingness to overcome the pervasive antipathy to make judgments about behaviour allows it to continue.

In Abrams we meet a mind far from that of the 'Anointed' and we are privileged to be able to engage with him through his writings. He shows us what real critical thinking – a much abused phrase – looks like, what courtesy and dignity are in conversation, and how *listening* to the other is the key to dialogue.

Such is the way of good company for the right journey.

> "The problem with the world is that intelligent people are full of doubts while the stupid ones are full of confidence."
>
> Charles Bukowski
> Poet

In a world of instant opinions and certainty of views, Abrams points to an alternative ethic and is a mind with whom one can grow. Ultimately we are obliged to consider how we think and, by extension, how others think. The conclusion to which Abrams draws us is that much thought is required in making judgments and in forming opinions and we fail as civilised beings if we refuse or reject engaging in conversation with another.

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