

The ETHICS of **Rhetoric**

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ὥστε συμβαίνει τὴν πηροποικὴν οἶον
παραφύεις τι τῆς διαλεκτικῆς εἶναι καὶ
τῆς περὶ τὸ ἤδη προσημασίας

Thus it happens that rhetoric is an offshoot
of dialectic and also of ethical studies.

—ARISTOTLE, *Rhetoric*

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never be a science. In the most critical undertaking of all, the choice of one's source of argument, it would be blindness to take him as mentor. To find what Burke lacked, we now turn to the American Abraham Lincoln, who despite an imperfect education, discovered that political arguments must ultimately be based on genus or definition.

Chapter IV

ABRAHAM LINCOLN AND THE ARGUMENT FROM DEFINITION

ALTHOUGH most readers of Lincoln sense the prevailing aspect of his arguments, there has been no thoughtful treatment of this interesting subject. Albert Beveridge merely alludes to it in his observation that "In trials in circuit courts Lincoln depended but little on precedents; he argued largely from first principles."¹ Nicolay and Hay, in describing Lincoln's speech before the Republican Banquet in Chicago, December 10, 1856, report as follows: "Though these fragments of addresses give us only an imperfect reflection of the style of Mr. Lincoln's oratory during this period, they nevertheless show its essential characteristics, a pervading clearness of analysis, and that strong tendency toward axiomatic definition which gives so many of his sentences their convincing force and durable value."² W. H. Herndon, who had the opportunity of closest personal observation, was perhaps the most analytical of all when he wrote: "Not only were nature, man, and principle suggestive to Mr. Lincoln; not only had he accurate and exact perceptions, but he was causative; his mind apparently with an automatic movement ran back behind facts, principles, and all things to their origin and first cause—to the point where forces act at once as effect and

1. *Abraham Lincoln* (Boston and New York, 1928), II, 549.

2. John G. Nicolay and John Hay, *Abraham Lincoln: A History* (New York, 1904), II, 46.

cause."³ He observed further in connection with Lincoln's practice before the bar: "All opponents dreaded his originality, his condensation, definition, and force of expression. . . ."⁴

Our feeling that he is a father of the nation even more convincingly than Washington, and that his words are words of wisdom when compared with those of the more intellectual Jefferson and the more academic Wilson strengthen the supposition that he argued from some very fundamental source. And when we find opinion on the point harmonious, despite the wide variety of description his character has undergone, we have enough initial confirmation to go forward with the study—a study which is important not alone as showing the man in clearer light but also as showing upon what terms conservatism is possible.

It may be useful to review briefly the argument from definition. The argument from definition, in the sense we shall employ here, includes all arguments from the nature of the thing. Whether the genus is an already recognized convention, or whether it is defined at the moment by the orator, or whether it is left to be inferred from the aggregate of its species, the argument has a single postulate. The postulate is that there exist classes which are determinate and therefore predicable. In the ancient proposition of the schoolroom, "Socrates is mortal," the class of mortal beings is invoked as a predicable. Whatever is a member of the class will accordingly have the class attributes. This might seem a very easy admission to gain, but it is not so from those who believe that genera are only figments of the imagination and have no self-existence. Such persons hold, in the extreme application of their doctrine, that all deduction is unwarranted assumption; or that attributes cannot be transferred by imputation from genus to species. The issue here is very deep, going back to the immemorial quarrel over universals, and we shall not here

3. *Herndon's Lincoln* (Springfield, Ill., 1921), III, 594.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 595.

explore it further than to say that the argument from definition or genus involves a philosophy of being which has divided and probably will continue to divide mankind. There are those who seem to feel that genera are imprisoning bonds which serve only to hold the mind in confinement. To others, such genera appear the very organon of truth. Without going into that question here, it seems safe to assert that those who believe in the validity of the argument from genus are idealists, roughly, if not very philosophically, defined. The evidence that Lincoln held such belief is overwhelming; it characterizes his thinking from an early age; and the greatest of his utterances (excepting the Gettysburg Address, which is based upon similitude) are chiefly arguments from definition.

In most of the questions which concerned him from the time he was a struggling young lawyer until the time when he was charged with the guidance of the nation, Lincoln saw opportunity to argue from the nature of man. In fact, not since the Federalist papers of James Madison had there been in American political life such candid recourse to this term. I shall treat his use of it under the two heads of argument from a concept of human nature and argument from a definition of man.

Lincoln came early to the conclusion that human nature is a fixed and knowable thing. Many of his early judgments of policy are based on a theory of what the human being *qua* human being will do in a given situation. Whether he had arrived at this concept through inductive study—for which he had varied opportunity—or through intuition is, of course, not the question here; our interest is in the reasoning which the concept made possible. It appears a fact that Lincoln trusted in a uniform predictability of human nature.

In 1838, when he was only twenty-nine years old, he was invited to address the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield on the topic "The Perpetuation of Our Political Institutions." In this instance, the young orator read the danger to perpetuation in the inherent evil of human nature. His argument was

that the importance of a nation or the sacredness of a political dogma could not withstand the hunger of men for personal distinction. Now the founders of the Union had won distinction through that very role, and so satisfied themselves. But oncoming men of the same breed would be looking for similar opportunity for distinction, and possibly would not find it in tasks of peaceful construction. It seemed to him quite possible that in the future bold natures would appear who would seek to gain distinction by pulling down what their predecessors had erected. To a man of this nature it matters little whether distinction is won "at the expense of emancipating slaves or enslaving freemen."⁵ The fact remains that "Distinction will be his paramount object," and "nothing left to be done in the way of building up, he would set boldly to the task of pulling down."⁶ In this way Lincoln held personal ambition to be distinctive of human nature, and he was willing to predict it of his fellow citizens, should their political institutions endure "fifty times" as long as they had.

