

## Answers to Practice 3: Features of an argument

### The Great Chain of Being (Text 5)

*'Notions of a "Great Chain of Being" and of a natural order to the universe continued to exert ideological significance during the eighteenth century and beyond.'* Discuss.

The idea of the 'Great Chain of Being' was common in medieval Europe. For those who believed in this chain, everything that existed belonged to a pre-assigned place, as if on higher or lower rungs of a ladder. Those lowest items in the universe were at the bottom of the chain whilst humans were nearer the top, below angels but above animals.<sup>8</sup>

In considering the influence of the chain of being in the eighteenth century, there are two aspects to consider. Firstly, whether the idea was still familiar in the eighteenth century, and secondly, whether it was used to support political or ideological positions in the important debates of the period.<sup>2</sup>

First of all,<sup>9</sup> it is proposed that the concept of the chain of being was very much alive in the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> Such a view is not universally accepted. It has been argued that references to the chain of being had died out by the mid-seventeenth century (Barking, 1957; Madison, 1967). Madison claimed that such notions of the universe were replaced by more enlightened ideas based on scientific observation.<sup>10, 13</sup> It could also be argued that war and trade provided ever increasing opportunities for people to meet with new ideas and ideologies. Colley (2003), for example, refers to how impressed travellers to North African Muslim countries were by its culture and by the tolerance shown by Islam to other faiths. In earlier centuries, Christian rulers burnt people at the stake for expressing such sentiments but this was no longer the case in the eighteenth century.<sup>10, 13</sup>

However, despite such changes in people's outlook, old ideas still continued to hold sway.<sup>11</sup> In the literature of the late eighteenth century, and even the early nineteenth century, it is not unusual to find references to the chain of being. Indeed, in an analysis of pamphlets produced in 1802–3, for example, Pendleton (1976) found that over one in 10 pamphlets, a significant proportion, included a reference to the 'Chain of Being'.<sup>7, 13</sup> A much higher proportion of the pamphlets alluded to related concepts, such as the 'natural order' of society. The concept of the 'chain of being' and the idea that there was an inherent order to the universe, was still prevalent in England even in the early nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

### Comments

Numbers in the text and below refer to the grid on p. 253.

- 8 This is descriptive text that tells the reader, briefly, what the 'chain of being' was. This is necessary background information.
- 2 These two sentences set out how the author intends to approach the argument, breaking it into two sections to help the reader recognise these stages in the argument when they are introduced later.
- 9 Signal word to introduce the first of the author's reasons.
- 1 This sentence sums up the main argument.
- 10 The author considers here counter arguments to the main line of reasoning. In this case, the counter arguments are raised and dealt with early in the line of reasoning as, if it were true that the idea had already died out, there wouldn't be much point continuing with the rest of the argument.
- 13 Examples of secondary sources (see p. 108).
- 11 This paragraph addresses the counter argument raised by Barking that references to the chain of being had died out. The counter argument raised by Madison is addressed throughout the essay, and in a separate paragraph below.
- 7 This evidence helps to support the overall conclusion that the concept did continue to have ideological significance.
- 13 Examples of secondary sources. (The pamphlets themselves are primary sources. See p. 108.)
- 6 Intermediate conclusion used as a reason: the author establishes first that the notion of a 'great chain of being' was still current. The reasons to support this are:
  - it is not uncommon to find examples;
  - Pendleton's research.

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As Pendleton's research indicates, there were still many publicists at the end of the eighteenth century who argued that the governing classes in England were a superior type of human being, higher on the great chain of being and closer to God. Many of those in power believed that their own social class was more intelligent, more beautiful, with better morals. They regarded the majority of the population as less intelligent and virtuous, as uglier beings, closer to an animal state, and therefore less deserving of consideration in all respects (Lavater, 1797).<sup>12</sup> People were expected to 'know their place' and to act accordingly at all times. This concept of beings on a higher level of the chain was useful in providing a justification for social superiority.<sup>5,6</sup>

The hierarchical ordering of nature was also<sup>9</sup> used to provide a powerful defence of political and economic inequalities.<sup>5,6</sup> In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, very few people were allowed to vote in elections, to organise politically or even to speak out against those believed to be their 'betters'. The overwhelming majority of the population still did not have the vote and there were vast differences in wealth, health, and well-being (Thompson, 1963).<sup>7,8,13</sup> The notion of a natural chain of being was used to argue that this was as nature or 'Providence' intended.

