1. Is the presence of evil essential to the well-being of the world? It is sometimes supposed that combat with evil is necessary to move us to the good, or even that our good lies in the combat itself. I shall argue in this paper that the first supposition is a half truth, and the second a fallacy. Our best endeavours have nothing to do with evil: as in solving a geometrical problem, or painting a picture, or climbing a mountain, or running a race, or performing a generous act without necessity.

We are by nature drawn towards the good. If there were no evil, the world would still be the scene of progress, of an intense life of aspiration and emulation, of spontaneous and noble struggle (the agon), a struggle essentially within oneself at the growing point of the moral consciousness. Indeed such would be a more untrammelled life of endeavour than at present. For while it is true that the sharpness of evil oft awakens us out of lethargy and releases springs of endeavour (and this is the half-truth contained in the belief that evil is required for our well-being); yet the creative energy comes from the good, not the evil, and the work would have been more creditable and perchance more balanced had it arisen spontaneously and not needed this prompting. So, the ruler who does nothing to encourage agriculture until he has a famine on his hands will not rank high in the annals of statesmanship.

'Had Adam remained in Paradise, there had been no Anatomy and no Metaphysics'. So Carlyle in his Characteristics, in the belief that without the urge to rectify deviance of body or mind there would have been no impulsion to the sciences. But this is to overlook the agon. A better reason for the sciences is disinterested wonder, with correction of deviance as an unintended bonus. Joy in contemplating and exploring God's works would have
prevailed in Paradise, with the sciences as a consequence. The case is analogous to the evolution of doctrine from the study of Scripture. Not all deepening of understanding waits on heresy to stimulate it, but comes rather from dwelling on the Word. Where there is love of God there is no need for the sting of necessity.

Further: If evil sometimes awakens, it is also the case that combat with evil may distract and deaden our sensibilities to the point where the enforced combat (eris) takes most of our energies, leaving little for disinterested mastery. Think of the school teacher, perhaps himself in love with English literature and initially eager to awaken that love in his pupils, but reduced to a dim routine by the necessity to do endless battle for order in the classroom.

And there is more. Preoccupation with eris may so hem in our horizon as to induce the complacent idea that when we have finished suppressing the evils there is nothing more that needs doing. So, the fate of many a statesman and warrior in later life: having slain all the dragons, life is left empty; the dreamt-of paradise turns out to be a desert. And not only in high places. We are all prone to become eris-bound unawares. Thus, the devoted nursing sister in the leper hospital whose life was rendered void when a cure was found for leprosy. A self-gratification as the motive of her work, which she herself had not perceived? A thralldom to eris? The two diagnoses are the same. An horizon limited to eris is a world where love and worship have been allowed to atrophy. With the cessation of eris there is left not an invigorated self but a diminished and fretful self.

The foregoing are cases which are rightly orientated, but where powers have languished (comparable to Aristotle’s weak-willed man). Much worse is the morbid condition where a species of inversion occurs (comparable to Aristotle’s vicious man). Here combat becomes the only satisfaction; combat is manufactured and sought for its own sake. It is an insatiable condition of inflammation, pleonexia. Such is the degenerate state of some sects of religious enthusiasts or activist political groups. Rationality has fled. They have no positive substance, but live and hold together on shared antagonism.

It should now be clear that the last supposition from which we commenced, that our good lies in eristic combat, is a singularly dangerous fallacy.

The horizon of the ‘politician’ is confined to contrivance and eris. We call a man of affairs a ‘statesman’ if we deem that he is touched by the agon. The sophist doctrine in Republic ii sees life as entirely a contest of eris. The Socratic rejoinder points to agon, with eris as a degenerate state when the vision fades. Thralldom to eris corresponds to servile fear; whereas
the joy of the agon is the fruit of filial fear.  

To resume: While allowing that combat may sometimes stir latent powers for good, it remains that for the most part the presence of evil in the world, and the necessity for constant combat with it, holds human life down to a low level, alleviated by what in world-weary moments we are inclined to regard as fitful gleams of something better. Thus the aged Plato on the human lot: ‘Puppets in the main, though with some touch of reality about them too’. (Laws vii, 804). Yet this resigned voice is not the last word, for there is hope of redemption from captivity to eris, of entry into the life-giving agon, as the Athenian Stranger concedes when challenged: ‘However, if you will have it so, man shall be something not so insignificant but more serious’.

