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**LAWFUL  
AIN'T  
GOOD**

NG

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**A PHILOSOPHICAL ANALYSIS OF THE  
DUNGEONS & DRAGONS ALIGNMENT SYSTEM**

*In most editions of the roleplaying game Dungeons & Dragons, there are nine “alignments” a character may choose between, roughly aligning to that character’s moral compass. For better or worse, this system has influenced untold thousands of players, at the table and beyond.*

*Herein we reproduce two essays to further our understanding of this system: “The Nine Alignments” and “Lawful Ain’t Good.”*

*The first, an anonymous essay from a long-extinct corner of the internet, is arguably the most complete understanding of the nine alignment system. The second, first published by Anarcho-Geek Review, makes the bold claim that there are only eight alignments. Lawful Good, as it argues, is an oxymoron.*

*In the wider scheme of things, this doesn’t matter at all. But for those of us who grew up imagining ourselves as warriors and witches, slaying dragons and evil kings, the alignment system is one of the cornerstones of our ethical understandings. For us, the incongruity between Law and Good is vital to our understanding of the world.*

*For more anarchist analysis of popular culture, visit  
[ANARCHOGEEKREVIEW.COM](http://ANARCHOGEEKREVIEW.COM).*

humanity. These are people who have convinced themselves they are Lawful Good. But any who seeks to chain the rest of us is not Good.

It's possible to do Good through the law. Those who do so are Neutral Good, using law as a tool when necessary for the greater Good. But at their extremes, Law and Good are fundamentally incompatible, incapable of overlap.

Chaos and Good are compatible: one can believe with all one's heart in Good and fight against Law. Chaos and Evil are compatible: one can fight against every fetter while still being antisocial and cruel. Law and Evil are compatible: ask any politician who serves a system that enslaves people, tortures people, denies whole segments of society agency, imprisons drug users, turns a blind eye to police violence, colonizes already-settled terrain, or wantonly destroys the earth—which is to say, the politician of more or less any existent or historical government.

I'm far too much a partisan of Chaotic Good to advocate that it's the best alignment by which to live your life. I work against Evil and I work against Law, and I find the overlap of those two to be the most egregious—and common—ill in this world. But others don't, and I have no strong desire to convince them otherwise. The world is quite interesting the way it is, full of diverse people who act, consciously or not, by these various alignments—all eight of them.

## THE NINE ALIGNMENTS

IN 1977, ADMITTEDLY BEFORE I WAS BORN, THE ROLEPLAYING GAME *Dungeons & Dragons* introduced the world to an ethical system known today as the nine alignments. A quarter of a century has gone by and millions of people have been exposed to this system. I was introduced to *D&D* in fourth grade and now, twenty years later, I still understand the world in this way. For many of us, in fact, with no formal training in philosophy, this is the only clearly-articulated understanding of ethics we've ever had. And this doesn't bother me.

The nine alignment system is a two dimensional understanding of human behavior and motivation. One axis is that of Chaos versus Law. The other, Good versus Evil. My intention herein is to explore each of the nine alignments, yes, but mostly to focus on the axes themselves. I will explore what they mean not just in terms of how we play characters in a game, but how we understand those acting in the world around us.

The nine alignments are, based on these two axes: Chaotic Good, Neutral Good, Lawful Good, Chaotic Neutral, True Neutral, Lawful Neutral, Chaotic Evil, Neutral Evil, and Lawful Evil.<sup>1</sup>

These alignments are seen as each character's moral compass. For most characters, they are not absolutes, but instead indicate their general behavior and motivations.

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<sup>1</sup> Note that in most depictions of the nine alignments, the alignments are listed descending from Lawful to Chaotic, rather than Chaotic to Lawful as is done here. It is the editor's assumption that the author, rather than trying to bias the reader towards Chaotic, is simply trying to break the reader of that bias. Overly simplistic readings of the nine alignments—like by children, or those who designed 4th edition *Dungeons & Dragons*—tend to see the alignments as one-dimensional, with the “pure” good of Lawful Good at the top and Chaotic Evil at the bottom.

## Good versus Evil

On first glance, this is the less interesting and more obvious of the two axes. We all know what Good is, we all know what Evil is. But do we? We live in a time when the president of the US, bless his low-IQ heart, goes on at some length about “evil-doer” this and “evil” that. We live in a time where we’ve come to understand that one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter. And it’s been more than a hundred years since Nietzsche put out *Beyond Good and Evil*, so really, why are we excited to prop up a system that draws a dichotomy between the two?

