



The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea

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From later antiquity down to the close of the eighteenth century, most philosophers and men of science and, indeed, most educated men, accepted without question a traditional view of the plan and structure of the world. In this volume, which embodies the William James lectures for 1933, Arthur O. Lovejoy points out the three principles--plenitude, continuity, and graduation--which were combined in this conception; analyzes their origins in the philosophies of Plato, Aristotle, and the Neoplatonists; traces the most important of their diverse samifications in subsequent religious thought, in metaphysics, in ethics and aesthetics, and in astronomical and biological theories; and copiously illustrates the influence of the conception as a whole, and of the ideas out of which it was compounded, upon the imagination and feelings as expressed in literature.

The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea Details

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Bouguerche says

The book presents a very typical idea of many societies, where , fathers and in general families canalize their children to serve their interests. It shows also in a way how, sometimes women are not given the value of a thinking human being and are led by others without any consideration of their wishes, opinions and desires, it is true that men usually over lead women but they are not to be blamed either because this is a result of a long history full of religious superstitions, misinterpretations of religion and miss-use of power. It is the whole society to be blamed and I think the way to fix that is to raise the new generations in a new way that calls for justice between genders and focuses more of their mental and intellectual abilities and potential instead of spreading another discriminatory speech against men and blame them for something, yes they use but were not the founders of .

Ed says

This book provides an astonishing tour through the history of philosophy by following the fate of the idea of a Great Chain of Being. I'm not going to try to summarize this story. The book sat on my shelf for many years. I finally picked it up during my study of eighteenth century ideas. I found Lovejoy's characterization of the Enlightenment and Romanticism the parts of the book I was best able to follow. His description of Romanticism's struggle to resist the Enlightenment's inclination to universalize and to insist on the inclusion of the varieties of particularities in our world view was very helpful. Of all things, it made Foucault's project much more intelligible to me. For this alone I would thank Lovejoy.

Lazarus P Badpenny Esq says

Very fine examination of the Platonic notions about the dual nature of God that gave birth to the Great Chain of Being and its implications for later Western thought. I predict repeated re-readings in the years to come.

Realini says

The Great Chain of Being by Arthur Lovejoy
Great book- 9 out of 10

The very idea is wonderful:

- The Great chain of Being- The history of the idea of plenitude from Plato to Schelling
Reading about such fabulous concepts and stories must be amazing.

I say must be, for I did not quite get it all.

- Perhaps 50% ?

- Or was it even less?

Alas, it gets too complicated for me and I am an epicurean, at least in what has to do with reading, where I

do not apply myself.

When I do not enjoy, grasp or both I lose concentration and without full attention, many if not all the good books are lost on the reader.

To be fair, this is not the easiest read, with the most accessible material.

On the contrary, it can get rather dry if not more and for the lay person, it will be difficult to navigate through scholars and theologians who have access to the highest spheres and inspiration that is not always allowed to mere mortals, like the undersigned

There are some wonderful concepts, like the one expressed in the very title-

- There is God on top of the world and from Him,
- all the way down we have lesser creatures

The fact that there is such an astonishing multitude of species and creatures is all for the best, speaking of which I love more and more the paradigm of *Candide*, even if it was ridiculed and intended for mockery:

- All is for the best in the best possible world

I will refer to some quotes or other concepts that I loved in this fantastic book:

- How exiting is the feeling of initiation in mysteries

At the beginning of the book, the translator refers to a term that appears frequently and is hard to pin down and explain- I love it:

- Otherworldliness

The author talks with erudition, expertise and talent about Plato, the essence of things, many scholars and plenty of areas where I was lost.

- The Universe is a Plenum Formarum
- It illustrates completely the diversity of beings
- All real potentialities came to form
- The Creator has given form to all that could and should exist

These are such beautiful statements, even if diminished by my adaptation.

Even if you do not get all of it- which maybe you will, even if I could not- it is still such a marvelous experience.

I would say that it is like a flight on the orbit, where you do not fully understand all the workings of the shuttle but are still flabbergasted.

Lovejoy, the author even has a fascinating name, apart from the fantastic subject matter.

These in fact are lectures that have been delivered at Harvard- which makes me smile, for I had a talk the other day.

Someone was kind of saying-

- Bleah, Harvard- so what...
- What do you mean – this is almost *nec plus ultra*

How can we diminish and scale down so much around us?

This is a mind boggling, sensational- if hard to read book.