Furthermore,<sup>9</sup> even after the eighteenth century, the hierarchical ordering of society was still presented as a divine plan, and all people were expected to follow the same religion. This idea of a divinely based order was used to frighten people into submission.<sup>6</sup> A broadside, or poster, pasted around London in 1802 declared that 'It is the ordinance of God, that there should be infinite gradations' and that 'as one star differeth from another star in glory, so shall the plan of subordination be through the whole earthly system.'<sup>12,7</sup> It was argued that it was natural for some people to have power and riches, and for other people to have none. For example, one pamphleteer (Pratt, 1803) claimed that if the natural order was changed, this would 'unsettle the whole system of the spheres; the planets would rush on each other ... and the earth be shrivelled, like a scroll, by a spark from the sun'.<sup>12</sup> If everything in the universe formed part of a single continuous chain, then to alter a single part could disrupt the whole chain, causing all society to come to an end and even the universe to collapse. The combining of an ideology of social order with a religious philosophy made the idea of a natural order particularly significant.<sup>7</sup>

### Comments

12 Primary source. See p. 108.

5 and 6 Intermediate conclusion used as a reason: the author has established the significance of the concept of the chain of being to maintaining the social structure. This then provides a reason that supports the overall conclusion that the concept is still of significance.

9 Signal word used to indicate to the reader that the author is adding more reasons to support the line of reasoning.

5 and 6 Intermediate conclusion used as a reason: the author has established the significance of the concept of the chain of being to defending the political and economic status quo. This then provides a reason that supports the conclusion.

8 Necessary but brief description of eighteenth-century society, to support the reasoning and to illustrate the significance of the political use of the concept of the chain of being.

7/13 Secondary source. This refers the reader to the source of evidence for the assertions made.

9 Signal word to indicate the argument is continuing in a similar direction.

6 Intermediate conclusion: the concept was used to rouse fear and submission.

12 These are examples of primary source materials, see p. 108.

7 Source materials used in this paragraph are used as evidence to support the conclusion that the concept had ideological significance.

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Moreover,<sup>9</sup> in 1802–3, such arguments were of particular importance in fostering patriotic sentiment to support war against France.<sup>6</sup> The political elite encouraged each other to be active in persuading the poor where their interest lay (Ashcroft, 1977).<sup>12/13</sup> They were worried that large sections of the population would welcome a French invasion that promised social, economic, political and religious freedom, as had been proclaimed in France after the Revolution of 1789.<sup>8</sup> Some expressed fear that if they armed the English people to defend the country, they would turn their weapons against their masters (Cholmeley, 1803).<sup>12</sup> Instead of taking the dangerous risk of arming the country, a propaganda campaign was launched, arguing that the ‘natural order’ was best and that the English people should accept it rather than join the French if the country were invaded.<sup>5</sup> If the natural order changed, the propaganda argued, the consequences would be famine, disease and death.

Rather than, as Madison suggests, the chain of being becoming an outmoded concept in the eighteenth century, scientists were still active in researching new possible gradations in the hierarchy.<sup>11</sup> They set about measuring the bones of people of different skin colours, social classes and geographical origins, in an attempt to set down a hierarchy from best to worst, using their own skin colour as the benchmark for perfection (White, 1779).<sup>12</sup> Lavater, whose writings were translated into English in 1797, referred to this as ‘the transition from brutal deformity to ideal beauty’ and argued that beauty was a sign of moral superiority. Lavater devised a system for measuring hierarchy, based on bone structure and appearance. His writings were widely published and highly influential in England. Over time, the use of the term ‘chain of being’ died out, but the belief in the natural or divine hierarchy and its use as a rationale for political and social inequalities continued to hold force.<sup>6, 5</sup>

### Comments

- 9 The word ‘moreover’ is used to signal that the same line of reasoning is being continued.
- 6 The intermediate conclusion is that this concept was significant at a particular historical moment.
- 12/13 This is a collection of primary sources published in 1977. (A modern date does not automatically indicate a secondary source.)
- 8 Necessary background to illustrate the significance of the concept at a particularly important political moment.
- 12 Primary source.
- 5 The reason given to support the intermediate conclusion for this paragraph is:
  - propaganda making use of the chain of being was used as an anti-French device, rather than arming the country.
- 11 This addresses a counter argument raised in the second paragraph above.
- 12 Primary sources.
- 6 Intermediate conclusion used as a reason: the author establishes that the assumptions underlying the chain of being were further developed by scientists and given new life. The reasons to support this interim conclusion are provided by the examples of research and by the acknowledgement that although the term ‘chain of being’ died out, its assumptions remained in force.
- 5 The intermediate conclusion is also a main reason used to support the overall conclusion, that the concept retained significance.

