

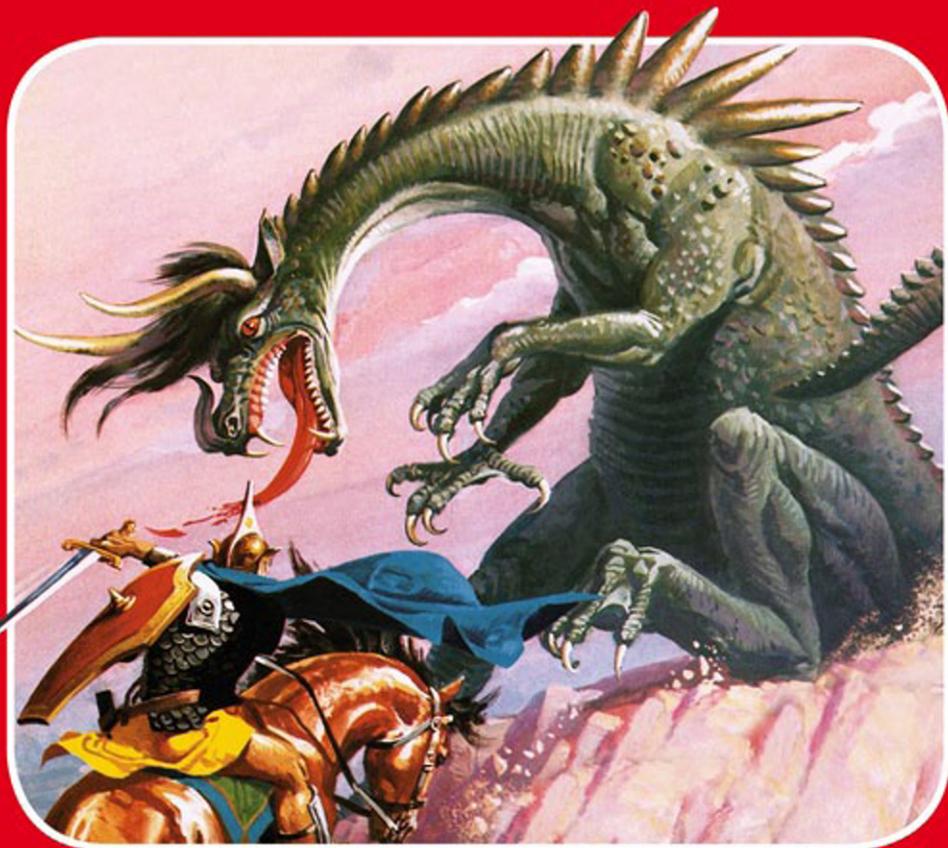
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Dungeons & Dragons

AND PHILOSOPHY

READ AND GAIN ADVANTAGE ON ALL WISDOM CHECKS



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DUNGEONS & DRAGONS AND PHILOSOPHY

**READ AND GAIN
ADVANTAGE ON ALL
WISDOM CHECKS**

**Edited by
Christopher Robichaud**

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2014
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Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-118-39762-6

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Illustration by Severino Baraldi (b.1930). Private Collection /
© Look and Learn / The Bridgeman Art Library.

Set in 11/14pt Sabon by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

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Abbreviations Used in the Text

<i>D&D</i>	<i>Dungeons & Dragons</i>
DM	Dungeon Master
LARP	live action role-playing
MMORPG	massively multiplayer online role-playing game
NPC	non-player-character
PC	player-character
RPG	role-playing game

Introduction

A Game Like No Other

Forty years. No, I'm not talking about the maximum number of years a ghost can age your PC on a hit. (Half-orcs be warned! Those blows will cost you dearly.) I'm talking about the game. The one that started it all and that promised to be something completely different from anything we'd ever seen before.

This game lets all your fantasies come true. This is a world where monsters, dragons, good and evil high priests, fierce demons and even the gods themselves may enter your character's life. Enjoy, for this game is what dreams are made of!¹

It's been forty years since Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson gave us the first tabletop role-playing game, *Dungeons & Dragons*. Making its way through the wargaming crowd that Gygax and Arneson navigated, *D&D* quickly grew in popularity. What started as a few white books – if you could even call them that – gave way to the numerous hardbound manuals of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, a series of boxed sets, miniatures, toys, video games, novels, comic books, and a Saturday morning cartoon. Heck, even Steven Spielberg gave *D&D* an oblique shout-out in *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*. The first edition was followed by the second, the third, the fourth, and now we are about to embrace the fifth.

