Sample GMAT Verbal Questions (Reading Comprehension)

Passage 3

In the seventeenth century, the burgeoning field of taxonomy, the science of classifying organisms, was deeply intertwined with the prevailing religious and philosophical beliefs of the time. The Great Chain of Being, a concept stretching back to ancient Greece, was a dominant paradigm. It posited a hierarchical order of creation, from the simplest life forms at the bottom to God at the top, with humans placed just below the angels. This linear, static view of nature profoundly influenced early taxonomists, who sought to fit all species into a fixed, unchanging ladder.

However, as explorers ventured into new continents and returned with a dizzying array of previously unknown species, the limitations of this hierarchical framework became apparent. How could a three-dimensional, interconnected web of life be forced into a linear chain? The more species that were discovered, the more difficult it became to place them neatly into a single, vertical order. These new discoveries, particularly those from the "New World," began to challenge the very foundation of the Great Chain of Being.

The growing empirical evidence led to a shift away from a simple, linear classification toward a more complex, branching system. Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist who is often considered the "father of modern taxonomy," was a key figure in this transition. His system of binomial nomenclature, which categorized species based on shared physical characteristics rather than on an abstract hierarchy, provided a much more flexible and adaptable framework. While Linnaeus himself was a devout believer in the Great Chain of Being and saw his work as simply detailing its order, his system's inherent flexibility ironically paved the way for later biological theories, such as evolution, that would completely dismantle the static hierarchy he sought to categorize. Thus, the very tools he developed to understand a fixed order became the means by which that order was ultimately shown to be dynamic and ever-changing.

Questions for Passage 3

11. The primary purpose of the passage is to:
    A. chronicle the life and work of the botanist Linnaeus.
    B. explain the scientific principles behind the Great Chain of Being.
    C. argue that the Great Chain of Being was a flawed scientific theory.
    D. describe the historical shift in the field of taxonomy from a linear to a branching system.
    E. highlight the conflict between religious belief and scientific discovery in the 17th century.
12. According to the passage, the Great Chain of Being was a dominant paradigm for early taxonomists because it:
    A. was a concept first developed in ancient Greece.
    B. provided a simple, hierarchical framework for classifying species.
    C. was supported by a wealth of empirical evidence from new species.

D. was a new and revolutionary idea at the time.
E. provided a secular alternative to religious explanations of the natural world.

13. The author's reference to the "dizzying array of previously unknown species" serves to:
A. explain why taxonomists were unable to complete their work.
B. illustrate the challenge posed by new discoveries to the Great Chain of Being.
C. suggest that scientists in the 17th century were more adventurous than their predecessors.
D. provide a list of the types of species that were being discovered.
E. highlight the limitations of Linnaeus's system of classification.
14. The passage suggests that Linnaeus's system of binomial nomenclature was "ironically" a key factor in dismantling the Great Chain of Being because:
A. his system was ultimately proven to be scientifically inaccurate.
B. his religious beliefs were in direct opposition to his scientific work.
C. he secretly believed that the Great Chain of Being was flawed.
D. his system, while intended to classify a fixed order, was flexible enough to accommodate the idea of change over time.
E. he was not aware of the vast number of new species being discovered.
15. Which of the following can be inferred about the prevailing religious and philosophical beliefs of the 17th century, as described in the passage?
A. They were a hindrance to any and all scientific progress.
B. They provided a framework that was compatible with a hierarchical, fixed view of nature.
C. They were eventually replaced by a purely secular, scientific worldview.
D. They were a more accurate representation of the natural world than early taxonomy.
E. They had no impact on scientific thought, which was an independent domain.

Passage 3 Explanations

11. **Correct Answer:** D. The passage traces the evolution of taxonomy. It starts with the early, linear "Great Chain of Being," then describes how new discoveries challenged this framework, and concludes with the shift to Linnaeus's more flexible, branching system. The central theme is the historical transition in the field of classification.
12. **Correct Answer:** B. The first paragraph states that the Great Chain of Being "posited a hierarchical order of creation" and that this "linear, static view... profoundly influenced early taxonomists, who sought to fit all species into a fixed, unchanging ladder." This clearly shows that the paradigm's appeal was its simple, hierarchical structure.
13. **Correct Answer:** B. The passage introduces the "dizzying array of previously unknown species" in the second paragraph, immediately followed by the question, "How could a three-dimensional, interconnected web of life be forced into a linear chain?" This shows that the new discoveries presented a significant challenge to the linear framework of the Great Chain of Being.

14. **Correct Answer:** D. The passage explicitly states that Linnaeus, despite his belief in the Great Chain of Being, created a system that was "much more flexible and adaptable." The irony lies in the fact that this flexibility, a feature he didn't intend to undermine the fixed order, "paved the way for later biological theories, such as evolution," which ultimately dismantled that very order.
15. **Correct Answer:** B. The first paragraph states that taxonomy was "deeply intertwined with the prevailing religious and philosophical beliefs," and that the Great Chain of Being was a "dominant paradigm" that "posited a hierarchical order of creation." This indicates that these beliefs provided a conceptual framework that was highly compatible with a fixed, hierarchical view of the natural world.