Because the concept remains. For better or worse, it’s part of our cultural understanding of the world. There are Good actions and Evil actions. More dangerously still, there are those seen as Good people and those seen as Evil people.

But if we’re able to avoid getting hung up on this assumption that Evil is always “bad” and Good is always, well, “good,” then we can find useful ways to use this axis to understand people’s behaviors. So what actions do we map to which alignments?

I will argue herein that the best way to understand Good and Evil (in the context of the nine alignments) is pro-social (Good) and antisocial (Evil) behavior. Obviously, what each society will define as “antisocial” behavior will differ, but we will attempt to nail down a working definition that is applicable across societies.

When I speak of “pro-social” behaviors, I speak about altruism, benevolence, good will, etc. and when I speak of “antisocial” I speak of aggression, ignoring or causing suffering to others, infringements on others’ liberty, etc.

Note that these definitions muddy the waters of Evil being “bad” and I personally prefer it that way. As it stands in real life, people are painted as “Evil” so that their desires can be dismissed. But by painting broadly with the Evil brush, we’re able to understand that within all of us there is Good and Evil, and every day we choose what behaviors to engage in. To be frank, most wars are fought between Evil people—those who conscript armies to their service, those who let innocents die as “collateral damage”—by means of soldiers who are, individually, all across the alignment spectrum

Traditionally, in *Dungeons & Dragons*, playing an evil character just isn’t done. Evil is for villains, Evil is for absolute awful monsters like serial killers and nazis. But realistically, there are those who act antisocially or at the expense of others to be found in all segments of society. Most would not even consider themselves Evil. Many are convinced they are the “good guy,” justifying all sorts of atrocities, while others simply don’t care for ethics at all.

of Evil perpetuated by Law. These examples are clearly in the realm of Lawful Evil—or perhaps Lawful Neutral. In fact, such a partisan could argue, one could make the same strawman arguments about Chaotic Evil behaviors and apply them to everyone on the Chaotic end of the Law/Chaos axis. And that’s fair.

It’s only through Law that *systemic* violence can be created. Law has, built into it, a greater ability to create Evil than Chaos does. Chaos only allows for *distributed*, or individual, acts of oppression.

And the very act of creating and enforcing a moral system into which you expect others to conform is Neutral at best and Evil at worse. It presupposes that people are not capable of being Good without being forced into that behavior, and it forces people into one person or group’s ideal of Good without allowing for variance. Forcing others into a system of beliefs is not Good behavior as we understand it.

Any hierarchy leaves responsibility at its pinnacle. A legal system, by claiming dominance over an entire culture, is therefore responsible for the whole of that culture, including its positive and negative qualities alike. Since no law can ever be Good all the time, a system based on laws can never be purely Good.

Chaotic folks, on the other hand, make no claims over the actions or ethics of others and are not responsible for how others behave. A chaotic society can include both Good and Evil in equal measure, but the advocate of Chaotic Good is not responsible for the actions of those who remain Chaotic Evil—although they would certainly work to eradicate that Evil.

At the risk of invoking Godwin’s Law (heh), some of the exemplars of Lawful Evil behavior are Hitler and Stalin. Both created incredibly Lawful societies that perpetuated incredible Evil. But who are our paragons of Lawful Good? Abraham Lincoln? Lincoln oversaw the largest mass hanging in US history, which was of Native Americans defending their territory against US intrusion. The emancipation proclamation he signed only freed the slaves in the rebel states, not those (more than a million) living in the loyal states. Freeing slaves is a Good act, but invading and murdering the indigenous people of this land was an Evil one. Abraham Lincoln was probably Lawful Neutral, by our understandings, at best.

Every potential example of Lawful Good from history I can imagine was either, on further analysis, not Lawful or not Good. The closest I will allow are those aspirants to Lawful Good who died before the won, before the Law they promoted became just another set of chains to shackle

bandits who steal from the rich and give to the poor. I would argue that Law, this “necessary” Evil, isn’t necessary and it certainly isn’t Good.

Chaos, on the other hand, suggests an organic system of ethics, in which situations are handled, well, situationally. Chaotic individuals deal with issues as they arise and mete out justice themselves when necessary but are far, far more likely to simply adopt a live-and-let-live attitude.

