



The Face of Chaos

A Discussion of Alignment in AD&D by Peter Vials

One of the central problems in an AD&D campaign is the alignment structure: what is 'chaotic good' behaviour? (Or lawful neutral, neutral evil *et al*?) The rulebooks are little help – the answer must come from the DM's personal preference.

The question is important; as Lew Pulsipher said in a very early *White Dwarf*, to ignore alignment is to short-change the players. Also, it ignores a source of much of the flavour of AD&D. Critics who claim that alignment is unnecessary are ignoring the problems inherent in an unaligned game. In *Traveller*, for example, in the space of a few minutes, a character can change in nature from pleasant to vicious with no harm apart from that to characterisation. One answer is to insist that players choose natures and aims for their characters, and penalise experience points for those that fail to adhere to their professed nature; another is to have players who role-play to the hilt, and who would not destroy their character's nature in this way. (This is obviously the best solution for any system; unfortunately, if a player refuses to co-operate, the referee may have no form of sanction without a game mechanics-based alignment.) Alignment, though, makes developing a character easier for new players, and provides a far better source of scenarios and purpose for a party than the mindless hunt for money; with an alignment structure, a DM can ensure a party will never lack motivation for taking on his current scenario (avoiding, to an extent, the nightmare of a party which decides to wander off into unknown and unplanned territory).

The main problem is deciding which actions are within a character's alignment. To take good and evil first, you could graft Christian morality into the campaign; if an act does not comply with Church values, it is evil. This produces problems with neutral behaviour, and with the issue of sensuality; which some will claim to be wrong, but which others (equally hotly) state to be neither good nor evil. Again it is a matter for a DM's preference! Perhaps a safer (less inflammatory) solution is to say that an evil act is one that specifically causes other people or creatures unnecessary harm or woe. A good act is the opposite, while a neutral act is one that neither aids nor harms others. (I am not suggesting that this is a complete solution,

but at least it is a step towards it.) There are a few minor difficulties – for instance, is an act that will eventually cause great good, an evil act if it causes short-term harm? The answer is both yes and no, depending on your attitude to law and chaos.

Lawfuls are organised and careful, with some respect for authority, perhaps a more honourable outlook than chaotics, and an inclination to plan and prepare carefully. They make efficient members of a team because they are willing to co-operate with each other. Few people seem to find visualising a lawful particularly tricky. Chaotics, on the other hand, are sometimes portrayed as people who act in a random fashion, with no thought to their acts. There are a number of random actions tables available in some magazines, where a character's actions are decided by rolling dice. Clearly such an idea is daft – would *you* act only on the roll of some dice? There is no requirement that chaotics must have intelligence and wisdom below 5, so they too must be considered to act intelligently; there must be method to their 'madness'. It is far better to regard a chaotic as an individualist, who dislikes organisations and bureaucracy, and who prefers to go his own way. His actions will be chaotic in the sense that they are based on spur of the moment opinions and perceptions, rather than on carefully organised plans; he views matters in the short term, rather than taking the long-term view. A chaotic would have a solitary rather than team-orientated mentality, and would be the bane of authority. While groups of chaotics are not uncommon, they do not interact so well, tending to lack co-ordination. A chaotic may tend to be more happy-go-lucky than a lawful, trusting more to chance and good fortune, but he need not be stupid; while he may not be so cunning, he may be more skilled at coming up with a suitable reaction based on the minimum amount of information.

Nor can it be said that a chaotic good is less good than a lawful good. In the AD&D rulebooks there is a definite slur upon chaotics, with a suggestion that they tend more towards evil than do lawfals. Thus a chaotic neutral's special familiar is evil while a lawful neutral's is good; the most highly good character class is the lawful good paladin, and so forth. One answer

is to make the ranger an equally good but only chaotic character class and to design separate special familiars for lawful and chaotic neutral mages, but most importantly the imbalance must be recognised and fought. After all, both chaotic good and lawful good are equally good, but in differing ways. The suggestion that a character who is chaotic good is somehow tarnished is unfair; equally, a lawful good is not automatically saintly. There are degrees within any alignment. At the other end of the scale, lawful evil is no less evil than chaotic evil; in some ways the lawful evils should be feared far more, due to their better organisation (witness the orcs in Tolkien).

The difference between law and chaos is also stressed by the term 'honour'. A paladin (the epitome of lawful good) is chivalry incarnate; thus a paladin would return a sword to a disarmed enemy to give him a fair chance, and would refuse to attack from behind or with unfair odds. But this does not make him any more good than a chaotic good ranger carrying out a guerrilla war against a powerful force of orcs; while the ranger's form of combat would not be honourable in the paladin's eyes, it is still good, and probably more effective than the paladin's answer of a frontal attack. (Sometimes it is the lawfully, trapped in their code of honour, that are more stupid!) Equally, a lawful evil may have the same sort of code of honour as a paladin; yet this does not make him good. He, too, might return a sword to his opponent and fight honourably, but may at the same time act in a way that is utterly evil, kidnapping maidens and extorting money. (Think about the Black Knight in Arthurian legend.)

To go back to the question of short-term harm, a lawful, who will plan ahead, might condone a lesser harm for a future good, whereas a chaotic would see the present harm, and object to it. For example, a chaotic good ranger, when faced with a gang of thugs beating up a shop-keeper who had refused to pay protection money, would immediately fight the bullies, rather than letting it happen and summoning the Watch; the latter option could well have led to the identification of the person organising the racket.

