

**PART ONE**

**“YOU WIN OR YOU DIE”**

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## **MAESTER HOBBS GOES TO KING'S LANDING**

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Who should rule in the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros? It's the fundamental question underlying *Game of Thrones* and the entire Song of Ice and Fire saga. Lannister armies, bristling with pikes, march north from Casterly Rock in support of young King Joffrey. The royal House Baratheon divides against itself, as the brothers Stannis and Renly each lay claim to the Iron Throne. In Winterfell Robb Stark is declared king in the North, subject to none, and in the Iron Islands, the grim fleets of the Greyjoys sail out to take the North for themselves. Meanwhile, in the distant eastern lands of the Dothraki, Daenerys Targaryen, last survivor of a dynasty that has ruled the Seven Kingdoms for three hundred years, raises a horde of fearless mounted nomads to reconquer her homeland and restore the Targaryen dragon to the throne.

Considering the issue of who should sit on the Iron Throne is not just an excuse for a self-indulgent wallow in the world of A Song of Ice and Fire. The question has real philosophical importance because we, like the warring peoples of Westeros,

must decide who is to rule us. Philosophers have been theorizing about politics for at least two and a half thousand years, and one way to test their theories is to consider how well they work in hypothetical fictional situations, called “thought experiments.” All that it takes to turn any fictional state of affairs, like the world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, into a thought experiment is to ask what the implications of our theories would be if this state of affairs were real.

One such theory comes from the English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and his masterpiece, *Leviathan*. What would Hobbes think of the political situation in Westeros? How would he advise the nobility of the great houses? What makes the perspective of Thomas Hobbes particularly fascinating is that he lived through the game of thrones *for real*. Hobbes, a professional tutor by trade, was a loyal supporter of the great House Stuart. The Stuarts not only reigned over England (once seven kingdoms itself!), but were kings of Scotland and Ireland as well. Like the Targaryens, the Stuarts were overthrown by their subjects in a terrible civil war. King Charles I of House Stuart, like Mad King Aerys II of House Targaryen, was put to death in the revolt, but Prince Charles, his son, like Viserys and Daenerys Targaryen, escaped into exile to plot a return to power. We readers are yet to learn whether Daenerys will finally sit upon the Iron Throne, but Hobbes’s student Charles Stuart returned to England to become Charles II. Hobbes was an avid reader of history, an experienced traveler, and a careful observer of his times. As he watched Britain’s bloody game of thrones unfold, he came to some very definite conclusions about the nature of human beings and how they should be governed.

### **You Are Selfish and Dangerous**

“Grand Maester Aethelmure wrote that all men carry murder in their hearts.”

—Grand Maester Pycelle<sup>1</sup>

Hobbes believed that people act only out of personal self-interest, claiming that “no man giveth, but with intention of good to himself.”<sup>2</sup> People often *pretend* to have loftier goals, of course; passionate oaths of loyalty to the crown were as common in Stuart England as they are in King’s Landing. Beneath the facade, however, we are motivated by selfishness—we are all Lord Littlefinger under the skin. Because we are fundamentally selfish, our behavior is bound only by what we can get away with. Where people are not forced to obey rules, there is nothing but violent anarchy, a “war of every man against every man.”<sup>3</sup>

According to Hobbes, conflict arises for three reasons: People fight to gain their neighbor’s possessions, like the barbarous clans who prey on travelers through the Mountains of the Moon. People fight to defend themselves from danger, even if it means striking preemptively against potential threats, as when Robert Baratheon seeks to assassinate Daenerys Targaryen just in case she ever becomes dangerous. And people fight just for the glory of it, like Khal Drogo, who slaughters his foes as much to satisfy his pride as his greed for treasure.