John says

i HAVE been trying to read this book for 3 weeks. Just could not get into it. I have little Interest in the thoughts of those from 1,700 years ago nor do I want to read about Plato and his thoughts. I got up to th 17th century and gave up. A total waste of time for me. perhaps I will return to it when I am old. ha

Miriam says

Lovejoy essentially invented the field of "history of ideas" as something beyond the study of philosophy. Here he traces the transmission of the idea of the "Great Chain of Being" (i.e. the idea that there is a hierarchy of creation) from ancient Greece through modern times, arguing that it so imbued western culture that it often unconsciously influenced habits of mind and patterns of thought.

In America, intellectual history as a field derives from Lovejoy's tenure at Johns Hopkins and his founding of the History of Ideas club there.

Bruce Dayman says

This is a very important book. It shows the progress of the idea of the great chain of being from Aristotle to the Enlightenment. It is important because it shows how intellectuals have wrestled with the dualism between matter and spirit ultimately becoming disillusioned with the whole idea.

Kenneth says

Dense book on the idea of plentitude that starts with Greek philosophy then concludes with Leibnitz's famous philosophical writings on the "best of all possible worlds".

I happen to disagree with the author's conclusions, but find the narrative one of the best on the subject matter nevertheless. The explanation of Medieval cosmology in particular with regard to the Ptolemaic universe is enchanting.

The imaginative affect of en-visioning that time in history through the authentic descriptions of Lovejoy is worth the read alone.

The latter half of the book is heavy treading. Simply put, the basic premise is that everything that can be created is created because everything that can be is.

In other words, there is no possibility of "gaps" in the "chain of being" that leave metaphysical reality in potential without actualizing the possible in the existing physical universe.

The world is necessarily filled to the brim.

Thom Dunn says

Other than Shakespeare's plays this is the ONE ESSENTIAL book--and phrase--to remember from the English Renaissance, it assays the foundation principle behind kingship, the political and social order, God and man. Some might wish to substitute Tillyard's The Elizabethan World Picture as THE ONE....but then you wouldn't have the all-encompassing phrase of this title to recall.

A. J. McMahon says

Lovejoy is a terrible writer, but the subject of this book was so fascinating that it made for an interesting read anyway. Also, Lovejoy doesn't have too much competition in this field, as no-one else has produced an equally lengthy book on the subject of The Great Chain of Being. Anyway, the story begins with Plato and Aristotle, continues on through the Neoplatonists into the Middle Ages, and then comes to an end in the eighteenth century, when with the new developments in science and philosophy the interest in the great chain of being faded away, from the mainstream of European thinking at any rate. The basic idea of the great chain is that all living creatures are connected in a single hierarchical chain which rises upward to the Oneness of God, which is both the source and the end of all life. There are plenty of interesting quotes, and fascinating philosophical insights, but Lovejoy fails to present all the material in a concise or accessible manner. He waffles on much of the time, failing to get to the point; the entire book of 300 plus pages could be reduced to much less than a hundred pages in terms of its actual content. To anyone with an interest in such matters, it is worth reading but be prepared to enter into the task of reading this book with all the patience you possess as you will have to wade through pages of specious verbiage to finally get to whatever the point of the passage is supposed to be about. My rating of three stars actually reflects a compromise between the one star of Lovejoy's writing and the five stars of the interest of the subject of the book.

Matthew Dambro says

Excellent exposition of the idea of the basis of our world view from Classical Greece to the Enlightenment. It is somewhat dated (1936) but Dr. Lovejoy's views are brilliantly served up for consumption by the educated elite of his time. This is strictly lectures for a graduate level university audience. He expects his listeners to be able to understand Latin, Classical Greek, German and French. He does not simplify as much as he explains. He requires much knowledge on the part of his reader. It is the seminal work in the field and requires close reading.

Paul says

Lovejoy traces the idea of the "Great Chain of Being", and the impact it has had on Western thought over the past 2500 years. This book is really focused on the atomic principles formulating the "Great Chain": principle of sufficient reason, principle of plenitude, and principle of continuity; focusing on the different ways they have been interpreted to affect the course of Western philosophy and theology.

Highly recommended to anyone interested in better understanding how some core ideas in society have evolved over the past 2500 years. The concepts presented were the primary world-view until the end of the Eighteenth Century, but they have been largely forgotten. If anything, this book helps to put any literature written before the 1800s into better context. Only downside to the book was that some of the quotations were in languages other than English with no translations provided.

Nils says

A classic but a bit of a slog, stylistically. The three big "unit-ideas" are Continuity, Gradation, and Plenitude. With breathtaking erudition Lovejoy unpacks not only the regularity with which these ideas have manifested themselves in the European philosophical and literary tradition (which he construed as a single ongoing conversation) but also the varied and often contradictory ways they have been unfolded and deployed. Methodologically, Lovejoy is interested only in yeh interplay of the ideas themselves: he eschews any effort to ground the ideas or their variability in particular social times and places. This creates a "seminar in the sky" effect: this is he sense it which it is a history of IDEAS rather than a history of INTELLECTUALS.