Social justice, a study and practice devoted to understanding and undermining oppression faced by various

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people in the world today, has made an excellent argument that systemic violence (that is, violence that is perpetuated by an entire social system) is generally more oppressive than what I’ll call distributed violence, which is to say individual acts of violence. When there’s an entire system in place to keep you oppressed, the ramifications of each individual act against you is essentially magnified by the power of that system. This is

why, in the USA, discrimination against white individuals on the basis of their skin is frankly not as much the anti-racist priority as discrimination against non-white individuals on the basis of their skin—there’s an entire system and history of oppression against people of color.

And the only way you can create systems of oppression is through law and the moralism it entails. The governmental system that “fights for justice” today is the same one that had legalized slavery and has dictated whom we can love, what imaginary borders we can cross, which drugs are acceptable, and even what we can wear.

At this point, the partisan of Lawful Good—or even someone who is just annoyed that I’m trying to claim Lawful ain’t Good—will argue that these are examples

Note that by these standards, violence itself is regarded as neutral on the spectrum. Many violent behaviors are intrinsically Evil—including sexual violence, violence against innocents, and torture—while others might be considered Good if they immediately prevent Evil. In this system, as I am presenting it, a “lesser Evil to stop a greater Evil” is indeed still Evil, but preventing someone from committing Evil is a Good act, so long as the method of prevention stays within Good moral bounds.

Good versus Evil isn’t a real war between two opposing ideologies, despite what politicians and activists alike might claim. Good versus Evil is simply reflected in the ways in which people fight such wars.

**Some explicitly Good behaviors:** mercy; giving away what what is valuable; healing; acting against Evil—including violent action.

**Some explicitly Evil behaviors:** torture; violence against innocents; forced labor; acting against Good; vengeance (distinguished from self-defense); all sexual violence; causing the deprivation of others.<sup>2</sup>

**Some Neutral behaviors:** killing one’s foes; giving away what one can easily afford; preferring Good but not fighting against Evil.

### Chaos versus Law

The second and less-understood axis of the nine alignments is that of Chaos versus Law. Curiously, the Chaos versus Law axis is actually the older of the two, at least in terms of inclusion in *D&D*. So what is Chaos, what is Law?

First, and perhaps most importantly, we must understand that it is not Chaos versus *Order* being discussed,

*The best way to understand Good and Evil (in the context of the nine alignments) is pro-social (Good) and antisocial (Evil) behavior.*

<sup>2</sup> On this editor’s personal ethical scale, some of these activities are unforgivable and horrid while others are simply things that people might do that might not be the best things ever.

but Chaos versus *Law*. Order, as chaos theoreticians, chaos magicians, and emergence theorists have all explained, is something that can and often does emerge from chaos—and indeed, is not an explicitly distinct thing. Chaos, when compared to law, is the organic/dynamic structuring of individuals and actions outside an externally enforced order. A Chaotic individual will, when presented with a problem, look for the most

immediately relevant or most desirable course of action without consulting an external moral code.

*A Lawful character desires a universally applicable moral code—or at least a moral code that is applicable across an entire culture.*

Law, by contrast, is the belief that society ought to be structured in a more formal way so that the actions of individuals are more aligned with one another. Law is externally existent and enforced order.

One mistake that many people make when they analyze the Chaos versus Law spectrum is that they believe that Lawful characters obey existing laws. Certainly,

many of them might. But what makes a character Lawful, in the context of the nine alignments at least as I would argue, is the desire to have a system of laws. Many Lawful characters will desire legal systems that are entirely unrelated to those that hold power within their society, and therefore they may themselves either be reformers or outlaws. On the whole, however, Lawful characters are more likely to be aligned with existing systems of law.

From my point of view, a Lawful character desires a universally applicable moral code—or at least a moral code that is applicable across an entire culture. A rigid set of individual ethics is actually something someone who is Neutral on the Law/Chaos scale might hold instead.

By the very virtue of being Chaotic, a Chaotic character may or may not align themselves with an existing system—whether or not they believe a legal system

## LAWFUL AIN'T GOOD

I'M SORRY TO TELL YOU, BUT EVERYTHING YOU KNOW ABOUT *DUNGEONS & Dragons* is a lie. There are only eight alignments. Because like the title of this essay suggests, Lawful ain't Good.

