

# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## Hierarchy

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Peace obtains in any multitude when the many are united in good order. Peace is order and order is in essence hierarchy, for order arises from equality and inequality among things.

But peace need not abolish change and motion. Rest is peace in its' ultimate realization; but there can be peace in this world of changing things. The life of man or of society is a motion. The problem is one of harmonizing the concurrent motions of many things. Men seem to succeed only at the expense of others: they move up in the world by pushing others down. So nations seem to rise and fall by competitive struggle, by conflict and war.

But each man and each nation can achieve its destiny without destroying everything in its path, or nullifying the destiny of others. Within the amplitude of divine providence, which permits men to seek their ends freely, all of these free motions of men and nations can occur together in peace. The possibility of such an order is expressed by a single scriptural text, much cited by St. Basil, St. Augustine and St. Thomas, from the Book of Wisdom (XI, 21): "Thou hast ordered all things in measure and number and weight." Or, as St. Thomas so frequently reiterates the same text, phrasing it differently, "God disposes all things in number, weight, and measure."

Even if the present war concludes with victory on the side of right, nothing will have been achieved unless we who survive the conflict have a clear enough understanding of peace to know the difference between a mere cessation of violence and a positive program for peace.

The scientist is concerned with the number of things and their weight and measure, but when, he considers the number of things he goes from one extreme to the other. Either that number is a vast infinity of things exceeding comprehension or it is unity, by the reduction of all things to merely accidentally different aspects of the same.

If the scientist considers the world as something to weigh and measure, he thinks of it in terms of quantity. Professor Shapley

of Harvard University Observatory once attempted to arrange everything in the universe in a scale based on their weights and sizes, from the smallest atomic particle to the largest galaxy of stars. The interesting fact he discovered was that man came just about at the middle of the series, midway in size between the least particle of matter and the largest galaxy of stars. That fact, as Professor Shapley recorded it, is unintelligible, for what is the meaning of man's being at the midpoint in size?

For the explication of the vision of hierarchy, I can do no better than to give St. Augustine's interpretation of the text from the Book of Wisdom. He says: "Measure fixes the abode of everything, number gives it its species, and weight gives it rest and stability."

Number stands for species or form, and measure or mode is antecedent thereto, as weight, and 'order according to weight, is consequent. In other words, in the ordering of things something comes before the species or number and this is its mode or measure. There is here a fine convergence of the text from Scripture and the wisdom of the philosopher. Aristotle says that the species of things can be compared to numbers, which differ in species by the addition or subtraction of unity. St. Thomas follows him in saying that species are like numbers; for a unit added to or taken away from a definition changes its species. Think for a moment of the integral numbers 1, 2, 3, 4, etc. Each of these numbers differs by the addition of a unit or the subtraction of a unit. So, St. Thomas tells us, the species of things are like numbers in that each is above or below another by the addition or subtraction of a grade of perfection in being.

It is a startling fact that one can number all created things. Thus *viewed, it is* not a vast universe. It is a relatively small universe when we consider things according to measure and number. The basic distinction in all created things *according to mode* is between incorporeal or spiritual being and corporeal substance. In the spiritual realm, there are three hierarchies of being and in each three orders, making nine modes of angelic being in all: seraphim, cherubim, thrones; dominations, virtues, powers; principalities, archangels and angels. And in each of these nine modes there are many species, for each angel is an individual species and in all this vast multitude of angels there are not two angels equal in being. There is no more startling or interesting fact than that, among spiritual creatures, *there are not two equal things*. Each angel is different by being a species, and each is higher or lower than every other angel by reason of the possession of more knowledge and more love, or less knowledge and less love. This inequality of angels is significant for consideration of individual differences among men.

There are two modes of corporeal being: the mode of living things and of things which are dead and inert. In these two modes, there are but five species, five numbers of things. In the mode of the non-living, there are but *element* and *mixture*. In the mode of the living, there are but *plant*, *brute animal* and man. Beneath these species—for these are the numbers of corporeal things—there are many sub-species or infra-specific, accidental classes. All the things that the scientists tell us are “species,” and the scientists have numbered 1 1/2 million “species” in the field of living things, are only accidental classes. Though it may seem paradoxical, in the domain of plants an orchid and an onion are only accidentally different, as in the domain of animals an oyster and an elephant differ only accidentally. And in this order of all created things, man again is found at the midpoint, but now in a different way from that in which Professor Shapley located him as at the median in size. According to St. Thomas, man is at the midpoint of creation because, as a rational animal, he is on the borderline of the corporeal and spiritual realms, participating in the nature of both. Because he has this peculiar status of being on the borderline of corporeal and spiritual things, there is about man one other distinction, namely, that one man differs from another individually, not merely because of the accidents of matter, but because each individual human soul is a special creation, and not a product of generation. That is why individual souls, when they assume their saintly posts, can occupy discrete places in the heavenly hierarchy, each higher or lower.

In the world of man himself, we find a hierarchy also. The generic powers of men are ordered as higher and lower. Within these generic powers, there\* are specific powers ordered as higher and lower. The virtues, by which these powers are perfected, are divided into two modes, the supernatural and natural. Within the supernatural, there is faith and hope and charity and of these the greatest is charity.

