

## 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. 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.

First of all, it is proposed that the concept of the chain of being was very much alive in the eighteenth century. 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. 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.

However, despite such changes in people's outlook, old ideas still continued to hold sway. 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'. 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.

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

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and virtuous, as uglier beings, closer to an animal state, and therefore less deserving of consideration in all respects (Lavater, 1797). 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.

The hierarchical ordering of nature was also used to provide a powerful defence of political and economic inequalities. 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). The notion of a natural chain of being was used to argue that this was as nature or 'Providence' intended.

Furthermore, 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. 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.' 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'. 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.

Moreover, in 1802–3, such arguments were of particular importance in fostering patriotic sentiment to support war against France. The political elite encouraged each other to be active in persuading the poor where their interest lay (Ashcroft, 1977). 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. Some expressed fear that if they armed the English people to defend the country, they would turn their weapons against their masters (Cholmeley, 1803). 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

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invaded. 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. 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). 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.

It is important to note that the concept of a hierarchically ordered universe could be used to justify almost any kind of inequality or oppression. 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. 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'. 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, far from waning in the eighteenth century, were further developed and extended. 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.

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

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