I can already hear you protesting. The Law/Chaos axis is wholly separate from the Good/Evil axis, you'll argue. It's not. Lawful is incompatible with Good.

To understand the alignments, I'll be using the rather interesting in-depth analysis found in the anonymous essay "The Nine Alignments" as my starting point for this argument.

As that essay (and I) understand it, Law is the creation, advocacy, and/or maintenance of rigid moral structures that lay out codified, you know, laws. Chaos is ignoring or fighting against codified moral structures. Neutrality is not being particularly partisan to either side of this.

Good is pro-social behavior, like helping people at some real cost to yourself, forgiving people, working to alleviate suffering, acting altruistically, etc. Evil is antisocial behavior, like unwarranted aggression, infringing on other's liberty, torture, sexual assault, genocide, cruelty, causing deprivation, and the like. To be Neutral on this axis is to be Good and Evil in some semblance of balance.

My argument is that, to be Good, one cannot also be solely Lawful. In fact, to be actively Lawful is inherently Neutral or Evil.

To be Lawful is to be righteously moralistic, because a Lawful person believes that it is possible to create systems of laws that are just. A system of law takes one person or group of peoples' ethics and imposes it upon others, predetermining what is considered justifiable or unjustifiable behavior.

On some level, we all know that law is bad. Culturally, it's considered a necessary evil. We celebrate tales of beggar thieves who steal bread, of

## Chaotic Evil

Chaotic Evil is known, at its extremes, as the alignment of serial killers and raving lunatics of destruction. And, to be sure, it is that. But for every mad bomber destroying people's lives because it's fun and they want to, there are plenty more people who just want to do whatever they want most of the time and sometimes that includes being downright Evil. Chaotic Evil is also the alignment of petty crooks who are pleasant to their friends but shoot people who don't deserve it.

And finally, Chaotic Evil is the alignment of those who are so committed to the destruction of a Lawful system that they will kill innocents to achieve it.

## Neutral Evil

Neutral Evil is the alignment for those who have Evil in their hearts and don't care how they get it, yes. But it's also the alignment for the majority of people who lackadaisically participate in an Evil system—those who are more invested in the system are more likely to be Lawful Evil instead. It's the alignment of the Nazi doctors who treated Nazi soldiers and concentration camp victims alike without intervening in the genocidal system.

Another form of Neutral Evil can be found in those who care primarily for economic power—often agnostic to Law—and wield it in ways that cause others great deprivation.

## Lawful Evil

Everyone who wants to take power and doesn't care what it takes to get it is Lawful Evil. Without Law, there is no power to take. And without moral compunctions, you're left with Evil.

The reason for desiring the power is incidental. Someone who wants power for power's sake—and once again, doesn't care how they obtain it—is Lawful Evil, but so are those who want power for “the greater good” and are willing to commit incredible atrocities to gain it. Ideologues and power-hungry kings alike fit into this category.

A final category would be those who are concerned primarily with power and may even go about achieving it in some Neutral fashion but are still committing Evil on some large scale in some other way.

## Conclusion

Moral frameworks for understanding the world are kind of weird. But this is the one I got.

should exist does not necessarily control whether or not they will align themselves with one for whatever advantage.

Now, if a Lawful character believes in an externally-applied code of behavior, wouldn't that leave a morally consistent Chaotic character incapable of many actions? For example, wouldn't a Chaotic character choosing to kill a slaver be enforcing her (external to the slaver) code of behavior onto the slaver?

Similar to how a Good character can kill those acting in an Evil manner with a clear conscience, the Chaotic character in this situation is actually interrupting someone (the slaver) who is in the process of forcing his external system of control (slavery) onto other people (those whom he would enslave).

**Some explicitly Lawful behaviors:** disciplining others; informing on lawbreakers; not forgiving those who have not been punished; obedience.

**Some explicitly Chaotic behaviors:** lying; viewing oneself as uncontrolled by law; meting out justice without formality; free-thinking.

**Some Neutral behaviors:** disciplining oneself.

### *A Note on Neutrality*

To be Neutral on either axis can represent any one of three conditions: first, and probably the most common, is that Neutral can represent someone who simply not care about Good versus Evil or Law versus Chaos, someone who is indifferent. Second, it can represent someone who strives for one or the other but performs so many acts opposing this so as to balance out at Neutral. The third, and rarest, is the champion of neutrality who desires an active balance between Good and Evil and/or Law and Chaos.