When everyone can do what they want, life, according to Hobbes, is “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.”<sup>4</sup> Nobody is safe in such chaos. Even mighty champions like the Mountain That Rides, Ser Gregor Clegane, must sleep sometimes, and when they do, even a poor warrior like Samwell Tarly could kill them. Our only recourse is to establish a set of rules that we will agree to live by, mutually giving up freedoms for the sake of mutual benefit. For example, you agree not to stick a battle-axe in my head and in return, I agree not to stick a battle-axe in yours. Being part of such a social contract is in everyone’s self-interest. Of course, since humans are driven only by self-interest, we won’t keep such promises unless it is in our own interest to do so. You may promise to keep your axe to yourself, but as soon as my back is turned, you will break your promise if it is in your best interest to do so, giving me

a swift chop and making off with my lunch. What people need to do, then, is set up an authority to make sure that everyone obeys the rules. Once there is someone watching us to make sure that if you give *me* the axe, *you* get the axe, it will be in your best interest not to strike as soon as my back is turned.

### The Realm Needs a King

When Joffrey turned to look out over the hall, his eye caught Sansa's. He smiled, seated himself, and spoke. "It is a king's duty to punish the disloyal and reward those who are true. Grand Maester Pycelle, I command you to read my decrees."

—*A Game of Thrones*<sup>5</sup>

Given all of this talk about social contracts, Hobbes might sound like a champion of democracy. In fact, he was anything but. So great is the need to contain human selfishness by making sure that there are always negative consequences for breaking the rules, that we must be ruled by an all-powerful dictator to whom we give complete obedience. Hobbes called such an absolute ruler a *Leviathan*, taking the name of the huge fire-breathing sea monster of Hebrew mythology. I assume that George R. R. Martin's use of the dragon to symbolize the (once) all-powerful House Targaryen is a nod to Hobbes's *Leviathan* (although it's also possible that Martin, like the rest of us, just likes dragons). Hobbes understood that being all-powerful includes having the power to appoint your own successor. Holding elections to appoint the next dictator would be as alien to Hobbes's ideal government as it would be to the kings of Westeros. But how does such a totalitarian system jibe with a social contract, according to which the power of the leaders is derived from the will of the people?

Hobbes believed that the social contract he recommends was already made long ago in all civilized, organized nations. The monarchies of Europe existed because Europeans' barbarous

and disorganized ancestors had tired of living in a hellish state of anarchy. They had agreed to submit to authority for the sake of their mutual good, and agreed on behalf of their descendants as well. The social contract having been made, there is no need for further input from the common people, who are born into the social contract and need only obey authority without question. Hobbes recognized that not all states were ruled by a monarch, and in that case, the people have a duty to establish a monarchy to rule them, but once the monarchy is in place, no more input from the common people is desirable.

As an analogy, consider the manner in which Robb Stark is declared the King in the North. He achieves this position of authority because his bannermen call on him to rule them. “[Greatjon Umber] pointed at Robb with the blade. ‘There sits the only king I mean to bow my knee to, m’lords,’ he thundered. ‘The King in the North!’ And he knelt, and laid his sword at . . . [Robb’s] feet.”<sup>6</sup> The other assembled lords follow suit, and the rafters of the great hall in Winterfell ring with their shouts of “The King in the North!” However, once the lesser houses have declared Robb the King in the North, they no longer have the right to *undeclare* him the King in the North. If they withdraw support from him at a later date, they become oathbreakers, devoid of honor. As for trying to tell a Stark ruler whom he may have as his successor, the lords of the north would have a better chance trying to teach a direwolf to dance.

### Hobbes Takes the Maester’s Chain

“So many vows . . . they make you swear and swear.  
Defend the king. Obey the king. Keep his secrets.  
Do his bidding. Your life for his.”

—Jaime Lannister<sup>7</sup>

So what would Hobbes think about the situation in Westeros? How would he advise the nobility? Let’s make Hobbes a court

adviser like Maester Luwin and Grand Maester Pycelle. He can drop by Oldtown first for several years of maester training at the Citadel. Having won enough links for his chain to wind around his neck, Hobbes sets sail for King's Landing in 273, ten years into the reign of the last Targaryen king, Aerys II. He's to be employed as a tutor, instructing noble Targaryen children just as he instructed the young prince Charles Stuart, and we'll let him become a valued member of court with the ear of the king, as he was in Charles's court.