Dungeons & Dragons and Philosophy: Read and Gain Advantage on All Wisdom Checks, First Edition. Edited by Christopher Robichaud.
© 2014 John Wiley & Sons, Inc. Published 2014 by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Just about everyone I know who's played the game has a story about what got them into it. I owe it all to my uncle, who, one very snowy Christmas Eve, gave me the Red Box and, without exaggeration, changed my life forever. I've been playing *D&D* now for three decades, and I'll stop only when they pry that D20 from my cold, dead hand.

During the 1980s, some people were prepared to do just that. A vocal minority during this time thought that playing *Dungeons & Dragons* would allow you to summon Satan, or gain supernatural powers, or summon Satan while gaining supernatural powers. Just check out Jack Chick's *Dark Dungeons* to get a sense of how that line of "reasoning" went. In retrospect, it's hysterical. But we can't ignore the fact that *D&D* almost suffered a critical hit due to malicious propaganda. And for decades after, the game remained stigmatized.

We're (mostly) past that now, thank goodness, with *D&D* having reached a new level of cultural, dare I say, coolness. Oh, let's not kid ourselves. We're still a bunch of fantasy freaks and gaming geeks, to nod and wink at Ethan Gilsdorf's wonderful book. But the game itself has donned new, shiny armor. With hit television shows like *Community* featuring it and theatrical productions like *She Kills Monsters* celebrating it, *D&D* has defied the odds and crawled out of the Tomb of Horrors triumphant. No small feat!

On the occasion of *D&D*'s fortieth birthday, then, and in light of its heightened cultural position, we have put together this book as a tribute to the rich depths of thinking that playing *D&D* lends itself to. And we're talking *D1-2: Descent Into the Depths of the Earth* kind of depths. All the contributors to this volume love philosophy and love *Dungeons & Dragons* and have brought those passions together to bear considerable fruit, much better than the spell *create food and water* would accomplish.

One final note. I have intentionally kept this volume ecumenical in its attitude to the various editions of the game and its attitude to the various philosophical traditions examining those editions. In short: all are welcome. Just like the best

of adventuring parties, we may squabble and pout and poke fun at each other, but at the end of the long day, we're in it together. There's a whole wide world filled with dungeons to explore and dragons to slay out there. So let's get to it. We begin, as, of course, we must, in a tavern ...

Note

1. Gary Gygax, *Player's Handbook* (1978).

Part I

LAWFUL GOOD VS. CHAOTIC EVIL

Sympathy for the Devils

Free Will and *Dungeons & Dragons*

Greg Littmann

The fundamental conflict underlying the worlds of *Dungeons & Dragons* is that between good and evil. On one side are gods of good like Pelor and Bahamut, supported by their clerics and paladins and decent adventurers everywhere. On the other side are the cruel gods of evil, like the cadaverous Vecna and spidery Lolth, along with legions of demons and devils, grinning undead, and ugly, rampaging humanoids. Good-aligned adventurers know that demons and devils alike must be made to leave the prime material plane immediately and that the philosophical differences between the evil-aligned drow and the chaotic evil-aligned orcs are less significant in the great scheme of things than the shared evil nature that makes them both so dangerous.

Life is hard when you are born to be bad in *D&D*. The evil-aligned species of the monster manuals generally live in misery. Evil humanoids like orcs and goblins spend their lives being bullied by their peers, before eventually charging to a bloody death in melee. Intelligent undead are often left for centuries just staring into space, while evil people not lucky enough to become undead end up in the Abyss or the Nine Hells, where conditions are, to be blunt, hellish, as souls are tormented by chain devils or ripped apart by shrieking vrock. Even being promoted through

the ranks of devils brings no respite – your immediate superiors are always evil bastards, the more so the higher you go. If you think *your* boss is bad, try working for Asmodeus!

Not even the *good* guys show the bad guys any sympathy. A party of good characters will chop and char a tribe of orcs to so much smoking hamburger without the slightest hesitation or regret. Not even the cleric says a few words over the corpses – she’s too busy looting them for small change. Likewise, good characters will carve their way through packs of rotting undead and gangs of howling demons and devils without giving a thought to how awful being carved up feels to the monsters, or where the poor blighters end up now and how much worse their next assignment might be.