Another excellent example of the use of this source appears in a speech which Lincoln made during the Van Buren administration. Agitation over the National Bank question was still lively, and a bill had been put forward which would have required the depositing of Federal funds in five regional sub-treasuries, rather than in a National Bank, until they were needed for use. At a political discussion held in the Illinois House of Representatives, Lincoln made a long speech against the proposal in which he drew extensively from the topic of the nature of human nature. His reasoning was that if public funds are placed in the custody of sub-treasurers, the duty and the personal interest of the custodians may conflict. "And who that knows anything of human nature doubts that in many instances interest will prevail over duty, and that the sub-

5. *The Life and Writings of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Philip van Doren Stern (New York, 1940), p. 239. This source, hereafter referred to as *Writings*, is the most complete one-volume edition of Lincoln's works.

6. *Loc. cit.*

treasurer will prefer opulent knavery in a foreign land to honest poverty at home."⁷ If on the other hand the funds were placed with a National Bank which would have the privilege of using the funds, upon payment of interest, until they are needed, the duty and interest of the custodian would coincide. The Bank plan was preferable because we always find the best performance where duty and self-interest thus run together.⁸ Here we see him basing his case again on the infallible tendency of human nature to be itself.

A few years later Lincoln was called upon to address the Washingtonian Temperance Society, which was an organization of reformed drink addicts. This speech is strikingly independent in approach, and as such is prophetic of the manner he was to adopt in wrestling with the great problems of union and slavery. Instead of following the usual line of the temperance advocate, with its tone of superiority and condemnation, he attacked all such approaches as not suited to the nature of man. He impressed upon his hearers the fact that their problem was the problem of human nature, "which is God's decree and can never be reversed." He then went on to say that people with a weakness for drink are not inferior specimens of the race but have heads and hearts that "will bear advantageous comparison with those of any other class." The appeal to drink addicts was to be addressed to men, and it could not take the form of denunciation "because it is not much in the nature of man to be driven to anything; still less to be driven about that which is exclusively his own business." When one seeks to change the conduct of a being of this nature, "per-

6. *Life and Works of Abraham Lincoln*, ed. Marion Mills Miller (New York, 1907), II, 41. This speech is not included in Stern's *Writings*.

7. This may impress some as an unduly cynical reading of human nature, but it will be found much closer to Lincoln's settled belief than many representations made with the object of eulogy. Herndon, for example, reports that he and Lincoln sometimes discussed the question of whether there are any unselfish human actions, and that Lincoln always maintained the negative. Cf. Herndon, *op. cit.*, III, 597.

suation, kind, unassuming persuasion should ever be adopted." He then summed up his point: "Such is man and so must he be understood by those who would lead him, even to his own best interests."⁸

One further instance of this argument may be cited. About 1850 Lincoln compiled notes for an address to young men on the subject of the profession of law. Here again we find a refreshingly candid approach, looking without pretense at the creature man. One piece of advice which Lincoln urged upon young lawyers was that they never take their whole fee in advance. To do so would place too great a strain upon human nature, which would then lack the needful spur to industry. "When fully paid beforehand, you are more than a common mortal if you can feel the same interest in the case, as if something was still in prospect for you, as well as for your client."⁹ As in the case of the subtreasury bill, Lincoln saw the yoking of duty and self-interest as a necessity of our nature.

These and other passages which could be produced indicate that he viewed human nature as a constant, by which one could determine policy without much fear of surprise. Everything peripheral Lincoln referred to this center. His arguments consequently were the most fundamental seen since a group of realists framed the American government with such a visible regard for human passion and weakness. Lincoln's theory of human nature was completely unsentimental; it was the creation of one who had taken many buffeting and who, from early bitterness and later indifference, never affiliated with any religious denomination. But it furnished the means of wisdom and prophecy.

With this habit of reasoning established, Lincoln was ideally equipped to deal with the great issue of slavery. The American civil conflict of the last century, when all its superficial ex-

citements have been stripped aside, appears another debate about the nature of man. Yet while other political leaders were looking to the law, to American history, and to this or that political contingency, Lincoln looked—as it was his habit already to do—to the center; that is, to the definition of man. Was the negro a man or was he not? It can be shown that his answer to this question never varied, despite willingness to recognize some temporary and perhaps even some permanent minority on the part of the African race. The answer was a clear "Yes," and he used it on many occasions during the fifties to impale his opponents.

The South was peculiarly vulnerable to this argument, for if we look at its position, not through the terms of legal and religious argument, often ingeniously worked out, but through its actual treatment of the negro, that position is seen to be equivocal. To illustrate: in the Southern case he was not a man as far as the "inalienable rights" go, and the Dred Scott decision was to class him as a chattel. Yet on the contrary the negro was very much a man when it came to such matters as understanding orders, performing work, and, as the presence of the mulatto testified, helping to procreate the human species. All of the arguments that the pro-slavery group was able to muster broke against the stubborn fact, which Lincoln persistently thrust in their way, that the negro was somehow and in some degree a man.

For our first examination of this argument, we turn to the justly celebrated speech at Peoria, October 16, 1854. Lincoln had actually begun to lose interest in politics when the passage of the highly controversial Kansas-Nebraska Bill in May, 1854, reawakened him. It was as if his moral nature had received a fresh shock from the tendencies present in this bill; and he began in that year the battle which he waged with remarkable consistency of position until he won the presidency of the Union six years later. The Speech at Peoria can be regarded as the opening gun of this campaign.

The speech itself is a rich study in logic and rhetoric, where-

8. Stern, *Writings*, pp. 263-64.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

in one finds the now mature Lincoln showing his gift for discovering the essentials of a question. After promising the audience to confine himself to the "naked merits" of the issue and to be "no less than national in all the positions" he took, he turned at once to the topic of domestic slavery. Here arguments from the genus "man" follow one after another. Lincoln uses them to confront the Southern people with their dilemma.

Equal justice to the South, it is said, requires us to consent to the extension of slavery to new countries. That is to say, inasmuch as you do not object to my taking my hog to Nebraska, therefore I must not object to your taking your slave. Now, I admit that this is perfectly logical, if there is no difference between hogs and Negroes. But while you thus require me to deny the humanity of the Negro, I wish to ask whether you of the South, yourselves, have ever been willing to do as much?¹⁰

If the Southern people regard the Negro only as an animal, how do they explain their attitude toward the slave dealer?