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It is important to note that<sup>9</sup> the concept of a hierarchically ordered universe could be used to justify almost any kind of inequality or oppression.<sup>6,5</sup> Indeed, Mary Wollstonecraft (1792) argued that the concept of a natural order was being used to justify all kinds of injustice such as cruelty to animals and children, the slave trade, and depriving women of political and economic rights.<sup>12</sup> Literature that used the idea of natural hierarchies also made use of comparisons between all types of people who did not form part of the English ruling oligarchy and growing middle classes. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, for example, in its 1797 edition, compared the behaviour of Africans, the English working class, and French revolutionaries, arguing that they shared common characteristics such as 'a lack of moral principles' and an absence of 'natural affections'.<sup>12</sup> Over the next century and a half, these ideas were drawn upon and extended by others to justify policies based on racial and social injustice in many parts of the world.

Ideas based on the chain of being, therefore,<sup>9</sup> far from waning in the eighteenth century, were further developed and extended.<sup>3</sup> The dangers posed by the French Revolution and the proposed invasion of England added force to the long-established concept of a natural order, especially after these were widely publicised in the anti-invasion and anti-revolutionary propaganda of 1802–4. The scientific methodologies of the eighteenth century resulted in findings that appeared to justify the concept of a natural hierarchy. Although the vocabulary of the chain of being began to die out, the underlying concept was reinforced and used to reinforce negative social, gender and racial stereotypes in the next two centuries. Hence, the concept of the 'great chain of being' did continue to exert ideological significance during the eighteenth century and beyond.<sup>4</sup>

### References

#### Primary sources

- Anon. (1803) *Such is Buonaparte* (London: J. Ginger).
- Ashcroft, M.Y. (1977) *To Escape a Monster's Clutches: Notes and Documents Illustrating Preparations in North Yorkshire to Repel the Invasion*. North Yorkshire, CRO Public No. 15.
- Cholmeley, C. (1803) Letter of Catherine Cholmeley to Francis Cholmeley, 16 August 1803. In Ashcroft, M.Y. (1977) *To Escape a Monster's Clutches: Notes and Documents Illustrating Preparations in North Yorkshire to Repel the Invasion*. North Yorkshire, CRO Public No. 15.

### Comments

- 9 This phrase is used to signal a further aspect of the argument, building on previous reasons.
- 6 The intermediate conclusion is that the concept was used to justify many kinds of oppression. The reasons to support this interim conclusion are evidence drawn from contemporaries such as Mary Wollstonecraft and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1797, and the uses to which the ideas were put.
- 5 The intermediate conclusion is another reason to support the overall conclusion that the concept remained significant in the eighteenth century and beyond.
- 12 These are examples of primary source materials, see p. 108.
- 9 Signal word used to indicate the conclusion.
- 3 This paragraph is mainly a summative conclusion – summarising key points from the preceding paragraphs.
- 4 The final sentence provides the logical conclusion here: it makes a deduction drawn from all the reasoning given above.
- NB Linking the final sentence back to the title signals to the reader that the main question posed in the title has been addressed.

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- Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1797) 3rd edition, Edinburgh.
- Lavater, J.K. (1797) *Essays on Physiognomy*, translated by Rev. C. Moore and illustrated after Lavater by Barlow (London: London Publishers).
- 'Pratt' (1803) *Pratt's Address to His Countrymen or the True Born Englishman's Castle* (London: J. Asperne).
- White, C. (1779) *An Account of the Infinite Gradations in Man, and in different Animals and Vegetables; and from the Former to the Latter*. Read to the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester at Different Meetings (Manchester: Literary and Philosophical Society).
- Wollstonecraft, M. (1792) *Vindication of the Rights of Women*. (Republished in 1975 by Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex.)

### Secondary sources

- Barking, J.K. (1957) *Changes in Conceptions of the Universe* (Cotteridge: Poltergeist Press).\*
- Colley, L. (2003) *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600–1850* (London: Pimlico).
- Madison, S. (1967) 'The End of the Chain of Being: the Impact of Cartesian Philosophy on Medieval Conceptions of Being'. *Journal of Medieval and Enlightenment Studies*, 66, 7.\*
- Pendleton, G. (1976) 'English Conservative Propaganda During the French Revolution, 1780–1802', Ph.D. (unpub.), Emory University.
- Thompson, E.P. (1963) *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin).

\*These two sources are hypothetical and provided for the purpose of the practice activity; the other sources are genuine.

### Comments