Why is there so little sympathy for the forces of evil? Presumably, it is precisely *because* they are evil. It is considered justice for bad things to happen to evil people (using the word “people” in its broadest sense, so as to include the various non-human intelligent individuals found in the worlds of *D&D*). Appeals to reciprocity might be made: the orcs we slaughter wouldn’t hesitate to slaughter *us* if they ever got the upper hand. The undead hate us just for being alive, while the things the devils would do to us if they had their way would make death in battle look like a merciful release.

How you treat your imaginary enemies doesn’t matter in itself. If it pleases you to imagine taking Asmodeus’ ruby rod and ramming it up his nose, then you go ahead and imagine that all you like, for all the harm you are going to do anybody. But considering the justification of the moral attitudes of *D&D* characters is philosophically useful because attitudes shown towards combating evil in *D&D* mirror the attitudes that many people take towards combating evil in the *real* world. Whether your make-believe wizard is fulfilling his moral duty to a pretend vampire doesn’t matter in itself, but how we treat people we label as “evil” in *this* world does.

Philosophers test moral theories by subjecting them to “thought experiments,” hypothetical situations set up and considered in an attempt to decide whether particular moral theories give the

right answers in all possible circumstances. *D&D* games are nothing *but* thought experiments, hypothetical situations in which hypothetical people do hypothetical things. Of the various story-telling art forms that can serve as a source for thought experiments, *D&D* is *particularly* suitable because the *D&D* player is an active participant in the story, forced to make decisions based on the situations described by the Dungeon Master.

Pity the Pit Fiend

Why *should* we feel sympathy for the evil-aligned monsters of *D&D*? One factor that might move us is that so many of them seem to be evil by *nature*. That is, they are evil given the very type of being they are. While a corrupt human or malicious halfling might have taken a wrong turn in life, other humanoids like orcs, goblins and trolls, along with non-humanoids like red dragons, ropers, or grell are born to their alignment; a red dragon is an *evil* creature – it says so right in the *Monster Manual*. Of course, the *Monster Manual* also states, “A monster’s alignment is not rigid, and exceptions can exist to the general rule,”¹ so beings labeled as “evil” in the manuals don’t *necessarily have* to be evil. Your PC *could* meet a red dragon looking to defect to the side of good, or a grell philosopher so tormented by the moral implications of her thought experiments that she can no longer eat people and is wasting away from hunger. But if the probability of a creature being anything other than evil is so slight that it is dealt with by a general disclaimer regarding monster alignment in the front of the *Monster Manual*, then there seems to be something unfair about holding it to blame for *being* an evil creature.

If the overwhelming majority of the members of a species behave a certain way, then either it is an astounding fluke, or something about being a member of that species *explains* that tendency; which is to say that something about being a creature of that type in that environment generally *causes* the associated behavior. Ropers spend their lives killing innocent adventurers

to devour their flesh. Either it is an incredible coincidence that ropers are generally found murdering people for a living instead of tilling the soil or running an adventurer's supply shop, or there is something about *being* a roper that explains their murdering behavior; which is to say that something about being a roper *causes* ropers to kill.

Once we can see the external causes of a behavior, we tend to be less willing to blame someone for exhibiting that behavior. It is hard to blame the poor roper for its record of murder and stalactite fraud if it was being born as a roper that caused young Rocky to turn to a life of crime. After all, the roper didn't *choose* to be a roper rather than a half-elf or a dryad; that it was a roper was entirely beyond its control. Likewise, when a glabrezu demon is spawned from the elemental chaos, waving its crab claws and swearing blasphemous and chaotic words, there can be no doubt that the poor bat-headed bastard never had a *choice* about being chaotic evil. As much as we might object to all the pincer violence and foul language, we can't reasonably *blame* the demon for being born a demon.

In fact, nobody can rightly be held to blame for the way they act if they could not have acted any differently. If this principle is in doubt, it can be demonstrated by the following thought experiment. Imagine that you are playing a good-aligned cleric in a dungeoneering party. You are in a dark stone corridor, guarding the rear as the team advances into unknown territory. Out ahead, the rogue is scouting in stealth mode, searching for traps and watching for monsters. Suddenly, the dice hit the table the wrong way and the rogue fails a crucial Perception check. The fighter and paladin take another step forward and there is a loud "click" as the corridor begins to tilt downwards, swiftly becoming a stone slide into a lower-level room filled with ferocious, slaving ghouls. The floor is dropping so fast that the rogue is the only one to make the roll to stay standing. Unfortunately for the rogue, the DM announces that you crash right into her, a cannonball in chainmail, as you slide helplessly toward the pit, and now you and the rogue slide *together* toward the bone-strewn nest of the ravenous dead.