You despise him utterly. You do not recognize him as a friend, or even as an honest man. Your children must not play with his; they may rollick freely with the little Negroes, but not with the slave dealer's children. If you are obliged to deal with him, you try to get through the job without so much as touching him. It is common with you to join hands with men you meet, but with the slave dealer you avoid the ceremony—instructively shunning from the snaky contact. If he grows rich and retires from business, you still remember him, and still keep up the ban of non-intercourse upon him and his family. Now why is this? You do not so treat the man who deals in corn, cotton, or tobacco?¹¹

Moreover, if the Negro is merely property, and is incapable of any sort of classification, what category is there to accommodate the free Negroes?

10. Stern, *Writings*, pp. 359-60.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 360-61.

And yet again. There are in the United States and Territories, including the District of Columbia, 433,643 free blacks. At five hundred dollars per head, they are worth over two hundred millions of dollars. How comes this vast amount of property to be running about without owners? We do not see free horses or free cattle running at large. How is this? All these free blacks are the descendants of slaves, or have been slaves themselves; and they would be slaves now but for something which has operated on their white owners, inducing them at vast pecuniary sacrifice to liberate them. What is that something? Is there any mistaking it? In all these cases it is your sense of justice and human sympathy continually telling you that the poor Negro has some natural right to himself—that those who deny it and make mere merchandise of him deserve kickings, contempt, and death.¹²

The argument is clinched with a passage which puts the Negro's case in the most explicit terms one can well conceive of. "Man" and "self-government," Lincoln argues, cannot be defined without respect to one another.

The doctrine of self-government is right—absolutely and eternally right—but it has no just application as here attempted. Or perhaps I should rather say that whether it has such application depends upon whether a Negro is not or is a man. If he is not a man, in that case he who is a man may as a matter of self-government do just what he pleases with him.

But if the Negro is a man, is it not to that extent a total destruction of self-government to say that he too shall not govern himself? When the white man governs himself, that is self-government; but when he governs himself and also governs another man, that is more than self-government—that is despotism. If the Negro is a man, why then my ancient faith teaches me that "all men are created equal," and that there can be no moral right in connection with one man's making a slave of another.¹³

12. Stern, *Writings*, p. 361.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 362.

Lincoln knew the type of argument he had to oppose, and he correctly gauged its force. It was the argument from circumstance, which he treated as such argument requires to be treated. "Let us turn slavery from its claims of 'moral right' back upon its existing legal rights and its argument of 'necessity.'"¹⁴ He did not deny the "necessity"; he regarded it as something that could be taken care of in course of time.

After the formation of the Republican Party, he often utilized his source in definition to point out the salient difference between Republicans and Democrats. The Democrats were playing up circumstance (the "necessity" alluded to in the above quotation) and to consequence (the saving of the Union through the placating of all sections) while the Republicans stood, at first a little forlornly, upon principle. As he put it during a speech at Springfield in 1857:

The Republicans inculcate, with whatever of ability they can, that the Negro is a man, that his bondage is cruelly wrong, and that the field of his oppression ought not to be enlarged. The Democrats deny his manhood; deny, or dwarf to insignificance, the wrong of his bondage; so far as possible crush all sympathy for him, and cultivate and excite hatred and disgust against him; compliment themselves as Union-savers for doing so; and call the indefinite outspreading of his bondage "a sacred right of self-government."¹⁵

In the long contest with Douglas and the party of "popular sovereignty," Lincoln's principal charge was that his opponents, by straddling issues and through deviousness, were breaking down the essential definition of man. Repeatedly he referred to "this gradual and steady debauching of public opinion." He made this charge because those who advocated local option in the matter of slavery were working unremittently to change the Negro "from the rank of a man to that of a brute." "They are taking him down," he declared, "and

14. Stem, *Writings*, p. 375.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 427.

placing him, when spoken of, among reptiles and crocodiles, as Judge Douglas himself expresses it.

"Is not this change wrought in your minds a very important change? Public opinion in this country is everything. In a nation like ours this popular sovereignty and squatter sovereignty have already wrought a change in the public mind to the extent I have already stated. There is no man in this crowd who can contradict it.

"Now, if you are opposed to slavery honestly, I ask you to note that fact, and the like of which is to follow, to be plastered on, layer after layer, until very soon you are prepared to deal with the Negro everywhere as with a brute."¹⁶

We feel that the morality of intellectual integrity lay behind such resistance to the breaking down of genera. Lincoln realized that the price of honesty, as well as of success in the long run, is to stay out of the excluded middle.

In sum, we see that Lincoln could never be dislodged from his position that there is one genus of human beings; and early in his career as lawyer he had learned that it is better to base an argument upon one incontrovertible point than to try to make an impressive case through a whole array of points. Through the years he clung tenaciously to this concept of genus, from which he could draw the proposition that what is fundamentally true of the family will be true also of the branches of the family.¹⁷ Therefore since the Declaration of Independence had interdicted slavery for man, slavery was interdicted for the negro in principle. Here is a good place to point out that whereas for Burke circumstance was often a deciding factor, for Lincoln it was never more than a retarding factor. He marked the right to equality affirmed by the signers

16. Stem, *Writings*, pp. 549-50.

17. Cf. the remark in "Notes for Speeches" (*Ibid.*, pp. 497-98): "Suppose it is true that the Negro is inferior to the white in the gifts of nature; is it not the exact reverse of justice that the white should for that reason take from the Negro any of the little which he has had given to him?"

of the Declaration of Independence: "They meant simply to declare the right, so that enforcement of it might follow as fast as circumstances would permit."¹⁸ And he recognized the stubborn fact of the institution of American slavery. But he did not argue any degree of rightness from the fact. The strategy of his whole anti-slavery campaign was that slavery should be restricted to the states in which it then existed and in this way "put in course of ultimate extinction"—a phrase which he found expressive enough to use on several occasions.