So also among the natural virtues there is an order; the cardinal virtues are supreme, and among them there is the order of prudence; justice, fortitude and temperance.

In the intellectual virtues there is an order: understanding is for the sake of science and science for wisdom. Within the field of knowledge itself there is an order. We pass from lower to higher degrees of knowledge: from history to science, from science to philosophy, from philosophy to theology, to mystical wisdom, and ultimately to the vision of God. And within philosophy itself there is an order: the gradation of physics, mathematics and metaphysics. And within metaphysics there is an order of first principles and

conclusions. So too, in all practical goods, there is an order; for some goods are external, and antecedent to happiness, some goods are of the body, and instrumental to happiness, and some are of the soul, and constitutive of happiness.

The task of human wisdom is to find order in things. The task can be performed because God created things in order and hence the inequality of things.

The grades of being are correlative with the grades of goodness. Each thing has as much goodness as it has being; this leads us to the vision of hierarchy in the field of morals.

The contemporary world looks upon all values as man-made measures of higher and lower. They are all relative to time and place. Equality and liberty are prized more than distinction and order. In the world in which we live, quantity is almost the only standard; our world is one in which getting ahead means beating your neighbor. In the political realm there is, on the one hand, the extreme of liberalism which views government as a necessary, evil, incompatible with freedom and equality; and, on the other hand, the extreme of totalitarianism, in which government is the great equalizer, absorbing everything into itself.

As compared to these two errors, let us examine what the vision of hierarchy helps us to see in the moral order. Boethius defines happiness as the state of those who possess in aggregate all good things. It is a perfect definition, but not easy to understand because it is hard to understand how one will or can possess all good things. The vision of hierarchy helps to interpret this truth: all good things can be possessed only if one possesses them in due proportion and in the right order. There is no more profound truth than that too much of a good thing is bad. One must have good things not only in proportion, but according to the order of their excellence. There is the possibility of happiness in the fact that all goods can be well ordered: as man moves, to his last end, he does so by a progression of steps, in which means are ordered to ends at every level.

There is also hierarchy in the political order. Government is founded on the inequality of men, not on their equality. The good society is hierarchical. It is not an organization of equal men, but of unequal orders of men. It is a society of perfect peace and freedom, of peace through order and freedom through government. Government is the ordering of the inferior by the superior. There is an equality of men, but it is not absolute. It is only the equality of common membership in the human species. Individually, men are unequal. Their basic inequalities are proportional to the differences in their qualities, and to say so is not to be untrue to American traditions and

institutions. John Adams was, fond of quoting a line from Pope which compactly expressed the vision of hierarchy: "All nature's difference keeps all nature's peace."

Now this vision of hierarchy has a personal significance for each individual. It is not merely a magnificently comprehensive view of creation. It is a view which concerns the personal destiny of each of us. Just as mode or measure is a determinant antecedent to form (number of species) so weight is consequent thereto, and it is that expression of our being which resides in our individual differences. To understand this we must understand ourselves as moving, because it is as individuals that we move. Consider a relatively simple truth about the motion of stones. All terrestrial bodies have gravity. Gravity means that they are all moving toward one place, the center of the earth. That place is the term of the motion of all terrestrial bodies. As these bodies move toward this place, something happens to their weight. Relative to the mass of a body it becomes lighter as it nears the center of the earth. Nobody actually achieves this; and if anybody did, all the other bodies could not, because all the bodies tend toward one place and therefore tend to exclude each other.

In the motion of bodies there is competition and exclusion. Now there is a threefold difference between the gravity of men and the gravity of stones: (1) Whereas all stones move toward the same place, the individual soul of each man moves toward its own proper place in the hierarchy of things. Hence, whereas stones exclude one another from achieving their ultimate goal, every man can achieve his goal. (2) Stones do not exercise their motion freely: they move according to the impact of external forces; but men operate freely. (3) Although stones get lighter as they approach their goal, human beings get heavier. The inequality of men in the divine creation is the cause of each having a proper place, but each of us, however, like a stone, may be nearer to or farther from his proper place. There are, therefore, two sorts of inequality among men: their inequality by nature, that is, by birth; and the inequality due to the use of their freedom, according to the fullness or emptiness of their actions, and the degree to which they attain their ends thereby.

It is a hard thing for most people to accept the fact that men are unequal. If one keeps the vision of hierarchy before him, that each is higher or lower in being and in goodness, he will live vigorously, but not competitively. He will strive for his own perfection without disorganizing society and sacrificing others to his ambition or greed. He will find in his own proper end the only true measure of success. He will be well-tempered in himself, and will be able to

live in concord with others. The simple rule is never to rest in less than you can be, because fullness of weight is the only measure of true happiness. But never should one strive to be more than somebody else, because no one else is a measure of another's perfection. This is the wisdom of the *Divine Comedy*.

One who keeps the vision of hierarchy before him will never forget the two precepts of charity: love God, and thy neighbor as thyself.



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