A matter of balance. The great chain of being and cultural sustainability

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The Renaissance idea of the Great chain of being is well known, a kind of a metaphor for the hierarchical order of the world that had developed through the Middle Ages. The untouchable God almighty was at the top and below him, in the spiritual world, were the angels. Man was in the middle, a rational being, torn between the noble spiritual world above and his own sinful flesh that was related to the lower regions inhabited by animals, plants and stones. Satan and his demons, as many as the raindrops of a nine days’ rain, also reigned in the lower depths.

This order was balanced, the concept of nature being dynamic and qualitative, with a close affinity to creativity and life. Inherent relations between things were an important aspect, which means that one had to observe the world in a large perspective or context. The mechanical world view that began emerging in the 16th and the 17th centuries, as well the Enlightenment and modern rationalism, lean on the other hand to reductionist quantification and technical approach to reality, neglecting the larger context and the qualitative relations.

The paper will address these different conceptions of the world from the point of view of cultural sustainability, in order to examine whether holistic ideas of balance may have some significance for cultural sustainability. The holistic aspect of the Great chain of being implies relations between single activities and a variety of surrounding phenomena. Motivations behind human actions are mainly based on ideas depending on cultural aspects. The question thus arises whether it is possible to increase awareness of a larger context in a world dominated by mechanistic views that often tend to exclude the possibilities of disturbed balance.

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