There is quite possibly concealed here another argument from definition, expressible in the proposition that which cannot grow must perish. To fix limits for an institution with the understanding that it shall never exceed these is in effect to pass sentence of death. The slavery party seems to have apprehended early that if slavery could not wax, it would wane, and hence their support of the Mexican War and the Kansas-Nebraska Bill. Lincoln's inflexible defense of the terms of the old Northwest Ordinance served notice that he represented the true opposition. In this way his definitive stand drew clear lines for the approaching conflict.

To gain now a clearer view of Lincoln's mastery of this rhetoric, it will be useful to see how he used various arguments from definition within the scope of a single speech, and for this purpose we may choose the First Inaugural Address, surely from the standpoint of topical organization one of the most notable American state papers. The long political contest, in which he had displayed acumen along with tenacity, had ended in victory, and this was the juncture at which he had to lay down his policy for the American Union. For some men it would have been an occasion for description mainly; but Lincoln seems to have taken the advice he had given many years before to the Young Men's Lyceum of Springfield: "Passion has helped us but can do so no more. . . . Reason, cold, calculating, unimpassioned reason—must furnish all the mate-

18. Stern, *Writings*, p. 422.

rials for our future support and defense. . . ." Without being cold, the speech is severely logical, and much of the tone is contributed by the type of argument preferred.

Of the fourteen distinguishable arguments in this address, eight are arguments from definition or genus. Of the six remaining, two are from consequences, two from circumstances, one from contraries, and one from similitude. The proportion tells its own story. Now let us see how the eight are employed:

1. *Argument from the nature of all government.* All governments have a fundamental duty of self-preservation. "Perpetuity is implied, if not expressed, in the fundamental law of all national governments."¹⁹ This means of course that whatever is recognized as a government has the obligation to defend itself from without and from within, and whatever menaces the government must be treated as a hostile force. This argument was offered to meet the contention of the secessionists that the Constitution nowhere authorized the Federal government to take forcible measures against the withdrawing states. Here Lincoln fell back upon the broader genus "all government."

2. *Argument from the nature of contract.* Here Lincoln met the argument that the association of the states is "in the nature of a contract merely." His answer was that the rescinding of a contract requires the assent of all parties to it. When one party alone ceases to observe it, the contract is merely violated, and violation affects the material interests of all parties. By this interpretation of the law of contract, the Southern states could not leave the Union without a general consent.

3. *Argument from the nature of the American Union.* Here Lincoln began with the proposition that the American Union is older than the Constitution. Now since the Constitution was formed "to make a more perfect union," it must have had in view the "vital element of perpetuity," since the omission of

19. Stern, *Writings*, p. 241.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 649.

this element would have left a less perfect union than before. The intent of the Constitution was that "no State upon its own mere motion can lawfully get out of the Union." Therefore the American Union, as an instrument of government, had in its legal nature protection against this kind of disintegration.

4. *Argument from the nature of the chief magistrate's office.* Having thus defined the Union, Lincoln next looked at the duties which its nature imposed upon the chief magistrate. He defined it as "simple duty" on the chief magistrate's part to see that the laws of this unbroken union "be faithfully executed in all the states." Obviously the argument was to justify active measures in defense of the Union. As Lincoln conceived the definition, it was not the duty of the chief magistrate to preside over the disintegration of the Union, but to carry on the executive office just as if no possibility of disintegration threatened.

Thus far, it will be observed, the speech is a series of deductions, each one deriving from the preceding definition.

5. *Argument from the nature of majority rule.* This argument, with its fine axiomatic statements, was used by Lincoln to indicate how the government should proceed in cases not expressly envisaged by the Constitution. Popular government demands acquiescence by minorities in all such cases. "If the minority will not acquiesce, the majority must, or the government will cease. There is no other alternative; for continuing the government is acquiescence on one side or the other.

"If a minority in such case will secede rather than acquiesce, they make a precedent which in turn will divide and ruin them; for a minority of their own will secede from them whenever a majority refuses to be controlled by such a minority."²¹ The difficulty of the Confederacy with states' rights within its own house was to attest to the soundness of this argument.

6. *Argument from the nature of the sovereignty of the people.* Here Lincoln conceded the right of the whole people to

21. Stern, *Writings*, pp. 652-53.

change its government by constitutional reform or by revolutionary action. But he saw this right vested in the people as a whole, and he insisted that any change be carried out by the modes prescribed. The institutions of the country were finally the creations of the sovereign will of the people. But until a will on this issue was properly expressed, the government had a commission to endure as before.

7. *Second argument from the nature of the office of chief magistrate.* This argument followed the preceding because Lincoln had to make it clear that whereas the people, as the source of sovereign power, had the right to alter or abolish their government, the chief magistrate, as an elected servant, had no such right. He was chosen to conduct the government then in existence. "His duty is to administer the present government as it came into his hands, and to transmit it, unimpaired by him, to his successor."²²

8. *Second argument from the nature of the sovereignty of the people.* In this Lincoln reminds his audience that the American government does not give its officials much power to do mischief, and that it provides a return of power to the people at short intervals. In effect, the argument defines the American type of government and a tyranny as incompatible from the fact that the governors are up for review by the people at regular periods.

It can hardly be overlooked that this concentration upon definition produces a strongly legalistic speech, if we may conceive law as a process of defining actions. Every important policy of which explanation is made is referred to some widely accepted American political theory. It has been said that Lincoln's advantage over his opponent Jefferson Davis lay in a flexible-minded pragmatism capable of dealing with issues on their own terms, unhampered by metaphysical abstractions. There may be an element of truth in this if reference is made to the more confined and superficial matters—to pro-

22. Stern, *Writings*, p. 656.

cedural and administrative detail. But one would go far to find a speech more respectful toward the established principles of American government—to defined and agreed upon things—than the First Inaugural Address.