When Maester Hobbes first arrives at the court of Aerys, he would find much to admire. Here is a king who understands the importance of centralizing power! The Leviathan Aerys rules his kingdom with an iron fist and crushes those he considers enemies. The rules in the court of Aerys are whatever Aerys says they are. Even a King's Hand stands only one step from execution—Aerys goes through five of them in twenty years. Serious miscreants are burned alive with wildfire, while Ser Ilyn Payne has his tongue ripped out with hot pincers just for making a tactless jest. At the court of Lady Lysa Arryn, Tyrion Lannister is able to thwart Lysa's will to kill him by insisting on a trial by combat. Lysa gives in to his demand because she is not an absolute dictator and places the authority of tradition over her own authority. Conversely, at the court of Aerys, when Eddard Stark's father Lord Rickard demanded *his* right to trial by combat, Aerys simply chose fire as his champion and had Rickard roasted alive. The Targaryen words are "Fire and Blood." These are kings who rule by force, not by negotiation and consensus.

It must be admitted, Aerys was not merely strict and authoritative, as a Leviathan should be, but was harsh, dangerous, and erratic, particularly toward the end of his reign. His judgments were often more than a little cruel and unfair. When Aerys's son Rhaegar abducts Lyanna Stark, and Brandon Stark rides to King's Landing with a group of young noblemen to protest, Aerys executes the lot of them for treason *and* executes all their



fathers for good measure. They didn't call him "Mad King Aerys" for nothing.

What are Aerys's subjects supposed to do in the face of such tyranny? Should they simply obey the king in order to maintain the implicit social contract? Or should they rebel as Robert Baratheon and Eddard Stark do, in an attempt to replace him with someone better? For Robert and Ned, honor and reason alike demand that they resist Aerys, but Maester Hobbes would continue to counsel obedience to the king. Why should the people of the Seven Kingdoms endure such a ruler? The answer is that the alternative is civil war, and civil war is so much worse.

### The Horrors of War

The northerners broke into a run, shouting as they came, but the Lannister arrows fell on them like hail, hundreds of arrows, thousands, and shouts turned to screams as men stumbled and went down.

—*A Game of Thrones*<sup>8</sup>

Civil wars are easily romanticized. The tales of King Arthur's knights are often glamorized stories of civil war as Arthur's realm crumbles, and Shakespeare's historical plays make England's Wars of the Roses seem a glorious triumph of good over evil. However, England went through a civil war in Hobbes's lifetime, making the grim reality all too clear to him. It had been a century and a half since the Wars of the Roses, in which the lords of York and Lancaster contested for the English crown just as the lords of Stark and Lannister contest for the Iron Throne. At stake in the English Civil War (1642–1651) was not just *who* should rule England, but also *how* it should be ruled. Charles I of the Stuarts, like Aerys Targaryen, believed that the king should hold the reins of power tightly, ruling as an absolute dictator unhampered by the judgments of his

subjects. Indeed, his father, James I of England, had declared that the power of a king should be that of a god on earth! Many of Charles's subjects, on the other hand, believed that there should be limitations on the power of the king and, in particular, that only the elected parliament should be able to levy new taxes. If only Charles had compromised and shared power, he would almost certainly have kept both his throne and his life. Instead, he was determined to crush all resistance and was eventually captured and beheaded.

The English Civil War was a time of terrible slaughter, with brutal clashes like the battles of Edgehill, Naseby, and Preston. Well over one hundred thousand soldiers were killed at a time when the population of Britain was less than six million. That's like the modern United States fighting a war in which it loses five million soldiers—and that doesn't even factor in the wounded! The horrors of this war only confirmed for Hobbes what he had already concluded from historical studies: civil war is so awful that it is never worth fighting. *Any* alternative is better as long as it keeps the peace. Hobbes wrote, "the greatest [harm], that in any form of Government can possibly happen to the people in general, is scarce sensible, in respect of the miseries, and horrible calamities, that accompany a Civil War."<sup>9</sup>

Maester Hobbles would urge the people of the Seven Kingdoms to endure the eccentricities of Aerys the Mad (and to stop *calling* him that); he'd insist that they show some sense of perspective. So a few Starks and other nobles get dispossessed, kidnapped, roasted, strangled, and otherwise treated with a brutality normally reserved for the common people. What is that compared with the suffering in a realm that is at war with itself?

