

Paladiary Day 24: Lawfulness and ACAB

So, I've called myself "Lawful Good" in the past, and to be honest, still consider myself so. Necessary disclaimer: the alignment system from D&D is inherently a storytelling and roleplay device. It cannot and never will actually encapsulate the complex and multi-layered beliefs, principles, and morals of real people. But archetropical identity is, by definition, already aligning itself with narrative and storytelling conventions that exaggerate reality. So it's not more contradictory to call myself Lawful Good than it is to call myself a paladin in the first place.

While any class in roleplaying systems like D&D can be any alignment, Paladins are often Lawful good. And in several media, they are presented, metaphorically or literally, as cops. This isn't a one-off trend, it is (while obviously not absolute) as much a stereotype of the class as seducing the dragon is for bards. This is especially true in certain systems (like older editions of D&D) where paladins policed the behavior of other players, because there were mechanical consequences to their own traits based on their party's behavior. It's something I've been increasingly reflecting on as my politics grow and shift to include police and prison abolition, and restorative justice. Does me not believing in the legal enforcement system of my lived-in society make me less lawful?

Some people resolve this discrepancy by defining "Lawful" not as defined by the legal system of society, but by having it mean a strict personal moral code. I think this doesn't work from two different directions. First of all, it fails to work for lawful evil: the classic lawful evil example is a tyrant or evil empire, who is explicitly using or even creating laws to inflict harm. Second, if we define lawfulness as "personal moral code" then literally everyone is lawful, because everyone by definition has moral beliefs. Robin Hood is a classic chaotic good example, because he is subverting and rebelling against his social system- I don't think anyone would say he doesn't have a personal moral code.

So is that it, I can't call myself lawful if I don't agree with current social structures? Perhaps. Indeed, there are some systems which would put me in a "Neutral Good" box by default. But I still think it is more accurate and fitting to call myself lawful, and here is why:

When I call myself Lawful, I mean it as a core personality trait. There is a video I have reblogged recently (I won't link it because tumblr is weird with links; it's in my border collie tag). In it, a person is walking two dogs, a husky and a border collie. The person drops both leashes. The husky wanders off. The border collie pauses, picks up the leash, returns it to its owner, then ducks out of its collar and runs off...to go and fetch the husky and bring it back. If I looked for a hundred years, I might never find a better example of what I mean when I say I have "border collie brain". It's a three-hit punch: the border collie's immediate correction/submission to authority, it's clear demonstration that it could run free at any time if it wanted, and it only choosing to do so in order to correct the other dog. The border collie is not, as expected of a leashed dog, actually bound or limited. It is willingly engaging in a social contract.

Even outside of the context of rules and laws, I naturally tend to think lawfully. As a child I was incredibly obedient, and could be panicked for days at the thought of breaking a rule. Some of this was certainly anxiety or neurodivergent rigidity, and I have been able to (with time and care) reduce the aspects that were distressing, unhealthy, or painful. But as a general trait, that aspect of my personality or worldview persists.

There have been times where I've misunderstood something in a podcast or other media, just because I've had the default assumption that characters are being honest or abiding by some rule. It's not that I don't know people can lie, cheat, etc. It's just that...sometimes I will literally not think in those terms unless prompted to by cues. And this feels so inherent to who I am as a person and how I approach the world, that it doesn't make sense to me to call myself anything but lawful. Like the metaphorical clock or an automaton, I have an internal lawfulness regardless of my external circumstances.

I'm reminded of a color tutorial I saw once by the artist Gigidigi (of Cucumber quest). She pointed out that, depending on scenery and lighting, depicting the "actual" colors of a character's hair or clothes may not work. One example was a scene where a blue-haired character was in a red room. The "actual" color used to depict the hair was a shade of gray, which nevertheless looked blue to the viewer in that scene. That's how I consider my lawfulness. I "am", intrinsically, a certain degree of lawful, just like the color value of a particular hue may define it as "gray". But my lawfulness can look different in different societal and legal contexts, just like that grey can be used to depict blue.