Although no other speech by Lincoln exhibits so high a proportion of arguments from definition, the First Message to Congress (July 4, 1861) makes a noteworthy use of this source. The withdrawal of still other states from the Union, the Confederate capture of Fort Sumter, and ensuing military events compelled Lincoln to develop more fully his anti-secessionist doctrine. This he did in a passage remarkable for its treatment of the age-old problem of freedom and authority. What had to be made determinate, as he saw it, was the nature of free government.

And this issue embraces more than the fate of these United States. It presents to the whole family of man the question of whether a constitutional republic or democracy—a government of the people by the same people—can or cannot maintain its territorial integrity against its own domestic foes. It presents the question whether discontented individuals, too few in numbers to control administration according to organic law in any case, can always, upon the pretenses made in this case, or on any other pretenses, or arbitrarily without any pretense, break up their government, and thus practically put an end to free government upon the earth. It forces us to ask: "Is there, in all republics, this inherent and fatal weakness?" "Must a government, of necessity, be too strong for the liberties of its own people, or too weak to maintain its own existence?"²³

Then looking at the doctrine of secession as a question of the whole and its parts, he went on to say:

This relative matter of national power and State rights, as a principle, is no other than the principle of generality and locality. Whatever concerns the whole should be confined to the whole—to

23. Stern, *Writings*, pp. 667-68.

the General Government; while whatever concerns only the State should be left exclusively to the State. This is all there is of original principle about it. Whether the National Constitution in defining boundaries between the two has applied the principle with exact accuracy is not to be questioned. We are all bound by that defining without question.²⁴

One further argument, occurring in a later speech, deserves special attention because of the clear way in which it reveals Lincoln's method. When he delivered his Second Annual Message to Congress on December 1, 1862, he devoted himself primarily to the subject of compensated emancipation of the slaves. This was a critical moment of the war for the people of the border states, who were not fully committed either way, and who were sensitive on the subject of slavery. Lincoln hoped to gain the great political and military advantage of their adherence. The way in which he approaches the subject should be of the highest interest to students of rhetoric, for the opening part of the speech is virtually a copybook exercise in definition. There he faces the question of what constitutes a nation. "A nation may be said to consist of its territory, its people, and its laws." Here we see in scholarly order the genus particularized by the differentiae. Next he enters into a critical discussion of the differentiae. The notion may strike us as curious, but Lincoln proceeds to cite the territory as the enduring part. "The territory is the only part which is of a certain durability. 'One generation passeth away and another cometh, but the earth abideth forever.' It is of the first importance to duly consider and estimate this ever-enduring part."²⁵ Now, Lincoln goes on to say, our present strife arises "not from our permanent part, not from the land we inhabit, not from our national homestead." It is rather the case that "Our strife pertains to ourselves—to the passing generations of men; and it can without convulsion be hushed forever with the passing of

24. Stern, *Writings*, p. 671.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 736.

one generation."²⁶ The present generation will soon disappear, and our laws can be modified by our will. Therefore he offers a plan whereby all owners will be indemnified and all slaves will be free by the year 1900.

Seen in another way, what Lincoln here does is define "nation" and then divide the differentiae into the permanent and the transitory; finally he accommodates his measure both to the permanent part (a territory to be wholly free after 1900) and the transitory part (present men and institutions, which are to be "paid off").

It is the utterance of an American political leader; yet it is veritably Scholastic in its method and in the clearness of its lines of reasoning. It is, at the same time, a fine illustration of pressing toward the ideal goal while respecting, but not being deflected by, circumstances.

It seems pertinent to say after the foregoing that one consequence of Lincoln's love of definition was a war-time policy toward slavery which looked to some like temporizing. We have encountered in an earlier speech his view that the Negro could not be classified merely as property. Yet it must be remembered that in the eyes of the law Negro slaves were property; and Lincoln was, after all, a lawyer. Morally he believed them not to be property, but legally they were property; and the necessity of walking a line between the moral imperative and the law will explain some of his actions which seem not to agree with the popular conception of the Great Emancipator. The first serious clash came in the late summer of 1861, when General Fremont, operating in Missouri, issued a proclamation freeing all slaves there belonging to citizens in rebellion against the United States. Lincoln first rebuked General Fremont and then countermanded his order. To O. H. Browning, of Quincy, Illinois, who had written him in support of Fremont's action, he responded as follows:

²⁶ Stern, *Writings*, p. 737.

You speak of it as the only means of saving the government. On the contrary, it is itself the surrender of the government. Can it be pretended that it is any longer the Government of the United States—any government of constitution and laws—wherein a general or a president may make permanent rules of property by proclamation?²⁷

This was the doctrine of the legal aspect of slavery which was to be amplified in the Second Annual Message to Congress:

Doubtless some of those who are to pay, and not to receive, will object. Yet the measure is both just and economical. In a certain sense the liberation of the slaves is the destruction of property—property acquired by descent or by purchase, the same as any other property. . . . If, then, for a common object this property is to be sacrificed, is it not just that it be done at a common charge?²⁸

It is a truism that as a war progresses, the basis of the war changes, and our civil conflict was no exception. It appears to have become increasingly clear to Lincoln that slavery was not only the fomenting cause but also the chief factor of support of the secessionist movement, and finally he came to the conclusion that the "destruction" of this form of property was an indispensable military proceeding. Even here though—and contrary to the general knowledge of Americans today—definitions were carefully made. The final document was not a proclamation to emancipate slaves, but a proclamation to confiscate the property of citizens in rebellion "as a fit and necessary measure for suppressing said rebellion." Its terms did not emancipate all slaves, and as a matter of fact slavery was legal in the District of Columbia until some time after Lincoln's death.