### *A Note on Moral Complexity*

People are morally complex. Very few people are paragons of any of the nine alignments and external forces will often compel a character to act in ways that they might not otherwise.

Furthermore, this is all made up: people do not exist to be put into categories, categories exist to better understand people.

### *A Note on Cultural Relativism*

The nine alignment system is meant to be understood as a person's motivations in the context of how they interact with human culture as a whole. Non-human animals are generally considered to be True Neutral, as they are assumed to lack sentience.<sup>3</sup> In roleplaying games and other fiction, however,

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3 This editor believes those who make this assumption are wrong.

there are numerous other sentient creatures that have their own motivations. A race of intelligent carnivores, for example, would be certainly acting within its own ethical framework to kill and eat humans, though clearly from our point of view killing us for food would be an Evil, or antisocial, act.

But since this system is designed with our own, human interests in mind, it is on that we will judge the actions of aliens and intelligent monsters—by how they interact with our own cultures. We lack the tools necessary to judge them in any other way.

### **Chaotic Good**

Oh, Chaotic Good. Perhaps the most popularly-played alignment in the whole system. Choosing to play a Chaotic Good character allows a player to act on their own whims and autonomy whilst still playing a hero.

A person who is Chaotic Good is a free-thinking kind spirit who may fight against Evil or simply embrace doing Good. They are, however, as likely as opposed to Law as they are to Evil, and tend to think poorly of police, politicians, and the like. They are opponents of hierarchy in all its forms, and they tend to have a particular love for freedom for themselves and for everyone else.

A Chaotic Good person faces a few contradictions for being committed to two distinct ideals. Honesty, for example, is generally considered Good, as it allows others to act with the best available information. But deception is often necessary. Some Chaotic Good people will only lie to those in positions of authority.

### **Neutral Good**

Most Good people are, most likely Neutral Good at heart. They'll use the law to enact as much Good as they can and work outside it or without it when necessary. For some Neutral Good people, in fact, an allegiance to either Chaos or Law is a detriment to the greater goal of promoting Good. Others are less consciously promoting Good but just can't bring themselves to act Evil.

### **Lawful Good**

Accidentally presented far too often as the most stodgy or boring alignment, Lawful Good is actually rife with moral complexity. A Lawful Good person in an Evil system is likely to be as much a revolutionist as any Chaotic Good person. It's just that she seeks to replace the Evil system with a Lawful Good system—at which point, her allegiances with any Chaotic Good compatriots are likely to become very strained indeed.

A Lawful Good person in a Neutral or Good society, however, is most likely to be concerned with enforcing the law of the land in a way that will often compete with her desire to do Good. A Lawful Good character, for example, will have no compunction locking up a starving thief caught stealing bread.

### **Chaotic Neutral**

Contrary to what most people think, a Chaotic Neutral character is not necessarily selfish. She is simply more concerned with her own freedom—and potentially the freedom of those whom she loves—than she is in abstract concepts like Good and Evil.

Some Chaotic Neutral characters are in fact committed to Neutrality, believing that it is important to keep all options open for how they might treat people. Some believe that the freedom to act pro-socially or antisocially depending on the situation is just as important as freedom from law.

### **True Neutral**

Most people honestly don't care much about this kind of stuff. They obey laws because it's not worth breaking them. They generally dislike Evil but don't mind if their side resorts to it when it comes down to winning or losing a war. They are True Neutral.

### **Lawful Neutral**

The Lawful Neutral person who is truly committed to Law as an ideal but is agnostic to Good or Evil is often represented in fiction but is rare indeed in real life. At their best, every judge in the world aims to be Lawful Neutral, but it's nearly impossible.

Some Lawful Neutral people are actually quite committed to the fight against one Evil system or another, they just represent people who are willing to “fight dirty” and commit evil acts in the process. Other Lawful Neutral people might even consider themselves Good but are simply unaware of the Evil that they themselves represent, such as slavery, the subjugation of women, or the use of torture.

Honest politicians (presuming their existence) are likely Lawful Neutral. In order to hold onto power, most governments will be forced to perform Evil acts—ideally against other countries, but often against their own citizens—from time to time.