Before pursuing this intimation of release let us look closer at the terms of our bondage as these were discerned by Plato and Aristotle.

2. The question of strife is of long-standing. Herakleitos seems to have thought strife essential: ‘Homer was wrong in saying “Would that strife might perish from among gods and men!”’. He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe’. (Fragment 43, Burnet).

Herakleitos’ dictum would seem to be true for the sub-rational order. There all is eris, necessity, alternation of contraries, cycles of time. But the dictum is not true for specifically human life. Humans, as rational beings, break through into an order which is not bound by eris and necessity. Witness the words of Aristotle in the Politics (VII, 13):

It has been argued in the Ethics that felicity is “the energy and practice of goodness, to a degree of perfection, and in a mode which is absolute and not relative [conditional]”. By “relative [conditional]” we mean a mode of action which is necessary and enforced; by “absolute” we mean a mode of action which possesses intrinsic value.

Consider, for example, the case of just actions. To inflict a just penalty or punishment is indeed an act of goodness; but it is also an act which is forced on the agent, and it has value only as being a necessity. (It would be better if neither individuals nor states ever needed recourse to any such action.) Acts done with a view to bestowing honours and wealth on others are in a different category: they are acts of the highest value. (Barker’s translation).

2. Anthony Trollope in his political novels makes a sound point, one oft observed and as oft forgotten, when he remarks the need for spirited combat in the House. A House with no effective opposition sinks into legislative lassitude and ineptitude if not into corruption. That Trollope is envisaging agon, not eris, is borne out by his qualification that spirited political enemies may be good friends outside the House, and even colleagues at a later date — for such is the way of agon: it arises from mutual respect.
We are all aware of this in a diffuse way. Hence the odium of making a virtue out of a necessity; or the disappointment at discovering that a hand offered in friendship was not disinterested. Or again, in the secret of command: always the fresh, the unpredictable, the right in retrospect. Whereas the routine, the foregone conclusion, the necessitated, destroy leadership.

When Aristotle in the prologue to the *Metaphysics* distinguishes between the servile and the liberal arts he is invoking the same principle: that the noble is the unnecessitated. Likewise in the *Politics* when he warns against things illiberal or banausic:

A good deal depends on the purpose for which acts are done or subjects are studied. Anything done to satisfy a personal need, or to help a friend, or to attain goodness, will not be illiberal; but the very same act, when done repeatedly at the instance of other persons, may be counted menial and servile. (VII, 2)

We notice, for future reference, that in the Stagirite's judgement there is nothing in the world’s work which is incapable of redemption. It is not the act, but the spirit in which it is done, which is fallen.

The servile encompasses the mechanical routine into which we fall when we think that the whole duty of man is fulfilled by conquering the things necessary, when we place an unimaginative ceiling on our endeavours. (Here lies the dreariness of the doctrine of utility: it is but organised banausia posing as a virtue). The liberal arts are those in which the agent is touched by wonder, which has no ceiling. It is when disinterested wonder is aroused that we enter the agon, the realm of things not necessitated, the polar opposite of eris. Thus a given calling, whether it be law or letters or farming, will be liberal in some hands and servile in others.

Since human character is susceptible to growth or diminution there is no unbridgable gulf between the servile and the liberal. Many things start in some necessitated or utilitarian way, then the intrinsic interest of the subject emerges, wonder takes possession, and the man becomes devoted to the pursuit for its own sake. The servile is transformed into the liberal, eris gives way to agon. So, for example, it seems to have been in the history of Greek astronomy. What began in utility, to achieve a workable Calendar, gradually became a discovery of great truths meet for disinterested contemplation. Likewise the case of men who take up some employment by accident, or under economic stress, or enter the army under compulsion, and unexpectedly find their vocation.

But if there is this way up through challenge and response, there is also the way down: some pursuit is entered into liberally, but the vision fades, and the work gradually sinks into dim routine and petty contrivance. And
as for the way up, it is not every man who accomplishes it; for it requires some prior disposition to the agon, a disposition of heredity or nurture, a touch of nobility; so that the man can feel the challenge as a challenge, not as something to be meanly circumvented or as an occasion for disappointment. The testimony of the servile confirms our initial diagnosis of eris: the balance sheet is not on the credit side.