In view of Lincoln's frequent reliance upon the argument

²⁷ Stern, *Writings*, p. 682.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 740.

from definition, it becomes a matter of interest to inquire whether he appears to have realized that many of his problems were problems of definition. One can of course employ a type of argument without being aware of much more than its *ad hoc* success, but we should expect a reflective mind like Lincoln's to ponder at times the abstract nature of his method. Furthermore, the extraordinary accuracy with which he used words is evidence pointing in the same direction. Sensitivity on the score of definitions is tantamount to sensitivity on the score of names, and we find the following in the First Message to Congress:

It might seem, at first thought, to be of little difference whether the present movement at the South be called "secession" or "rebellion." The movers, however, well understand the difference. At the beginning they knew they could never raise their reason to any respectable magnitude by any name which implies violation of law.²⁹

Lincoln must at times have viewed his whole career as a battle against the "miners and sappers" of those names which expressed the national ideals. His chief charge against Douglas and the equivocal upholders of "squatter sovereignty" was that they were trying to circumvent definitions, and during the war period he had to meet the same sort of attempts. Lincoln's most explicit statement by far on the problem appears in a short talk made at one of the "Sanitary Fairs" it was his practice to attend. Speaking this time at Baltimore in the spring of 1864, he gave one of those timeless little lessons which have made such an impression on men's minds.

The world has never had a good definition of the word liberty, and the American people, just now, are much in want of one. We all declare for liberty; but in using the same word we do not all mean the same thing. With some the word liberty may mean for

29. Stern, *Writings*, p. 669.

each man to do as he pleases, with himself, and with the product of his labor; while with others the same word may mean for some men to do as they please with other men, and the product of other men's labor. Here are two, not only different, but incompatible things, called by the same name, liberty. And it follows that each of the things is, by the respective parties, called by two different and incompatible names—liberty and tyranny.

The shepherd drives the wolf from the sheep's throat, for which the sheep thanks the shepherd as his liberator, while the wolf denounces him for the same act, as the destroyer of liberty, especially as the sheep was a black one. Plainly, the sheep and the wolf are not agreed upon a definition of the word liberty; and precisely the same difference prevails today among us human creatures, even in the North, and all professing to love liberty.³⁰

So the difficulty appeared in his time, and it should hardly be necessary to point out that no period of modern history has been more in need of this little homily on the subject of definition than the first half of the twentieth century.

The relationship between words and essences did then occur to Lincoln as a problem, and we can show how he was influenced in one highly important particular by his attention to this relationship.

Fairly early in his struggle against Douglas and others whom he conceived to be the foes of the Union, Lincoln became convinced that the perdurability of laws and other institutions is bound up with the acceptance of the principle of contradiction. Or, if that seems an unduly abstract way of putting the matter, let us say that he came to repudiate, as firmly as anyone in practical politics may do, those people who try by relativistic interpretations and other sophistries to evade the force of some basic principles. The heart of Lincoln's statesmanship, indeed, lay in his perception that on some matters one has to say "Yes" or "No," that one has to accept an alternative to the total exclusion of the other, and

30. Stern, *Writings*, pp. 810-11.

that any weakness in being thus bold is a betrayal. Let us examine some of the stages by which this conviction grew upon him.

It seems not generally appreciated that this position comprises the essence of the celebrated "House Divided" speech, delivered before the Republican State Convention at Springfield, June 16, 1858. There he said: "A house divided against itself cannot stand; I believe this government cannot endure permanently half slave and half free. I do not expect the Union to be dissolved—I do not expect the house to fall—but I do expect it will cease to be divided. It will become all one thing or all the other."³¹ How manifest it is that Lincoln's position was not one of "tolerance," as that word is vulgarly understood today. It was a definite insistence upon right, with no regard for latitude and longitude in moral questions. For Lincoln such questions could neither be relativistically decided nor held in abeyance. There was no middle ground. In the light of American political tradition the stand is curiously absolute, but it is there—and it is genuinely expressive of Lincoln's matured view.

Douglas had made the fatal mistake of looking for a position in the excluded middle. He had been trying to get slavery admitted into the territories by feigning that the institution was morally indifferent. His platform declaration had been that he did not care "whether it is voted up or voted down" in the territories. That statement made a fine opening for Lincoln, which he used as follows in his reply at Alton:

Any man can say that who does not see anything wrong in slavery, but no man can logically say it who does see a wrong in it, because no man can logically say he don't care whether a wrong is voted up or down. He may say he don't care whether an indifferent thing is voted up or down, but he must logically have a choice between a right thing and a wrong thing. He contends that whatever community wants slaves has a right to have them. So they

31. Stern, *Writings*, p. 429.

have if it is not a wrong. But if it is a wrong, he cannot say people have a right to do a wrong.³²

In a speech at Cincinnati the following year, he used a figure from the Bible to express his opposition to compromise. "The good old maxims of the Bible are applicable, and truly applicable, to human affairs, and in this, as in other things, we may say here that he who is not for us is against us; he who gathereth not with us scattereth."³³ In the Address at Cooper Union Institute, February 27, 1860, Lincoln took long enough to describe the methodology of this dodge by Douglas and his supporters. It was, as we have indicated, an attempt to squeeze into the excluded middle. "Let us be diverted by none of those sophistical contrivances wherewith we are so industriously plied and belabored—contrivances such as groping for some middle ground between the right and the wrong; vain as the search for a man who should be neither a living man nor a dead man; such as a policy of 'don't care' on a question about which all true men do care. . . ."³⁴ Finally, and most eloquently of all, there is the brief passage from his "Meditation on the Divine Will," composed sometime in 1862. "The will of God prevails. In great contests each party claims to act in accordance with the will of God. Both may be, and one must be, wrong. God cannot be for and against the same thing at the same time."³⁵ God too is a rational being and will not be found embracing both sides of a contradictory. Where mutual negation exists, God must be found on one side, and Lincoln hopes, though he does not here claim, that God is in the Union's corner of this square of opposition.

The fact that Lincoln's thought became increasingly logical under the pressure of events is proof of great depths in the man.

32. Stern, *Writings*, pp. 529-30.

33. *Ibid.*, p. 558.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 591.

35. *Ibid.*, p. 728.

