

# Great Chain of Being



The great chain of being is a strict, religious hierarchical structure of all matter and life, believed to have been decreed by God. The chain starts from God and progresses downward to angels, demons (fallen/renege angels), stars, moon, kings, princes, nobles, commoners, wild animals, domesticated animals, trees, other plants, precious stones, precious metals, and other minerals. Each link in the chain might be divided further into its component parts. The chain of being is composed of a great number of hierarchical links, from the most basic and foundational elements up through the very highest perfection, in other words, God.

God sits at the top of the chain, and beneath him sit the angels, both existing wholly in spirit form. Earthly flesh is fallible and ever-changing, mutable.

Spirit, however, is unchanging and permanent. This sense of permanence is crucial to understanding this conception of reality. It is generally impossible to change the position of an object in the hierarchy. (One exception might be in the realm of alchemy, where alchemists attempted to transmute base elements, such as lead, into higher elements, either silver or, more often, gold the highest element.)

In the natural order, earth (rock) is at the bottom of the chain; this element possesses only the attribute of existence. Each link succeeding upward contains the positive attributes of the previous link and adds at least one other. Rocks possess only existence; the next link up is plants which possess life and existence. Animals add motion and appetite as well.

Man is both mortal flesh, as those below him, and also spirit, as those above. In this dichotomy, the struggle between flesh and spirit becomes a moral one. The way of the spirit is higher, more noble; it brings one closer to God. The desires of the flesh move one away from God. The Christian fall of Lucifer is thought of as especially terrible, as angels are wholly spirit, yet Lucifer defied God (who is the ultimate perfection).

## The Chain

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### God

God is at the top of the chain and is also external to creation. God was believed to exist outside the physical limitations of time and space. 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 any category.

## **Angelic Beings**

Angels were beings of pure spirit who 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.

## **Deities**

The deities are said to be pagan gods, or otherwise "false gods", who were widely revered to and worshiped during the times where the Supreme God's existence was unknown at the time. The deities are usually ranked lower than the angels themselves due to the angels being the first beings of light created by God. In fact, the deities soon came into being afterwards, mostly through the aid of God Himself. It is believed that the cause of it was when God clashed with Chaos, and consequently spread essence and being of light across the newly born universe which soon gave birth to the Primordials and later the gods that would be known as their offspring. As such, God is the direct creator of the deities and it is even said that they are in fact, pieces of Him. Since the deities were worshiped by humans, they are placed among the humans as well. And because they are below angels is due to them being human-like in nature although upon a more transcended state of being. But regardless, they can still exhibit human emotion, and reproduce as well. They could even commit sin like humans, and are not free from temptation or malevolence as well.

## **Humanity**

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 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 highest-ranking human being 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.

## **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." Plants did have greater tolerances for heat and cold, and immunity to the pain that afflicts most animals. At the very bottom of the botanical hierarchy, fungi and mosses, 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. The mineral primate is the diamond.