

THE CHAIN OF BEING

Author Unknown

The Chain of Being was a concept the Elizabethans inherited from the Middle Ages. It was an attempt to give order (or "degree" as Elizabethans often called it) to the vastness of creation. The idea was that God created everything in a strict hierarchy, or chain, that stretched from God Himself down to the lowest things in existence. Everything had its own place. Humans occupied a place in the chain below the angels but above animals, plants, and stones. Some humans were higher in the chain than others.

The monarch was the highest, with nobles and churchmen below. The followed gentlemen and finally commoners. All women were considered to be inferior to men, with the obvious exception of Elizabeth I. Her position as monarch outweighed the fact that she was a woman. Accepting one's place in the chain was a duty that would be rewarded by God in heaven. Disrupting the chain was thought to lead to chaos, but of course, many people still did challenge their position in society.