Again, consider Aristotle on temperance. He distinguishes the truly temperate man from the self-restrained man (e.g. Nic.Eth. I, 13, 1102b 12sq.). The self-restrained or self-governing man does the right through his rational self being victorious in the struggle over his unruly self; his life is not glorious; it is meritorious, but precariously so, since he is not emancipated from eris. The truly temperate man is a higher development of character; for he does the right unselfconsciously with ease and grace in the perfect harmony of his self; he is the dependable man. As Gauthier and Jolif observe in their Commentary (II, I p.250) self-restraint or continence is only a demi-virtue: The continent man rules his actions by reining-in his passions. But the very passions of the temperate man are ordinate to right action and assist right action; within him there is no cauldron of eris. The temperate man acts aright 'naturally'. His is a 'habit', a hexis.

Similarly in any field. The novice, the unformed man, must constantly restrain his impulses and vagaries by following rules. The accomplished man incorporates the rules into himself and moves unnecessitated and with effortless mastery. (Cf. Aristotle’s question in the Politics whether it is better for a man to rule or for the law to rule, and the conclusion that in the ideal the two are the same: the accomplished magistrate is a living law).

There are many other themes in the Stagirite’s writings which bear like witness; notably his arguments for the supremacy of peace over war, and for the primacy of the internal life. But enough has been said to make clear the nature of the nether world, whether it be described under the aspect of combat, of servility, or of necessity.

3. When we turn to Plato, we find that he is of similar judgement to Aristotle as regards the nobility of the unnecessitated and the dishonour of eris. So, the force of the passage in Laws vii, 803:

It is the current fancy that our serious work should be done for the sake of our play; thus it is held that war is serious work which ought to be well discharged for the sake of peace. But the truth is that in war we do not find, and we never shall find, either any real play or any real education worth the name; and these are the things I count supremely serious for such creatures as ourselves. Hence it is peace in which each of us should spend most of his life and spend it best. (Taylor)

At first sight this is a puzzling passage, and seems to contradict what Plato
has maintained elsewhere: that the purpose of rightful war is peace. Thus *Laws* i, 628: ‘He will never be a true statesman, nor will any man be a finished legislator, unless he legislates for war as a means to peace, rather than for peace as a means to war’. But on reflection it appears that the passage from the 7th. Book is really an extension of the thesis in the 1st. Book.

While believing that war is properly a means to peace, we may become so serious about this means as to fall into thinking that all virtue is in war; and so be left with sketchy notions concerning peace, treating peace as frivolous play. Such is a not uncommon predicament, not only in the field, where some are all adrift as to what constitutes victory, but on wider horizons. Thus the revolutionary party in politics who when they have wrested power find themselves unable to rule; they are devoid of workable ideas and executive ability, and so fail miserably; they had attuned themselves only to strife and could not rise to the even more exacting demands of ordered government. Likewise the man who decides that the felicities of life can be postponed while he builds his fortune; when leisure comes he finds himself at a loss. Or again the politician whose character is so terribly scarred by the long climb into office that he makes but a sorry statesman (A good argument for hereditary rulers!).

By war, *polemos*, in the *Laws* vii passage, we should understand Plato to be speaking in metonomy of eris in general; and by ‘real play and real education’ to refer to the agon. If we commence with eris, the element of necessity endangers (precludes, Plato would say) our cultivation of the higher reaches of goodness, and encourages the false notion, already referred to, that the virtues deployed in eris are the height of human attainment. A latter-day literary example of what Plato has in mind would be Macaulay: that teeming, overflowing, brilliant mind; but to breathe the air of faction was necessary to enliven his genius; on the occasions when he endeavours to rise into the agon, how insubstantial the outcome!

In *Republic* x, 611 Plato takes a simile: the statue of the sea-god Glaukos. Pulled up from the sea, the limbs broken, encrusted with seaweeds, it is hard to discern its original form. So it is that we now commonly see the soul, deformed by countless evils. We can apprehend the soul’s true nature only by turning our attention to the soul’s love of wisdom and after what company she strives. Taylor comments:

In aspiration, as distinct from struggle against evil, there is room, within a society of just men made perfect, for a very real and intense moral life. In fact, in our familiar experience of the moral life, as we now have to live it as a life of warfare, we do not see it in its truest character; we see it, as Socrates says in *Rep.* 611c-d, as we now see the soul, incrusted with all sorts of accretions which disguise its true lineaments; to discern them,
these accretions must be purged away. With the passage from struggle to triumph, morality would no doubt undergo a transfiguration, but it would be a transfiguration and not a transformation, (A. E. Taylor, *Faith of a Moralist* i, 406).