Just when it looks like things can't get any worse, the rogue's player gives you the stink-eye and says "As I slide down, I'm going to take my rapier and stick it in the *cleric*. I'm using *crimson edge* to make sure the wound bleeds for the ghouls." And *then* the DM tells you "I'm revoking all of your clerical powers! There's no way that pushing the rogue into a pit filled with ghouls isn't a major violation of your good alignment. Don't think that Pelor is going to help you *turn* those puppies down there. Pelor thinks you are *ooze*." It seems natural to object "But my cleric couldn't *help* it! Once the trap went off, I fell down and that's when I hit the rogue. You can't blame the cleric – the cleric never had a choice."

Damnation Without a Saving Throw

What makes the evil monsters of *D&D* philosophically interesting is how obvious the connection often is between their evil behavior and factors entirely outside of their control. One second you are raw elemental chaos, the next, a spikey demon who exists to destroy. Like the falling cleric, the predicament of monsters born to be evil illustrates that when we can see the external causes of behavior, we deny that the subject is acting from free will and, if we are being consistent, we withhold moral blame. However, it isn't whether we can clearly *see* the external causes of a behavior that makes the moral difference. The morally important thing is that the behavior *has* external causes – it isn't right to blame someone for something they couldn't help doing. What makes this philosophically interesting is that it means that *nobody* has free will in the morally relevant sense. There is no such thing as free will! We are, all of us, falling clerics pulled helplessly along by natural laws.

After all, our bodies are physical things and physical things always act in strict accordance with the laws of physics. Any alteration in a physical system requires energy, so unless energy comes streaming into the physical universe from outside, there is no force we can *add* to the physical universe in order to make

an alteration in what it is already set up to do. Your body is a machine made of meat and giblets, and machines do what their physical structures dictate they do – to do otherwise would be to defy natural law. More specifically, your brain is a fleshy computer, and like any other computer, must act in accordance with the way that it is programmed to act. We have learned enough about the universe to be able to recognize that we are, all of us, golems, slaves to the orders that bind us.

To say that an action is “determined” is to say that the action must occur, given previous events and the laws of nature. Since ancient times, philosophers have worried that if the universe is entirely deterministic – that is, if every event in the universe is causally determined – then free will is impossible. The Roman philosopher Lucretius (99–55 BCE) wrote in his *On the Nature of the Universe*, “If all motion is always one long chain, and new motion arises out of the old in order invariable ... whence comes this free will?”² The French philosopher Baron d’Holbach (1723–89) – whose name would be good for an evil warlord – accepted determinism and thus denied free will. He wrote in *The System of Nature*: “All the steps taken by man to regulate his existence, ought only to be considered as a long succession of causes and effects, which are nothing more than the development of the first impulse given him by nature.”³ So, for instance, if you decide to play *D&D* one day instead of going to work, it would have defied the laws of nature for you to decide any other way, given the mechanical structure of your body. You are no more choosing freely when you decide to hack lizardfolk with your friends today than the cleric is choosing freely when he falls in accordance with the law of gravity.

Free Will in the Lair of the Succubus

Many philosophers have denied that there is any incompatibility between having free will and our actions being determined. Appropriately known as “compatibilists,” these philosophers generally believe that your actions are *free* if your own preferences play an

appropriate role as links in the causal chain that results in your actions. As the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) put it in his *Leviathan*, “Lastly, from the use of the word *free-will*, no liberty can be inferred to the will, desire, or inclination, but the liberty of the man; which consisteth in this, that he finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire, or inclination to do.”⁴ Thus, your decision to play *D&D* instead of going to work would be free if your *desire* to play *D&D* played a decisive role in the outcome that you *did* play *D&D* – if, for instance, your mad craving to try out a minotaur barbarian was so great that it overcame your fear of poverty and drove you to the gaming table. Even if your decision was already set at the Big Bang, as long as your actions are *in accordance* with your desires, then you are free on this model.