Now as we take a general view of Lincoln's habit of defining in its relation to his political thought, we see that it gave him one quality in which he is unrivalled by any other American leader—the quality of perspective. The connection of the two is a necessary one. To define is to assume perspective; that is the method of definition. Since nothing can be defined until it is placed in a category and distinguished from its near relatives, it is obvious that definition involves the taking of a general view. Definition must see the thing in relation to other things, as that relation is expressible through substance, magnitude, kind, cause, effect, and other particularities. It is merely different expression to say that this is a view which transcends: perspective, detachment, and capacity to transcend are all requisites of him who would define, and we know that Lincoln evidenced these qualities quite early in life,³⁶ and that he employed them with consummate success when the future of the nation depended on his judgment.

Let us remember that Lincoln was a leader in the most bitter partisan trial in our history; yet within short decades after his death he had achieved sanctuary. His name is now immune against partisan rancor, and he has long ceased to be a mere sectional hero. The lesson of these facts is that greatness is found out and appreciated just as littleness is found out and scorned, and Lincoln proved his greatness through his habit of transcending and defining his objects. The American scene of his time invites the colloquial adjective "messy"—with human slavery dividing men geographically and spiritually, with a fluid frontier, and with the problems of labor and capital and of immigration already beginning to exert their pressures—but Lincoln looked at these things in perspective and refused to look at them in any other way.

For an early example of this characteristic vision of his, we may go back to the speech delivered before the Young Men's

36. The homeric fits of abstraction, which almost every contemporary reports, are highly suggestive of the mind which dwells with essences.

Lyceum in 1838. The opening is significant. "In the great journal of things happening under the sun, we the American people, find our account running under date of the nineteenth century of the Christian era. We find ourselves in the peaceful possession of the fairest portion of the earth as regards extent of territory, fertility of soil, and salubrity of climate."³⁷ So Lincoln takes as his point of perspective all time, of which the Christian era is but a portion; and the entire earth, of which the United States can be viewed as a specially favored part. This habit of viewing things from an Olympian height never left him. We might cite also the opening of the Speech at Peoria, and that of the Speech at the Cooper Union Institute; but let us pass on twenty-five years and re-read the first sentence of the Gettysburg Address. "Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal." Again tremendous perspective, suggesting almost that Lincoln was looking at the little act from some ultimate point in space and time. "Fourscore and seven years ago" carries the listener back to the beginning of the nation. "This continent" again takes the whole world into purview. "Our fathers" is an auxiliary suggestion of the continuum of time. The phrase following defines American political philosophy in the most general terms possible. The entire opening sentence, with its sustained detachment, sounds like an account of the action to be rendered at Judgment Day. It is not Abe Lincoln who is speaking the utterance, but the voice of mankind, as it were, to whom the American Civil War is but the passing vexation of a generation. And as for the "brave men, living and dead, who struggled here," it takes two to make a struggle, and is there anything to indicate that the men in gray are excluded? There is nothing explicit, and therefore we may say that Lincoln looked as far ahead as he looked behind in commemorating the event of Gettysburg.

37. Stern, *Writings*, p. 231.

This habit of perspective led Lincoln at times to take an extraordinarily objective view of his own actions—more frequently perhaps as he neared the end of his career. It was as if he projected a view in which history was the duration, the world the stage, and himself a transitory actor upon it. Of all his utterances the Second Inaugural is in this way the most objective and remote. Its tone even seems that of an actor about to quit the stage. His self-effacement goes to the extent of impersonal constructions, so that in places Lincoln appears to be talking about another person. "At this second appearing to take the oath of the Presidential office, there is less occasion for an extended address than there was at the first." "At this second appearing?" Is there any way of gathering, except from our knowledge of the total situation, who is thus appearing? Then after a generalized review of the military situation, he declares: "With high hope for the future, no prediction in regard to it is ventured." Why "is ventured" rather than "I regard"? Lincoln had taught himself to view the war as one venture?³⁷ Lincoln had taught himself to view the war as one of God's processes worked out through human agents, and the impersonality of tone of this last and most deeply meditative address may arise from that habit. Only once, in the modest qualifying phrase "I trust," does the pronoun "I" appear; and the final classic paragraph is spoken in the name of "us." There have been few men whose processes of mind so well deserve the epithet *sub specie aeternitatis* as Lincoln's.

It goes without further demonstration that Lincoln transcended the passions of the war. How easy it is for a leader whose political and personal prestige are at stake to be carried along with the tide of hatred of a people at war, we have, unhappily, seen many times. No other victor in a civil conflict has conducted himself with more humanity, and this not in some fine gesture after victory was secured—although there was that too—but during the struggle, while the issue was still in doubt and maximum strain was placed upon the feelings. Without losing sight of his ultimate goal, he treated everyone with personal kindness, including people who went out of their

way in attempts to wound him. And probably it was his habit of looking at things through objective definitions which kept him from confusing being logically right with being personally right. In the "Meditation on the Divine Will" he wrote, "In the present civil war it is quite possible that God's purpose is something different from the purpose of either party. . . ."³⁸ That could be written only by one who has attained the highest level of self-discipline. It explains too why he should write, in his letter to Cutbert Bullitt: "I shall do nothing in malice. What I deal with is too vast for malicious dealing."³⁹ Lastly, there is the extraordinary confession of common guilt in the Second Inaugural Address, which, if it had been honored by the government he led, would have constituted a step without precedent in history in the achievement of reconciliation after war. It is supposable, Lincoln said, that God has given "to both North and South this terrible war." Hardly seventy-five years later we were to see nations falling into the ancient habit of claiming exclusive right in their quarrels and even of demanding unconditional surrender. As late as February, 1865, Lincoln stood ready to negotiate, and his offer, far from requiring "unconditional surrender," required but one condition—return of the seceded states to the Union.

There is, when we reflect upon the matter, a certain morality in clarity of thought, and the man who had learned to define with Euclid and who had kept his opponents in argument out of the excluded middle, could not be pushed into a settlement which satisfied only passion. The settlement had to be objectively right. Between his world view and his mode of argument and his response to great occasions there is a relationship so close that to speak of any one apart is to leave the exposition incomplete.

