

Where is man on the Great Chain of Being?

Read and consider two concise and modern statements on the Great Chain of Being.

Statement 1:

God: existence + life + will + reason + immortality + omniscient, omnipotent

Angels: existence + life + will + reason + immortality

Humanity: existence + life + will + reason

Animals: existence + life + will

Plants: existence + life

Matter: existence

Nothingness

As a result of this hierarchy, creatures and things on a higher level were believed to possess more authority over lower ones. Plants, for instance, were believed to have authority over the minerals in the soil. They were superior to minerals because, unlike inert matter, they were alive and capable of growth. Consequently, they had God's sanction to draw nutrients from the earth and grow upon it, while the minerals and soil existed to support plants. Similarly, animals--a step higher on the Chain of Being--were thought to have authority over both inanimate plants and minerals. So horses could trod on rocks and earth and eat plants. Humans in turn were believed to possess greater attributes than animals. Thus it was proper for them to rule over the rest of the natural world. Similarly, spiritual beings like angels and God had greater ability than humanity and so ruled over and controlled humanity as well as the rest of the animal and the inanimate world.

Statement 2: The fear of "disorder" was not merely philosophical--it had significant political ramifications. The proscription against trying to rise beyond one's place was of course useful to political rulers, for it helped to reinforce their authority. The implication was that civil rebellion caused the chain to be broken, and according to the doctrine of correspondences, this would have dire consequences in other realms. It was a sin against God, at least wherever rulers claimed to rule by "Divine Right." (And in England, the King was also the head of the Anglican Church.) In Shakespeare, it was suggested that the sin was of cosmic proportions: civil disorders were often accompanied by meteoric disturbances in the heavens.

The need for strong political rule was in fact very significant, for the Renaissance had brought an end for the most part to feudalism, the medieval form of political organization. The major political accomplishment of the Renaissance, perhaps, was the establishment of effective central government, not only in the north but in the south as well. Northern Europe saw the rise of national monarchies headed by kings, especially in England and France. Italy saw the rise of the territorial city-state often headed by wealthy oligarchic families. Not only did the chain of being concept provide a rationale for the authority of such rulers; it also suggested that there was ideal behavior that was appropriate to their place in the order of things. It is no wonder then that much Renaissance literature is concerned with the ideals of kingship, with the character and behavior of rulers, as in Machiavelli's *Prince* or Shakespeare's *Henry V*.

Discussion Directions. Consider how at least two of the following readings inform our current understanding of the Great Chain of Being and Renaissance Hierarchy. Be sure to cite specific and compelling textual evidence. Be ready to present your findings to the entire class.

Sir John Fortescue (1394–1476):

In this order hot things are in harmony with cold; dry with moist, heavy with light, great with little; high with low. In this order angel is set over angel, rank upon rank in the Kingdom of Heaven; man is set over man, beast over beast, bird over bird, and fish over fish, on the earth, in the air, and in the sea; so that there is no worm that crawls upon the ground, no bird that flies on high, no fish that swims in the depths, which the chain of this order binds not in most harmonious concord. God created as many different kinds of things as he did creatures, so that there is no creature which does not differ in some respect from all other creatures, and by which it is in some respect superior or inferior to all the rest. So that from the highest angel down to the lowest of his kind there is absolutely not found an angel that has not a superior and inferior; nor from man down to the meanest worm is there any creature which is not in some respect superior to one creature and inferior to another. So that there is nothing which the bond of order does not embrace. And since God has thus regulated all creatures, it is impious to think that he left unregulated the human race, which he made the highest of all earthly creatures.

From Higden's *Polychronicon* (1342?)

In the universal order of things the top of an inferior class touches the bottom of a superior: as for instance oysters, which occupying as it were the lowest position in the class of animals, scarcely rise above the life of plants, because they cling to the earth without motion and possess the sense of touch alone. The upper surface of the earth is in contact with the lower surface of water; the highest part of the waters touches the lowest part of the air, and so by a ladder of ascent to the outermost sphere of the universe. So also the noblest entity in the category of bodies, the human body, when its humours are evenly balanced, touches the fringe of the next class above it, namely the human soul, which occupies the lowest rank in the spiritual order. For this reason the human soul is called the horizon or meeting-ground of corporeal and incorporeal; for in it begins the ascent from the lowest to the highest spiritual power. At times even, when it has been cleansed of earthly passions, it attains to the state of incorporeal beings.

William Shakespeare *MacBeth* 1.4.48-53 (1606)

The Prince of Cumberland! That is a step
On which I must fall down, or else o'releap,
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;
Let not light see my black and deep desires:
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

E.M.W. Tillyard from *The Elizabethan World Picture* (1942)

The chain stretched from the foot of God's throne to the meanest of inanimate objects. Every speck of creation was a link in the chain, and every link except those at the two extremities was simultaneously bigger and smaller than another: there could be no gap. The precise magnitude of the chain raised metaphysical difficulties; but the safest opinion made it short of infinity though a finitude quite outside man's imagination.