

The Chain of Being: Tillyard in a Nutshell

(adapted from Dr. Kip Wheeler's Literary website)

The scholars E. M. W. Tillyard and A. O. Lovejoy argued that the medieval and Renaissance world inherited a special worldview, the idea of a hierarchical universe ordained by God. "The Chain of Being" describes this medieval and Renaissance structure as an interconnected web of greater and lesser links. Each link in the Chain was an individual species of being, creature, or object. Those links higher on the Chain possessed greater intellect, mobility, and capability than those lower on the Chain. Accordingly, the higher links had more authority over the lower. For instance, plants only had authority and ability to rule over minerals. Being superior in quality to inert rock and soil, the plants had divine sanction to draw sustenance from them, and grow upon them, while the minerals and soil supported them. Animals--higher on the Chain of Being--were thought to have natural authority over both inanimate plants and minerals. For instance, horses could trample the rocks and earth; they could also eat plants. Humans in turn were thought to possess greater attributes than other animals, and could rule over the rest of the natural world, uprooting weeds and planting gardens, digging up metals and shaping them into tools, and so on. Likewise, spiritual beings like angels and God had greater ability than man, and could rule over and control humanity as well as the rest of the animals and the inanimate world.

The unifying principle holding the Chain together was either (1) rational order, as suggested in earlier classical literature like passages in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and (2) divine love, as evidenced in later Enlightenment writings like Alexander Pope's *An Essay on Man*. Every being in creation was thought to have its place within this Chain, which entailed a certain degree of authority and a certain degree of responsibility to the rest of the Chain. As long as each being knew its place and did its destined duty for the rest of the Chain, all would be well.

Basic Chart of Ranks At a Glance:

The Chain as a whole:

- God
- Angels
- Humans
- Animals
- Vegetables
- Minerals

Four Humors:

- Yellow Bile (or Cholera): causes anger and irritability
- Black Bile (or Tears): causes melancholy, sadness
- Blood: causes excitement, energy, happiness, sexual arousal
- Phlegm: causes lethargy, boredom

Astrological Ranks:

- Sun
- Moon
- Planets
- Stars

Note: The Elizabethans referred to all celestial objects, including the sun, moon, planets, and comets, as "stars." Thus, "the watery star" refers to the moon, the star that controls the tides. The Earth is (in Ptolemaic models) the center of the universe, but it is not ranked on the Chain of Being as a star. Instead, the Sun is the primate of the celestial objects because it is the brightest object in the sky.

Four Elements:

- Fire (attributes of hot and dry). Its alchemical spirit is the Salamander.
- Air (attributes of warm and moist). Its alchemical spirit is the Sylph.
- Water (attributes of cold and moist). Its alchemical spirit is the Naiad / Nixie.
- Earth (attributes of cold and dry) Its alchemical spirit is the Gnome.

Subgroups of the Chain of Being:

God: At once at the top of the Chain of Being, but also external to creation, God was believed to stand outside the physical limitations of time. He possessed the spiritual attributes of reason, love, and imagination, like all spiritual beings, but he alone possessed the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence. God serves as the model of authority for the strongest, most virtuous, most excellent type of being within a specific category (the "primate," see below).

Angelic Beings: Beings of pure spirit, angels had no physical bodies of their own. In order to affect the physical world, angels were thought to build temporary bodies for themselves out of particles of air. Medieval and Renaissance theologians believed angels to possess reason, love, imagination, and--like God--to stand outside the physical limitations of time. They possessed sensory awareness unbound by physical organs, and they possessed language. They lacked, however, the divine attributes of omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence of God, and they simultaneously lacked the physical passions experienced by humans and animals. Depending upon the author, the class of angels was further subdivided into three, seven, nine, or ten ranks, variously known as triads, orders or choirs. Each rank had greater power and responsibility than the entities below them. The Pseudo-Dionysius divides the angels into three "choirs" or "triads" with three orders in the *Caelestis Hierarchia*. St. Gregory the Great and Saint Thomas Aquinas favored the nine-tiered system. Aquinas writes in the *Summa Theologica*: "There are nine orders of angels, to wit, angels, archangels, virtues, powers, principalities, dominations, ophanim [*alias* thrones], cherubim, and seraphim." The primate, or superior type of angel, was the *seraph*, or in the plural form, *seraphim*.

Humanity: For medieval and Renaissance thinkers, humans occupied a unique position on the Chain of Being, straddling the world of spiritual beings and the world of physical creation. Humans were thought to possess divine powers such as reason, love, and imagination. Like angels, humans were spiritual beings, but unlike angels, human souls were "knotted" to a physical body. As such, they were subject to passions and physical sensations--pain, hunger, thirst, sexual desire--just like other animals lower on the Chain of the Being. They also possessed the powers of reproduction unlike the minerals and rocks lowest on the Chain of Being. Humans had a particularly difficult position, balancing the divine and the animalistic parts of their nature. For instance, an angel is only capable of intellectual sin such as pride (as evidenced by Lucifer's fall from heaven in Christian belief). Humans, however, were capable of both intellectual sin and physical sins such as lust and gluttony if they let their animal appetites overrule their divine reason. Humans also possessed sensory attributes: sight, touch, taste, hearing, and smell. Unlike angels, however, their sensory attributes were limited by physical organs. (They could only know things they could discern through the five senses.) The human primate was the King.