Unfortunately, the compatibilist model of freedom still fails in cases where the causal chain is particularly obvious. For instance, let’s say that you are playing a good-aligned fighter, and you are down the old dungeon one day when the party comes across a room containing what appears to be a helpless prisoner chained to the wall. You release her, because that is what good adventurers do, and she turns out to be a succubus, because that is what helpless prisoners in the dungeon are. Correctly guessing that you have the lowest wisdom in the party, the succubus throws her *dominate* at you, and takes control of your actions, at which point the DM announces that you turn your back on the devil and use your axe to chop at the party warlock. Once the fight is over and the succubus banished back to Dis to fill out forms, your team-mates turn on you, taking the 50 feet of hempen rope from your adventurer’s kit and tying a noose in it to hang you with. “You don’t *ever* turn against the party!” growls the ranger.

Something seems unfair about the party blaming your fighter in this way. But why? Turning on an innocent person and chopping at them with an axe is an archetypical example of what we would normally call immoral behavior. Note, furthermore, that the fighter was acting entirely in accordance with his desires. Ever since the succubus put the whammy on him, he *wanted* to protect her. When he took a swing at the warlock, it

was because he *wanted* to chop him up. People who willingly do such things to other people are reviled as the worst of the worst. Sometimes they say “The devil made me do it,” but this defense rarely gains them any sympathy. Yet in the case we are looking at, the devil really *did* make the fighter do it. She charmed him with her black magic and the DM took control of the character, announcing the attack against the warlock. Because the fighter couldn’t help what he did, because no other course of action was open to him, it is unfair to hold him responsible for trying to trim the warlock with an axe.

How Thorin Axebeard Randomly Defended the Bridge

So we cannot be free if our actions are entirely determined. That might make it seem that the possibility of freedom hangs on whether determinism is true or not. If that were so, it would be good news for fans of free will, since it turns out that determinism is *not* true – our universe is not entirely deterministic. According to most popular interpretations of quantum mechanics, sometimes things happen *randomly* at the subatomic level. That is, they do not happen for any previous reason, but instead happen for no reason at all. They are *undetermined*. For example, the rate at which a radium atom will undergo radioactive decay is undetermined. While every element has an average decay rate, an individual atom will decay at random. In principle, undetermined events at the quantum level could influence human behavior. They could direct you to step right or left, or to play a ranger or a warlord, or to make a moral decision one way or the other – to tell the other players about the rune-encircled ring your shaman just found, or to have the character just slip it onto her finger and not mention it. Might this subatomic randomness be freedom? This has been the hope of some philosophers almost from the time Werner Heisenberg (1901–76) published his uncertainty principle in 1927, introducing randomness to quantum theory.

Alas, randomness may rescue us from strict determinism, but acting randomly brings us no more *freedom* than we would have if events were entirely determined. To illustrate, consider the following thought experiment. Your DM introduces some new house rules she's made up, in the form of pages of detailed percentile tables describing the reactions of PCs to the events around them. When your party meets a mysterious black-clad elf on the roadway, you don't trust him and want to steer clear, but the DM rolls a couple of D10s and tells you that the party have graciously asked the sinister elf to tag along. Later, your dwarven fighter is standing at one end of a subterranean stone bridge, having just held off a goblin onslaught to protect the team behind. The corpses of goblin warriors lie piled around his feet, but not one of them made it through. Now a deep horn sounds and the rock trembles as the enemy herd a dark wave of towering ogres to the other side of the bridge to make the next assault. The foe is too strong! You want your dwarf to shout "Retreat!" and make good use of unencumbered speed running back to the surface as fast as he can. But the DM rolls her D10s again and tells you that no, the dwarf is going to charge straight down the bridge at the ogres, dropping his shield and yelling "Death for Moradin!" All night, every single action your character takes is decided entirely by the roll on the DM's tables.

Eventually you object, "You don't need me here. I make no difference at all to what my character does or says or thinks. Thorin Axebeard is nothing but a puppet controlled by your Dwarven Culture and Psychology tables, dancing along to the dice. You aren't giving *me* the freedom to decide what my character does."

"But I am giving you *complete* freedom!" retorts the DM indignantly, holding up the two D10s. "The rolls are effectively random. You can't *get* anything freer than a random result – that's all the freedom there is in the universe. We can either roll dice on my tables or quantum particles in your head to decide what Thorin does, and the role-playing is better when we use my tables." Clearly, though, the DM is *not* giving you the freedom to decide what your character does. When the DM makes your