

## The Great Chain of Being

From M.H. Abrams' *Glossary of Literary Terms*, 4th. Edition (New York: Holt, 1981. pp. 73-74)

The concept is grounded in ideas about the nature of God, or the first cause, found in Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus, and was developed by later thinkers into an inclusive world view. This view was already prevalent in the Renaissance, but was given further philosophical refinement by Leibniz early in the eighteenth century, and was adopted by many thinkers of the Enlightenment. In its comprehensive eighteenth-century form it held that the essential "excellence" of God consists in His illimitable creativity, an unstinting overflow into the fullest possible variety of beings. From this premise were deduced three consequences:

(1) Plenitude. The universe is absolutely full of every possible kind and variety of life; no conceivable species of being can remain unrealized.

(2) Continuity. Each species differs from the next by the least possible degree, and so merges all but imperceptibly into its nearest related kinds.

(3) Gradation. The existing species exhibit a hierarchy of status and so compose a great chain, or ladder, of being, extending from the lowliest condition of the merest existence up to God Himself. In this chain man occupies the middle position between the animal kinds and the angels, or purely spiritual beings.

From E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto, 1960. pp. 23, 25-26) :

"This metaphor (of 'the vast chain of being') served to express the unimaginable plenitude of God's creation, its unfaltering order, and its ultimate unity. 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 of a finitude quite outside man's imagination . . . . The account of the chain of being found here (in Raymond de Sebonde's *Natural Theology*) must have been the common property of western Europe in the sixteenth century. First there is mere existence, the inanimate class: the elements, liquids, and metals. But in spite of this common lack of life there is a vast difference of virtue; water is nobler than earth, the ruby than the topaz, gold than brass: the links in the chain are there. Next there is existence and life, the vegetative class, where again the oak is nobler than the bramble. Next there is existence life and feeling, the sensitive class. In it there are three grades. First the creatures having touch but not hearing memory or movement. Such are shellfish and parasites on the base of trees. Then there are animals having touch memory and movement but not hearing, for instance ants. And finally there are the higher animals, horses dogs, etc., that have all these faculties. The three classes lead up to man, who has

not only existence life and feeling, but understanding: he sums up in himself the total faculties of earthly phenomena. (For this reason he was called the little world or microcosm). But as there had been an inanimate class, so to balance it there must be a purely rational or spiritual. These are the angels, linked to man by community of the understanding, but freed from simultaneous attachment to the lower faculties. There are vast numbers of angels and they are as precisely ordered along the chain of being as the elements or the metals. Now, although the creatures are assigned their precise place in the chain of being, there is at the same time the possibility of change. The chain is also a ladder. The elements are alimantal. There is a progression in the way the elements nourish plants, the fruits of plants beasts, and the flesh of beasts men. And this is all one with the tendency of man upwards toward God."