4. And now let us take up the question of emancipation from the eris-bound condition. The works of eris are always with us. They are not to be rejected but redeemed. Or more accurately, men are to be redeemed, so that henceforth they can engage in the tasks of necessity as free men, not as serfs. Plato and Aristotle are in broad agreement on this basic principle.

In Plato’s figure, the Guardians must return to the Cave, which is their proper home. Having first made firm the intellectual and moral virtues in their proper character the Guardians can perform their *synkatabasis* without danger of captivity to the servile. The words of the Athenian Stranger put the matter succinctly:

> There are two different kinds of good things, the merely human and the divine; the former are consequential on the latter; hence a city which accepts the greater goods, acquires the lesser along with them, but one which refuses them, misses both. (*Laws* i, 631)

We need to engage in eris not to attain the good but to defend it. Hence Plato’s prototype of the philosopher is the sagacious watch-dog (*Rep* ii, 375); then the military guardian engaged in the never-ending war between light and dark. Yet in the end the philosopher is above even this war and its necessities; it is peace which he enjoys, something not constructed by him, but given to him in contemplation of the eternal archetype. Thus the indicative mood, not the imperative, has the last word. The right rule is: As you describe so you prescribe. (Hume’s dichotomy of ‘is’ and ‘ought’ is false. For the indicative bears the imperative: As witness the classic reply of the mountaineer when asked why he climbs the mountain: ‘Because it’s there’. Herein is the force of the categorical imperative).

3. The matter has been very clearly put by Canon Demant:

> ‘We find it hard to live in fellowship, and when we look at society we find it cleft by conflicts of will and interests. It is easy then to jump to the conclusion that society itself is an artificial and difficult achievement. The moralist is inclined to conclude that because moral effort is required to combat forces which tend to break up society, therefore society is the creation of moral effort . . .

For religion, however, the good life is given, to be rejected or accepted. It exists objectively in God . . .

The good life, given to man from above, brings about the moral struggle; it is not created by it . . .

Struggle, heroism, disinterestedness, sacrifice, if mistaken for the good life itself, are dangerous, and a subtle form of subjectivism — often of a moralistic atheism — which virtually deifies the imperfections of the soul’. (V. A. Demant, *Theology of Society* pp.15-16).
The utilitarian or contractual reading of life, which Socrates is invited to criticize in the *Republic*, contains a subtle innuendo which, if true, would rivet our bondage to eris beyond all hope of release: viz. that the moral order is a construction of human devising in defiance of nature; that there must be a constant struggle between our natural selves and our moral selves; that eris goes down to the depths of our being and is ineradicable; that the last word is in the imperative.

Socrates replies by ambulation. At the end is not a command but an invitation; an invitation to come out and play, as the Athenian Stranger puts it in the *Laws*.

The belief that eris is fundamental to the human constitution breaks out ever anew. Latter day evolutionary philosophies represent the moral order as at war with our original animal instincts. T. H. Huxley gave classic expression to the theme in his Romanes lecture: the ethical world is an embattled enclave in the cosmos. The reply of Socrates in the *Republic* of ‘come and see’ remains the proper reproach to eris-bound philosophies; likewise the words of the Athenian Stranger: morality is not a repressive artifice of secondary elaboration, morality and nature are properly at one, the cosmos is on our side. (*Laws* x, 888 sq.)

5. Penultimately, let us return to the Stagirite. His words on the necessitated and the generous, on the servile and the liberal arts, on continence and temperance, on war and peace, are restrained but very telling. Whereas Plato could not take up the subject except in words of high drama. We cannot imagine Aristotle making a scathing attack on Periclean Athens, as Plato saw fit to do, on the grounds that its glories were but the glories of eris. It would not be in character for Aristotle to declare, in Actonian phrase, that all great men are bad men. Plato’s fervour will repel by its hyperboles as much as arrest by its earnestness.