Animals: Animals, like humans higher on the Chain, were animated (capable of independent motion). They possessed physical appetites and sensory attributes, the number depending upon their position within the Chain of Being. They had limited intelligence and awareness of their surroundings. Unlike humans, they were thought to lack spiritual and mental attributes such as immortal souls and the ability to use logic and language. The primate of all animals (the "King of Beasts") was variously thought to be either the lion or the elephant. However, each subgroup of animals also had its own primate, an avatar superior in qualities of its type.

Mammalian Primate: Lion or Elephant

- Domesticated Predators (dogs, cats)
- Predatory Mammals (wolves)
- Domesticated Herbivores (horses, cattle, donkeys)
- Wild Herbivores (deer, rabbits, etc.)

Avian Primate: Eagle

- Birds of Prey (hawks, owls, etc.)
- Carrion Birds (vultures, crows)
- "Worm-eating" Birds (robin, etc.)
- "Seed-eating" Birds (sparrow, etc.)

Note that avian creatures, linked to the element of air, were considered superior to aquatic creatures linked to the element of water. Air naturally tended to rise and soar above the surface of water, and analogously, aerial creatures were placed higher in the Chain.

Piscine Primate: Whale or Dolphin (We know a whale is not a fish; back then people did not)

- Fish of various sizes and attributes

The chart would continue to descend through various reptiles, amphibians, and insects. The higher up the chart one went, the more noble, mobile, strong, and intelligent the creature in Renaissance belief. At the very bottom of the animal section, we find sessile creatures like the oysters, clams, and barnacles. Like the plants below them, these creatures lacked mobility, and were thought to lack various sensory organs such as sight and hearing. However, they were still considered superior to plants because they had tactile and gustatory senses (touch and taste).

Plants: Plants, like other living creatures, possessed the ability to grow in size and reproduce. However, they lacked mental attributes and possessed no sensory organs. Instead, their gifts included the ability to eat soil, air, and "heat." (Photosynthesis was a poorly understood phenomenon in medieval and Renaissance times.) Plants did have greater tolerances for heat and cold, and immunity to the pain that afflicts most animals. The primate of plants was the oak tree. In general, trees ranked higher than shrubs, shrubs ranked higher than bushes, bushes ranked higher than cereal crops, and cereal crops ranked higher than herbs, ferns, and weeds. At the very bottom of the botanical hierarchy, the fungus and moss, lacking leaf and blossom, were so limited in form that Renaissance thinkers thought them scarcely above the level of minerals. However, each plant was also thought to be gifted with various edible or medicinal virtues unique to its own type.

Minerals: Creations of the earth, the lowest of elements, all minerals lacked the plant's basic ability to grow and reproduce. They also lacked mental attributes and sensory organs found in beings higher on the Chain. Their unique gifts, however, were typically their unusual solidity and strength. Many minerals, in fact, were thought to possess magical powers, particularly gems.

Lapidarical Primate: Diamond, then various gems, rubies, sapphires, topaz, chrysolite, etc.

Metallic Primate: Gold, then various metals, silver, iron, bronze, copper, tin

Geological Primate: Marble, then various stones, granite, sandstone, limestone, etc. At the very bottom of the mineral section, we find soil, dust, and sand, and other minute particles.

Literary Ramifications: Artists in the period have ready at their fingertips a catalog of instant symbols and connotations, all conveniently ranked in status. If Shakespeare compares a woman to a vine and her husband to an oak, he doesn't do so merely to talk about her beauty or his strength. Instead, he emphasizes her subordination to him in the Chain of Being. Likewise, if two characters fight for the throne, one compared to a lion, the other compared to a boar, the comparison implies something about which one has a legitimate claim. Likewise, imagery from the sun, the moon, or other parts of nature often involve an implied set of connotations concerning that object or animal's place in nature.

Moral Ramifications: It becomes a moral imperative for each creature to know its place in the Chain of Being and fulfill its own function without striving to rise above its station or debasing itself by behavior proper to the lower links in the chain. A human who is as gluttonous as a pig, or as lecherous as goat, has allowed the lower, bestial instincts in his nature to supersede his divine capability of reason. He is guilty of fleshly or carnal sin, and denies the rational, spiritual aspect of his nature.

Likewise, a human who attempts to rise above his social rank does so through arrogance, pride, or envy of his betters. Here, the error is an intellectual or spiritual sin.

Political Ramifications: The belief in the Chain of Being meant that monarchy was ordained by God and inherent in the very structure of the universe. Rebellion was a sin not only against the state, but against heaven itself, for the king was God's appointed deputy on earth, with semi-divine powers. King James I himself wrote, "The state of monarchy is the supremest thing upon earth: for kings are not only God's Lieutenants upon earth, and sit upon God's throne, but even by God himself they are called Gods." Such an ideology necessitates a social conservatism so extreme that it is difficult to imagine today.

Conversely, the King has a moral responsibility to God and his people. In return for his absolute power, he is expected to rule his subjects with love, wisdom, and justice. To do otherwise is to abandon those natural qualities that make a noble fit to rule in the first place. Misusing regal authority is a perversion of divine order.