



The Social Psychology of Alignment

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Abstract

The formulation of moral alignments is as varied in roleplaying games as it is in behavioural psychology and the philosophy of ethics. Both universal and context bound models require assessment on quantitative and qualitative scales. Comparative evaluations through social simulation models, such as role playing games, may allow for a consistent synthesis of existing approaches.

Alignment: Definition, Variations, and History

A character's alignment is represents their general outlook and approach to life. From the outset, therefore, there is a notion of behavioural consistency which is beyond functional biology. It is evidently clear that character behaviour is hardly a matter of being an inert bunch of nerves waiting to be stimulated, rather there is activity to view the world not only as it is, but as it could and should be (aesthetic and moral domains).

But even on this level there are problems. Does a character without aesthetic and moral domains to their behaviour have an alignment? Even more problematic, does a character without consistent moral and aesthetic outlooks have an alignment? And just to throw a further spanner in the works, how are variations in moral and aesthetic outlooks evaluated against each other? An exhaustive analysis of such questions may be beyond the scope of this article, nevertheless some key concepts and directions are possible with a view to further elaboration.

Historically, alignment is a famaliar notion in Western philosophy. With origins in ancient Hellenic thought and carried through the middle ages, the initial concept of alignment refered to the balance of the elements (Earth, Wind, Fire, and Water). Such a concept of alignment is strongly supported in games like Everyway and RuneQuest. With the advancement of medical knowledge, or such as it was, the assignment of alignment according to the repective balance of vital fluids was an evolution from the elemental perspective. Assigning general personality according to "humours", sanguine, choleric, melancholic, and vitrolic is used in *Swordbearer*, which also adopts the evolution in its magic system. Personality humours were still in fashion as terminology this century.

The conversion from alignment as a measure of disposition to principled standards of moral and aesthetic principles is a direct result of the seperation of the mind and body in renaissance and enlightenment philosophy. Immanuel Kant's principle of the categorical imperative elevated each action as a moral good if, and only if, the specific act could be universalised. Of course, earthly contexts problematise such acts, hence alignment being that which results from a series of judgements. The disjunction between universal principles and technical law can evidently only be transcended in these cases by appeal to reason, or specifically, common law.

Alignment: Universal, Contextual, and Normative

In roleplaying games there are three sorts of alignment models which match with theoretical inquiries in social psychology; universal, contextual, and normative. A universal model of alignment assumes that there are universal

principles of moral behaviour by which all behaviour may be evaluated against. In contrast, a contextual alignment system highlight relative differences, particularly with narrative considerations. Contextual alignment systems operate with varied principles and absolute aesthetics; Finally, normative alignment systems are without moral or aesthetic standards, rather the evaluation of alignment is normal/abnormal behaviour evaluation, or in the case of systems theory, legal/criminal. The following outlines the different variations in roleplaying alignments;

Advanced Dungeons and Dragons: Universal alignment system based on moral principles (good, neutral, evil) and context-bound standards (law, neutral, chaos). Extreme confusion in the latter as a code of norms, principles, or aesthetics.

Call of Cthulhu: Exceptional lack of an alignment system perfectly appropriate for a nihilistic model and Nietzschean ethics.

Dungeons & Dragons: Confused alignment system with attempt to combine moral principles from AD&D into context standards (law, neutral, chaos). Pre-principled legalistic standard of moral behaviour (i.e., the law cannot be evil, chaos cannot be good). Psychologically immature but appropriate according to clientele.

GURPS: Normative alignment system. Specific moral or aesthetic components are not important in comparison to variation from cultural norms.

Palladium: Systematic and normative alignment system co-existing with system of moral principles. Internal inconsistencies are glossed over in favour of completeness.

Pendragon: Context bound religions using normative assignments on a univesal personality scale.

RuneQuest: Context bound religions using universal symbolic order to reflect paticular dispositions. Appropriate pre-principled, polytheistic alignment system, however includes no means for univesal principles to develop.

Swordbearer: Universal disposition system, without moral principles or aesthetic standards. Interesting not as an alignment system, but rather as a disposition system.

An example may elucidate these variations. According to the Dieties and Demigods manual for Advanced Dungeons and Dragons (1980) in Babylonian mythology all demihumans and intelligent creatures are considered to be demons. Communicating with such beings is considered to be a major clerical transgression resulting in the loss of all religious spells and excommunication until a quest is fulfilled.

In contextual alignment systems, such a proposition isn't a problem. The overwhelming aesthetic is pro-human, anti-alien to the point of extremism. Clearly the Bablylonian dieties would have the Grandfather Mortal rune in RuneQuest. In normative alignment systems the same applies. Devoid of any moral.evaluation, a simply application of fanatical antipathy would suffice in the Hero system and GURPS (or criminality if the requirement is ignored).