Aristotle is as well aware of our lapsed condition as is Plato, but judges it in more generous terms. Where Plato looked to perfect preparation, whether by guardians or by laws, before taking up the dangerous burden of eris, Aristotle looked rather to cultivating the element of agon which, except

4. Lord Hailsham is doubtless right in asserting that ‘in political life it is every bit as important to combat evil as to create good’; on the understanding that the good life has deeper roots than politics and will emerge naturally if conditions allow. (*The Case for Conservatism* p.12). Aristotle (but not Plato?) would have said the same; for the springs of the good life are primarily in the lesser associations which it is the duty of the statesman to protect and nurture; and he sees fit to devote two Books of the *Ethics* to philia, that sense of fraternity without which the statesman governs in vain. On the other hand it remains that combatting evil may become a preoccupation such as to destroy the good end, as is said to have been the case under the Spartan constitution. The eternal vigilance which is the price of liberty extends to vigilance over our own tendency to be captured unawares by eris while in a good cause.
in the worst of times, emerges, albeit fitfully, from the scenes of eris. Aristotle is the founder of that line of benign worldliness (in Gilby’s phrase) which runs through St. Thomas Aquinas; Plato of the all-or-nothing school which reaches its climax in St. Augustine.

Yet fundamentally both men are in agreement about the facts. They both believe that conversion is essential. Where they diverge markedly is on the mode of conversion. In Plato’s eyes conversion is a sudden event; in Aristotle’s it is a gradual process of growing into a nobler order. The question is still being agitated in our day.

6. Let us draw two corollaries.

The first is in regard to law. In the agon we are God’s servants. Under divine law, we engage in that law – abiding play on which Plato places such great store. Obedience to the divine law, being consonant with our nature, elicits and actualises that nature. True law is essentially constructive and liberating. Its threats are an appendix made necessary by weakness and vice.

Otherwise is it in the city of unredeemed eris. There it is supposed that our nature is our senses and passions. The regulations with threats which we cannot but devise and submit to if we are to live together, go against this nature. Law now is not a fountain of life, but essentially repressive and penal. Such was the doctrine of the sophists of old, revived by the utilitarians of recent times; that our only recourse is to experimental rules for social control; that, in the old phrase, laws are entirely man-made conventions.

In agonistic jurisprudence we uphold the right primarily, with social benefits as a bonus. In eristic law-making we reach directly for the social benefits. Plato is contemptuous of this latter practice, branding it as both futile and a symptom of moral bankruptcy. Hence we are not astonished at his dismissal, in the Republic, of all legislation made under the eris-bound philosophy of life. Having voiced his protest in the Republic, he proceeds in the Laws to establish right order in jurisprudence, and then to restore legislation with appended penalty.

We note too that Plato’s insistence on the proper mastery of eris, not succumbing to it, is in accord with the Scriptural imago dei, whereby we are given dominion over the lower orders of creation, not put in subjection to necessity.

The second corollary: Human affairs for the most part are prone to sink into eris. There are exceptions: Pure mathematics is a field exempt from this fall. (Is this one reason why Plato revered Geometry?). Another exemplary case is disinterested scientific research: for three centuries its unwavering fidelity to its tradition has rendered scientific research a moral inspiration to the world. Yet another is the army: a well-disciplined army in a just cause, while not proof against a fall, is of all human institutions one of the most
difficult to subvert; the profession of arms, fortified by tradition, stands like a rock when all about is falling into dissoluteness.

Such are the shining beacons of agon. But when we look elsewhere there is ample of confirmation of Plato’s dark view of human affairs. Public measures which rapidly degenerate into faction and eris: such is distressing, yet can be borne with resignation as human weakness. Much graver is ‘the treason of the clerks’. Those who should be our guardians throw up their briefs and sink to the shame of determining the just by the popular, the emotional, the useful, the opportune, instead of by phronesis, which respects the God-given realities of things. This is not by ordinary frailty. By design, culpably, the clerks become ‘the spiritual militia of the material’ in Benda’s phrase. This is the perversion which excites Plato to his bitterest words: the watch-dog has taken to ravaging the flock; the clerk has become a kolax, a word of which the mildest English translation is ‘flatterer’.