David Withun says

Lovejoy here tracks the origins and development of the idea of the Great Chain of Being from its origins in the thought of Plato through its growth and adaptation in the Middle Ages and finally to its flowering and fading in the 18th and 19th centuries. Throughout, Lovejoy provides an engaging discussion and a wealth of insight. Lovejoy's book is the model for how intellectual history should be done and a fascinating study of an important idea.

Jacob Aitken says

Arthur Lovejoy analyzes a powerful if flawed concept's "control" over Western mind since Plato. The chain of being is the continuum of "substance/essence/stuff" beginning with God (or Plato's Good) and ending with either inorganic life or nothingness itself. The chain of being hinges around three concepts: plenitude, continuity, and gradation.

Summary of the Idea

At the top of the chain is pure Being. At the bottom is pure nothingness. Further, Good is coterminous with Being. Thirdly, good is self-diffusive. So far this isn't too bad. It becomes tricky when it becomes "ontologized." a) the line between Creator and creature is fuzzy; b) if something is lower on the chain, is it less good? What's the difference between less good and bad?

If there is an infinite distance between God and not-God, and all of this is placed on a "scale" or chain, then is there not an infinite distance between each link in the scale? This was Dr Samuel Johnson's critique, and it highlighted the problem of the chain of being: reality had to be static and exist all at once. This called creation into question, since if the Good is necessarily self-diffusive, then it had to diffuse into creation. God had no freedom to do otherwise. Ironically, this Idea also called evolution into question: if there is an infinite distance between the links, then there is no changing from one link to another.

Analysis

This book's value lies in its being a prime example of clear, penetrating thinking. In each chapter Lovejoy presents a new difficulty with the idea of a chain of being and the force is cumulative. The chain functions as a snapshot of the God-world relationship. Since God is perfect, and the chain is a diffusion of his goodness, and since God is eternally perfect, then we must see this eternal perfection. If not, we have to find "the

missing link” (and is not evolution a mere temporalizing of the chain?)

Nathaniel Perrin says

A seminal text in the history of ideas that may be both obsolete and cursory but nonetheless important as an introduction to the contours of Western thought.

Franz says

I found myself wading through the first couple of chapters or so of Lovejoy’s book. He writes English prose as if it were bad German: a thicket of long sentences one must hack through, most of them containing numerous subordinate clauses, asides, and commas like this sentence, before finally reaching the reward of the main verb. But once I got used to his grammatical style, I became engrossed. Recommended for those with a interest in the history of ideas, a field that Lovejoy apparently did much to develop. A classic in the field which probably hasn’t been improved greatly as a history of the chain of being, even though the book is based on lectures delivered in 1933.

The great chain of being refers to the belief that there is a continuous series of creatures and objects with God at the top and rocks, maybe even atoms, at the bottom. In between, in descending order, are spiritual creatures such as angels, humans, apes, lions, , spiders, tuna, worms, amoebas, seaweed, roses, and so on down to fossils and rocks. Not only is this chain continuous, meaning that there are no breaks or gaps in the series, but gradation is an important concept as well. What this means is that in each kind of creature or thing there are resemblances with the creature just above or below that kind of creature or thing in the chain. Think of a real steel chain. Each link on the chain entwines with the links on either side of it. Of course this example is inadequate as all the chain links are identical. But if you think of humans, the epitome of mortal life on earth, it is the only earthly creature that shares a spiritual nature with the angels and a physical nature as well as other resemblances with the apes. This means that the lowest animal and the highest plant, whatever they are, must be linked. The importance of the continuity of the chain is that if any niche or link that isn’t filled by the appropriate creature or natural object causes, all of reality to collapse.

Along with continuity and gradation, the third key concept in the idea of the great chain of being is plenitude. Plenitude refers to the fullness of reality, meaning that every possible creature or natural object that could possibly exist actually does exist. God could not have done otherwise, thus putting a bit of a cramp on his power, though many people didn’t notice. If there were gaps in which a possible creature did not exist in fact, that break in the chain would result in catastrophe. This idea of plenitude led many people to believe in the 17th century that there must be life on the other planets, even intelligent life, maybe even life forms more intelligent than humans. And that there must be planets orbiting the stars also filled with intelligent beings and other creatures and objects unimagined by us.

The sources of this idea of the chain of being were Plato and Aristotle. Plato came up with the idea of plenitude, Aristotle with the ideas of continuity and gradation. The Neoplatonist Plotinus further developed the ideas and the great chain of being eventually became an integral part of Christian theology. Lovejoy points out that rather than being rather close to God, we humans were really much closer to the bottom of the pile. Rather than indicating that the Earth was the center of the cosmos and therefore in an exalted position, we learn from Lovejoy that we humans are much closer to Hell than the Empyrean residence of God and his

avored angels. A Newton is closer to the centipedes than he is to God, although Newton was closer to the angels than to the rest of us.