With a system of alignment based on the deliberate cause of harm being evil, what is neutral behaviour? This can best be expressed as self-interest and self-preservation. A neutral is a person whose acts are specifically aimed at looking after 'number one', and who doesn't care whether his acts cause others harm. He will not go out of his way to inflict harm or misery, but will not take steps to prevent himself hurting others, either directly or indirectly. Essentially, his nature is callous indifference to the feelings of others. A lawful neutral is, by this definition, in some ways a more unpleasant person than a chaotic neutral. The former is a planner, thinking ahead about what will best benefit him, acting to make opportunities which further his aims, and therefore foreseeing the harm he may inadvertently cause, but accepting it. A chaotic neutral, however, is an opportunist, making the most of opportunities for gain and self-advancement when they occur, and perhaps not comprehending what harm he is causing. On the other hand, a lawful neutral may be more prepared to act in a way that is honourable: of course, a chivalrous nature is not an essential for any but the more extreme lawfals.

Within any neutral, though, there are shades of grey. Some neutrals may, if they have two courses of action that are equally effective for them, always choose the one that causes least harm. Others may do the opposite! The true neutral will not worry, and will pick more or less at whim, sometimes one way, sometimes the other.

This leaves neutral good and neutral evil to be resolved. Some DMs treat these as the purest forms of good and evil, uncluttered by law and chaos. Others treat them as lesser forms, closer to the lawful or chaotic neutral positions. Equally, they can be compared to lawful or chaotic good and evil, but unconfined by their restrictions. The problem with the latter idea is that many players will then choose this alignment, since they then do not need to worry so much about their actions. One or both of the other options are better: to use both, the alignment needs to be split into neutral good and evil and true good and evil. The neutral good position, of course, is likely to bend towards a lawful or chaotic neutral position.

The same idea could, of course, be used for lawful and chaotic neutral, giving true lawful and lawful neutral, for example. This is most useful in a campaign where the struggle between law and chaos is more important than that between good and evil.

Finally, there is true neutral. This is undoubtedly a cop-out

alignment, which can be used to justify any actions as 'preserving the balance'. My answer (I hope not by any means illogical or unfair!) is the same imposed by the *Players Handbook*: to restrict true neutral to druids only, as they are the only class able to visualise the world from a truly impartial viewpoint. This ensures that all characters (other than druids) will have a firm alignment.

Which conflict, therefore, is more important – that between good and evil, or that between law and chaos? Such a question must be up to the individual DMs; my personal preference, though, is for the former. The original idea of law versus chaos comes from Michael Moorcock's apocalyptic books, typified by those of the Elric 'saga' (which every AD&D player should read), although it seems in this case that Moorcock is using law and chaos merely as different terms for good and evil. Thus while the distinction is valid, a struggle between the two seems difficult to envisage, and always confuses new players; so I feel the more easily understood struggle between good and evil is a better choice. Of course, a third option is a total balance between the two struggles, with both being important. This could be superb if well planned, but provides a vast range of problems. Experienced DMs only need apply!

Another matter is the alignment of monsters. If you look at the *Monster Manual* you will see that dwarves are lawful good. How many chaotic dwarf thieves are there in your party? The same applies to elves, halflings, gnomes, etc. Obviously, for these races, the alignment given is merely the most likely, or the alignment of the culture of the creature, rather than the only one possible. So why shouldn't the same apply to gnolls or ogres? It seems quite possible that a moderately bright ogre (as ogres go) might decide that he preferred to be chaotic good, in which case you could meet him in the local temple. If monsters can decide their alignments, there is no longer any justification for murdering orc children, as they might grow up to be good – instead, paladins and clerics in the party must find some way to take them back to the local temple to be brought up correctly. Such a situation makes scenarios far less black and white (one of the major objections levelled at an alignment structure) with characters not being certain that the mind flayer they have encountered is necessarily evil; thus there is more call for character/monster interaction and a shift away from the boredom of hack and slay.

Finally, no consideration of alignment is complete without thinking about that bugbear of AD&D, the *know alignment* spell. With this spell, a third-level cleric can examine a roomful of people, pick out those that are evil (or good), and ensure that a carefully planned scenario fails. Framing a paladin as a convert to evil is impossible, because one spell will prove that his goodness is unsullied. And so on and so forth. *Know alignment* makes hiding a villain extremely difficult; this is one reason for opposing a formalised alignment system. But despair not! There are a number of ways of limiting the use of *know alignment*. The first is to take note of the fact that most normal people object to clerics finding out their alignment; thus if a cleric attempts to cast the spell openly, he or she will probably be mobbed, (losing the spell, but this is unlikely to be the hapless cleric's major concern!). Even if the cleric attempts it in private, there will be a chance that someone will come along and disturb him – if the use of the spell would ruin a scenario, make this a certainty! This is not particularly unfair; a sharp player should be able to explain matters away to the intruder's satisfaction, and if he can't then he deserves what he gets. A second point is to take into account that the cleric may cast his spell more than ten minutes (ie the spell's duration) before the target turns up. A third answer, and the answer to random use of the spell, is to ensure that there are always more NPCs in the vicinity than the spell can test, thus reducing the chance of the cleric picking on someone important. Fourthly, a lawful cleric shouldn't use the spell where its use would be dishonourable, and even if the cleric is not lawful, lawful party members (especially paladins) should object bitterly to this invasion of another's privacy.

If all else fails, though, there are two other solutions. One is the reverse of *know alignment*, which foils a search, but might just raise a party's suspicions. A more subtle approach (most effective in inverse proportion to its use) is a magic item that gives a false reading; these are lethal, especially when a party relaxes its guard in the presence of someone who must be safe, because the spell says he's lawful good... And once the spell's veracity is dubious, it becomes virtually useless, raising the level of player doubt and paranoia, and returning mystery, intrigue and tension to the game. □