

SCALA NATURAE: THE GREAT CHAIN OF BEING

RAPHAEL'S "BRIGHT CONSUMMATE FLOWER" *PARADISE LOST* BOOK 5.469-505

[Link to an Image of the Great Chain of Being](#)

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

The concept is grounded in ideas about the nature of God, or the first cause, found in Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus.... 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....
- (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....

From E.M.W. Tillyard's *The Elizabethan World Picture* (London: Chatto, 1960. 23, 25-26, text split into paragraphs, underlining added):

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 ... there could be no gap....

First there is mere existence, the inanimate class: the elements, liquids, and metals....

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.... 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....

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.... 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....

For further information, refer to Arthur O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being: a Study of the History of an Idea*. Harper Torchbooks, 1960 or subsequent edition by other publishers. (Originally published in 1936.)