The notions of plenitude and continuity required that every slot in the chain must be occupied. This meant that the universe is static, never changing or developing. When the astronomers of the 17th century discovered the nature of the planets and the stars, the natural inclination of the educated public was to assume that those worlds were all filled with life.

Lovejoy spends several chapters on the 18th century when thinking about the chain of being both culminated and began to break down. He explains why not only Leibniz but many others argued that the world that exists must be the best of all possible worlds. At the same time, with the gradual development of science and technology, and the challenge of progress, the idea of the great chain of being gradually changed to include some dynamic aspects until only vestiges of the original idea remained in the richness of nature as seen by the German romantics. Ideas of species evolution were already in the air several decades before Darwin proved it.

The idea of the chain of being embodied an ethic. The world is organized so that the place of every thing in it must occupy the place it is in and no other. That includes the human world. European men are at the top of the human heap, while sub-Saharan Africans populate the bottom. The rest of the races occupy the spots in between. It becomes easier to understand, though no less loathsome, why slavery was justified in the eyes of many, and social improvement from the lower nether levels of society to the higher echelon was almost impossible. It also makes the divine right of kings easier to fathom. The way the world is, is the way the world should be.

Lovejoy examines the writings of dozens of thinkers, especially the philosophical poets. However, he spends almost no ink on the Scottish thinkers of the 18th century. He never even mentions Adam Smith. I imagine they had no sympathy for this idea. I doubt that many of us, at least in the economically advanced nations, would accept such a chain of being. We are enthralled with the idea of progress, which is the antithesis of the idea of the great chain of being.

Michael says

The Great Chain of Being is one of the foremost books of intellectual history, which is, as the subtitle reads, the study of the history of an idea. Here, in fact, the Great Chain of Being specifically refers to two complementary ideas first postulated by Plato and the Greeks, which the book then attempts to investigate over the succeeding millennia. The first idea (the principle of plenitude) stated that the Creator, being omnipotent, all-powerful, and faultless, could only create a world which contained everything that could ever be conceived. The second idea (the principle of continuity) was a deduction of the first: if everything that could ever be conceived was to actually exist, the steps between each thing would be absolutely miniscule ... if not, there would be a gap within which some other conceivable thing could be placed. Together the two ideas form a plan and structure of a world composed of an infinite number of links ranged in hierarchical order from the least to the greatest, eventually reaching (to the point that infinity can be reached) the Creator himself, wherein each link differs from its neighbor above and its neighbor below by the least possible degree. This is the Great Chain of Being.

For most of its history, the idea of the Great Chain of Being was used to extol the virtue and greatness of the

Judeo-Christian god, and its two constituent parts were seen as two sides of the same teleological argument in favor of the greatness of God. By the Enlightenment, however, some thinkers (Liebniz first, but Schelling most explicitly) recognized that, when extended to its logical end, the principle of continuity was incompatible with the principle of plenitude, as they resulted in two competing tenets: respectively, an admiration by man of God's creation for itself, and a constant striving by man to imitate God's goodness.

Yet, recognizing man's unique and wholly necessary placement in the universe is mutually exclusive from attempting to upend such a place by striving to ascend to the next place in the line of creation. Schelling noted that the Great Chain of Being required of man both a piety towards the God of things as they are [including] an adoring delight in the sensible universe (so that man could better appreciate the fullness of life as created by God) and also suppression of the natural interests and desires (so that man could better prepare for whatever ascension he could attain), and Schelling's intellectual successors of the Romantic period concluded that the Great Chain of Being served as an argument against, and not for, the existence of God.

Yvonne Flint says

My parochial education was sadly lacking in philosophical history and thought with its focus primarily on religious teachings. I am delighted to realize that my self-education as an adult allows me to read these serious philosophical lectures on the history of some formative Platonic ideas with pleasure and understanding. Now, 80+ years after the lectures were given, I can see the results of this history in the continuing evolution of Western cultural thought and belief.

Mary Catelli says

Tracing across eras from the age of the Platonists the notion of plenitude in a (rather!) academic study.

It began with the Platonic explanation of the universe having so many manifestly imperfect things: what was perfect was the universe, and its perfection consisted of having every possible type of being.

Onward through its mutations. The philosophers who debated whether God had created freely. The philosophers who insisted, as soon as the notion of other worlds like ours arose, that obviously they had to be inhabited. The philosophers who rejected the notion of progress because it would require that the plenitude not be complete at some point.