In a principled alignment system, pragmatic difficulties arise. The recognition of intersubjective sentience proposes from the outset recipricol relations as a code for good behaviour. Treating an alter-ego as a "demon" is hardly condusive for an enduring relationship. Whilst the majority of Babylonian deities (Anu, Anshar, Dahak, Druaga, Ishtar, Marduck, Nergal, Ramman) are assigned neutral or evil alignments in AD&D and would tberfore would be indifferent (at best) with this abdication from the moral good, a problem would occur with Girru, the god of fire, who espouses a lawful good alignment. The problem is further complexified as Girru, at least in the AD&D game, resides with other Lawful Good supernatural beings in the Seven Heavens, which as it happens, is the home of Yondolla, lawful good goddess of the Halflings, and Garl Glittergold, lawful good god of the gnomes (both of whom are ahistorical figures), albeit in different regions of that plane.

So what are the lawful good worshippers of Girru supposed to do when they encounter halflings and gnomes? Adopt their lawful position, that is, treat them as demons, or adopt their good position, and accept them as fellow beings of equivalent suasion (albeit with culturally induced caution)? To pose the question in this way, is of course, to answer it. It is simply not possible to assign alignment as a code of behaviour and expect cultural contexts to override universal principles, regardless of the normative position or distribution of principles within a society. Prejudices or laws aside, in order to remain "good", worshippers of Girru must accept Halflings and Gnomes (and presumably other "good" non-humans, such as Elves), or slip towards lawful neutrality, or even a lawful evil persepective.

Nevertheless, an equivalent validity claim would suggest slippage towards neutral or even chaotic good, as the laws of the Babylonian mythos have been overturned in favour of the common weal.

The results are quite destabilizing from a traditional point of view. There is either an inevitable conflict between Girru and the rest of the Babylonian mythos (Girru sides with the "good"), or within the Seven Heavens (Girru sides with Babylonian "law"). Ultimately, the conflict arises from the differences between culturally assigned "law" vs "chaos" as opposed to universal principles of "good" vs "evil". If the law/chaos dichotomy is to be rid of its earth-bound contexts principles for these concepts need to be assigned. The Advanced Dungeons and Dragons alignment system lacks the qualitative values for such assignments.

The typical notion of the law/chaos alignment is a representation of legality, as we witnessed in the preceding example. The conflict between cultural contexts and universal principles can only be transcended by adopting universal principles of law/chaos alignment. Advanced Dungeons and Dragons already rejects the possibility of such an alignment system, at least in second edition, which deregulates to the position of the chaotic neutral alignment to that of insanity.

In Stormbringer (and the new edition, Elric!), the conflict between law and chaos is fundamental to the behaviour of the universe itself. Understandably, a different sort of principles are required, because law and chaos are clearly not representations of legality/criminality in this case. To express succinctly, the conflict between law and chaos in Stormbringer seems very much a conflict between powerful, one-dimensional trajectories (law) and adaptable, multi-dimensional scope (chaos). It is under this guise that law is technologically proficient and chaos spiritually proficient.

Some Tentative Conclusions

Disposition should be distinguished from alignment. A general disposition cannot accurately evaluate moral principles, aesthetic desires, or legalistic standing. Variation in disposition standards should be historically bound. For example Everyway for mythic representations, Swordbearer for traditional/medieval representations, and perhaps the Call of Cthulhu Sanity stat for modernity).

Alignment needs to be differentiated from systematic referents of legality/criminality. A lawful (in a metaphysical sense) person in a chaotic (in a legal sense) society, remains lawful, if perhaps, criminal. Rather, it is appropriate to establish a two dimensional "System Evaluation" of each character based on their systematic status (as derived from wealth and power) and legality/criminality. As these are quantitative norms they may be distributed according to a standard roleplaying bell curve (3-18), or as appropriate according to game system. For example, a character with a Status of 15 and Legality of 5 would be equivalent of an Australian multi-millionaire forced to flee to, say Spain. (As for their moral alignment, we'll leave that for their own conscience).

Moral and aesthetic alignment can also be quantified, again on a same bell curve. Moral principles can be assigned as per Kohlberg's structure of moral development. Because moral principles as assigned from social ethics each `_player_` at the end of each game `_session_` should vote, by secret ballot, on what they think the alignment of the other characters should be. The GM should also assign a vote which would represent the perspective of NPCs that the characters met. Bear in mind that some characters, particularly those who act secretly and quietly, may have an average moral alignment, until their secret (good or evil) is discovered.

Aesthetic alignments, as explained previously, are entirely based on personal judgment. The quantitative value assigned here is for the purposes of roleplaying only with the rate of change representing the mental stability of the character. One point per session is the rate a reasonable person would adopt, whereas a character at three points per session would be considered flightly and without focus. This doesn't preclude extreme variation within specific circumstances.

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