With the full career in view, there seems no reason to differ with Herrdon's judgment that Lincoln displayed a high order

³⁸ Stern, *Writings*, p. 728.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 710.

of "conservative statesmanship."⁴⁰ It is true that Lincoln has been placed in almost every position, from right to left, on the political arc. Our most radical parties have put forward programs in his name; and Professor J. G. Randall has written an unconvincing book on "Lincoln the Liberal Statesman." Such variety of estimate underlines the necessity of looking for some more satisfactory criterion by which to place the man politically. It will not do to look simply at the specific measures he has supported. If these were the standard, George Washington would have to be regarded as a great progressive; Imperial Germany would have to be regarded as liberal, or even as radical, by the token of its social reforms. It seems right to assume that a much surer index to a man's political philosophy is his characteristic way of thinking, inevitably expressed in the type of argument he prefers. In reality, the type of argument a man chooses gives us the profoundest look we get at his principle of integration. By this method Burke, who was partial to the argument from circumstance, must be described as a liberal, whose blast against the French Revolution was, even in his own words, an attack from center against an extreme. Those who argue from consequence tend to go all out for action; they are the "radicals." Those who prefer the argument from definition, as Lincoln did, are conservatives in the legitimate sense of the word. It is no accident that Lincoln became the founder of the greatest American conservative party, even if that party was debauched soon after his career ended. He did so because his method was that of the conservative.

The true conservative is one who sees the universe as a paradigm of essences, of which the phenomenology of the world is a sort of continuing approximation. Or, to put this in another way, he sees it as a set of definitions which are struggling to get themselves defined in the real world. As Lincoln remarked of the Framers of the Declaration of Independence: "They

40. *Op. cit.*, III, 610.

meant to set up a standard maxim for free society, which should be familiar to all, and revered by all; constantly looked to, constantly labored for, and even though never perfectly attained, constantly approximated, and thereby constantly spreading and deepening its influence and augmenting the happiness and value of life to all people of all colors everywhere."⁴¹ This paradigm acts both as an inspiration to action and as a constraint upon over-action, since there is always a possibility of going beyond the schemata into an excess. Lincoln opposed both slavery and the Abolitionists (the Abolitionists constituted a kind of "action" party); yet he was not a middle-of-the-roader. Indeed, for one who grew up a Whig, he is astonishingly free from tendency to assume that "the truth lies somewhere in between." The truth lay where intellect and logic found it, and he was not abashed by clearness of outline.

This type of conservative is sometimes found fighting quite briskly for change; but if there is one thing by which he is distinguished, it is a trust in the methods of law. For him law is the embodiment of abstract justice; it is not "what the courts will decide tomorrow," or a calculation of the forces at work in society. A sentence from the First Inaugural Address will give us the conservative's view of pragmatic jurisprudence: "I do suggest that it will be much safer for all, both in official and private stations, to conform to and abide by all those acts which stand unrepealed, than to violate any of them, trusting to find impunity in having them held to be unconstitutional."⁴² The essence of Lincoln's doctrine was not the seeking of a middle, but reform according to law; that is, reform according to definition. True conservatism can be intellectual in the same way as true classicism. It is one of the polar positions; and it deserves an able exponent as well as does its vivifying opposite, true radicalism.

41. Stern, *Writings*, p. 423.

42. *Ibid.*, p. 649.

After Lincoln had left the scene, the Republican Party, as we have noted, was unable to meet the test of victory. It turned quickly to the worship of Manmon, and with the exception of the ambiguous Theodore Roosevelt, it never found another leader. No one understood better than Lincoln that the party would have to succeed upon principle. He told his followers during the campaign of 1858: "nobody has ever expected me to be President. In my poor, lean, lank face nobody has even seen that any cabbages were sprouting out. These are disadvantages all, taken together, that the Republicans labor under. We have to fight this battle upon principle and upon principle alone."⁴⁸ For two generations this party lived upon the moral capital amassed during the anti-slavery campaign, but after that had been expended, and terrible issues had to be faced, it possessed nothing. It was less successful than the British Tories because it was either ignorant or ashamed of the good things it had to offer. Today it shows in advanced form that affliction which has overcome the "good elements" in all modern nations in the face of the bold and enterprising bad ones.

Let it be offered as a parting counsel that parties bethink themselves of how their chieftains speak. This is a world in which one often gets what one asks for more directly or more literally than one expects. If a leader asks only consequences, he will find himself involved in naked competition of forces. If he asks only circumstance, he will find himself intimidated against all vision. But if he asks for principle, he may get that, all tied up and complete, and through purchased at a price, paid for. Therefore it is of first importance whether a leader has the courage to define. Nowhere does a man's rhetoric catch up with him more completely than in the topics he chooses to win other men's assent.

48. Stern, *Writings*, p. 452.

Chapter V

SOME RHETORICAL ASPECTS OF GRAMMATICAL CATEGORIES

IN AN EARLIER part of this work we defined rhetoric as something which creates an informed appetite for the good. Such definition must recognize the rhetorical force of things existing outside the realm of speech; but since our concern is primarily with spoken rhetoric, which cannot be disengaged from certain patterns or regularities of language, we now turn our attention to the pressure of these formal patterns.

All students of language concede to it a certain public character. Insofar as it serves in communication, it is a publicly-agreed-upon thing; and when one passes the outer limits of the agreement, one abandons comprehensibility. Now rhetoric affects us primarily by setting forth images which inform and attract. Yet because this setting forth is accomplished through a public instrumentality, it is not free; it is tied more or less closely to the formalizations of usage. The more general and rigid of these formalizations we recognize as grammar, and we shall here speak of grammar as a system of forms of public speech. In the larger aspect, discourse is at once bound and free, and we are here interested to discover how the bound character affects our ability to teach and to persuade.

We soon realize that different ways of saying a thing denote different interests in saying it, or to take this in reverse as we do when we become conscious users of language, different in-