

## **Worldview: The Great Chain of Being**

In studying history, it is important to ask about what world-view the people took so much for granted that they rarely even talked about it. Once you are aware of a period's world-view, you can start to see all sorts of oblique references to it in the literature and art of the period. Often, however, the average person at the time was no more aware of their absolute presuppositions about the world than a fish is aware of the water it swims in.

The worldview of Medieval and Renaissance Europe on the eve of the Scientific Revolution was dominated by the idea that all of Creation existed in a hierarchical relationship, and that absolutely *every thing* could be classified as either above or below any other thing in the universe. All entities existed in a linear succession, or hierarchy, of increasing greatness, culminating with God.

This succession was known as the ***Great Chain of Being***.

### The Celestial World – from the Moon up, consisting of the 5<sup>th</sup> element, the *quintessence*

At the top was God, the creator.

The angels descended in importance through several orders – cherubim, seraphim, thrones, powers etc..

In Heaven, the lowliest angel was next in line after the greatest man who had ever lived (not counting Jesus, who is one with God).

### The Human World – a Microcosm of the whole Universe

At the top, at any given time, was the King or the Pope, depending on one's faith and politics.

The idea of social and political order was seen as an extension or analog of the arrangement both of the natural world and, more importantly, of the celestial world or Heaven.

At each level of human hierarchy, women occupied a spot just below their male counterparts. A queen was above a duke; a duchess was above an earl.

At the bottom of the human world was the lowliest slave or savage.

### The Sublunary World consisted of everything below the Moon and was made out of the four elements of Earth, Water, Air and Fire

At the top of the earthly hierarchy was, of course, Man.

The animal hierarchy itself progressed up through bugs, fish, amphibians, reptiles and mammals, much the same as our current evolutionary zoology explains it.

The next lowest were oysters, barnacles and other unmoving animals.

Below that, plants – trees, flowers, and grass in descending order – were above non-living objects.

At the bottom of the hierarchy were inanimate objects, which existed in relation to each other in the same hierarchy – gold above silver, metals above stones, soil above clay, etc.

Satan and the other fallen angels were not part of the Great Chain of Being. Satan's crime was to challenge this hierarchy, and he continues to try to undo it. That was why violations of the hierarchy here on earth, such as killing the King or adopting animal ways, were associated with chaos in the cosmos, and a general unraveling of God's plan, in other words *Evil*.



## **Examples of the Great Chain of Being in literature, science and political theory**

Aristotle/Ptolemy/Aquinas: The quintessential realm consisted of heavenly spheres, each one closer to God, or the Prime Mover, than the one below it.

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Dante's *Divine Comedy*: In the third book, *Paradise*, Dante visits different personages ruling each of the planetary spheres, the "nine heavens," as he ascends toward the Empyrean, the tenth heaven of God. Here are the spheres arranged with the more perfect on top:

9. Primum Mobile (First Mover) – Realm of Angels
  8. Fixed Stars – Jesus, Mary, and Saints Peter, Paul and John
  7. Saturn – Peter Damian, a famous medieval monk – symbolized Contemplation
  6. Jupiter – King David, Emperor Trajan, Emperor Constantine – symbolized Justice
  5. Mars – Warriors of God: Joshua, Roland, Charlemagne – symbolized Fortitude
  4. Sun – St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Francis, St. Dominic, Solomon – symbolized Wisdom
  3. Venus – Various people who did good out of love, but lacked temperance
  2. Mercury – Byzantine Emperor Justinian – Good works out of ambition, for the sake of fame
  1. Moon – Various blessed souls who had abandoned holy vows and therefore could not rise higher
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Quote from *The Governour* (1531), by Sir Thomas Elyot (1490-1546)

"Hath not God set degrees and estates in all his glorious works? First in his heavenly ministers, whom he hath constituted in divers degrees called hierarchies. Behold the four elements, whereof the body of man is compact, how they be set in their places called spheres, higher or lower according to the sovereignty of their natures. Behold also the order that God hath put generally in all his creatures, beginning at the most inferior or base and ascending upward. He made not only herbs to garnish the earth but also trees of a more eminent stature than herbs. Semblably in birds beasts and fishes some be good for sustenance of man, some bear things profitable to sundry uses, other be apt to occupation and labour. Every kind of trees herbs birds beasts and fishes have a peculiar disposition appropereed unto them by God their creator; so that in everything is order, and without order may be nothing stable or permanent. And it may not be called order except it do contain in it degrees, high and base, according to the merit or estimation of the thing that is ordered.

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Look at these words of Shakespeare and try to hear them within the context of the Great Chain of Being.

"What a piece of work is man: how noble in reason; how infinite in faculty; in form and moving how express and admirable; in action how like an angel; in apprehension how like a god; the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals."

From Hamlet, Act II, Scene II, lines 303-312

"...Each new morn

New widows howl, new orphans cry, new sorrows

Strike heaven on the face, that it resounds

As if it felt with Scotland and yell'd out

Like syllable of dolour." (dolour = pain)

From Macbeth, Act IV, Scene III, lines 4-8; Here MacDuff is lamenting the chaos that has been unleashed in the universe by the assassination of King Duncan and Macbeth's usurping of the Scottish throne.

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Lastly, I want to point out that when Galileo lay on his deathbed, his friends reported to him that a comet had appeared in the sky. Although some believed that the comet was passing among the planets, Galileo disagreed. He believed that because the comet was changeable and temporary, it had to be sublunary, within the earth's atmosphere. If such a changeable object were above the moon, he reasoned, it would violate the hierarchy of the universe.

**We will soon see how the Newtonian revolution *undermined* the Great Chain of Being with the theory of gravity, and changed forever how everyone viewed the universe.**