### Robert's Rebellion

They had come together at the ford of the Trident while the battle crashed around them, Robert with his warhammer and his great antlered helm, the Targaryen prince armored all in black. On his

breastplate was the three-headed dragon of his House, wrought all in rubies that flashed like fire in the sunlight.

—*A Game of Thrones*<sup>10</sup>

Robert Baratheon, of course, is not the sort of fellow who would be calmed by Maester Hobbes's appeals to the good of the realm. Hobbes's worst fears come to pass, and the houses Baratheon, Arryn, and Stark rise up against Aerys Targaryen. Thousands die in bloody clashes like the battles of Summerhall, Ashford, and the Trident, while the great city of Kingsport is sacked by the Lannisters and comes within a hair's breadth of being burned to the ground.

After Robert's final triumph at the Trident in 283, in which he slays Rhaegar in single combat and puts the loyalist army to flight, Maester Hobbes has an important choice to make: he could either flee into exile with the surviving Targaryens, like Ser Jorah Mormont, or remain in King's Landing to try to persuade the new king to let him keep his old job, like the spider Varys and Grand Maester Pycelle. Pragmatist that he was, Hobbes's usual response to danger was to flee. When his political writings upset supporters of parliament, he fled to Paris. When his political writings upset other royalists in Paris, he fled back to London again. If there were two things Hobbes was good at, they were annoying people and fleeing. It might be tempting, then, to believe that Hobbes would escape with the last Targaryens into the lands of the Dothraki, there to try to explain social contracts to Khal Drogo. Besides, it seems natural to suppose that if subjects owe their king complete loyalty, they should maintain that loyalty if the king is driven into exile. Indeed, that is *exactly* what Hobbes did in the case of young Charles Stuart.

For all that, I believe that Hobbes would remain in Kingsport and transfer his loyalty to Robert. He would do this not because he is a craven or an oathbreaker, but because the same principles that led him to support the Leviathan Aerys so wholeheartedly

would lead him to desire a replacement. Remember, the entire point of giving our complete loyalty to an all-powerful dictator is that we are driven to seek safety, and only an all-powerful dictator can offer us the best protection. But a so-called king like the exiled Viserys Targaryen can't offer anyone any protection. He's only got one knight, and even *he* won't do as he's told. Hobbes wrote: "The obligation of subjects to the sovereign is understood to last as long as, and no longer, than the power lasteth by which he is able to protect them."<sup>11</sup> The Targaryens' power to protect is gone and so is any reason to support them. Hobbes supported young Charles Stuart because the only alternative was to support a *republican government*. In the person of Robert Baratheon, Hobbes has a perfectly good king to support, and will concentrate on serving his new monarch loyally and tutoring Prince Joffrey to be a great dictator in his own turn.

In Hobbes's view, despite the fact that Robert should never have rebelled in the first place, it is now King Robert who must never be rebelled against. It is just as wrong for Queen Cersei to defy the usurper Robert by plotting to place a Lannister on the throne as it would have been if she'd tried that on Aerys, who was heir to a three-hundred-year dynasty. It goes without saying that her *murder* of the king is even worse! Such an act puts the entire realm in terrible danger. Yet once again, just as in the case of Aerys, once Robert is gone, the important thing is not bringing the perpetrators to justice but making sure that there is someone sitting on the Iron Throne to keep the peace. Hobbes would be as eager to transfer his loyalty from King Robert to King Joffrey as he had been to transfer it from King Aerys to King Robert, even if he knew of Joffrey's true heritage. Targaryen, Baratheon, Lannister—it really doesn't matter very much as long as *nobody breaks the peace*. It isn't even particularly important that Joffrey is so incompetent a ruler that he thinks disputes over real estate should be settled by combat to the death. The harm the little git can inflict is minimal compared to the carnage of a civil war.

The eunuch Varys would agree absolutely. He works desperately to keep King Robert alive, but when Eddard threatens the peace of the realm by preparing to reveal that Joffrey is not Robert's rightful heir, Varys conspires to have him executed. He cannot allow Ned to undermine the power of Joffrey, regardless of his lineage, because to do so would plunge the Seven Kingdoms once more into civil war. When Ned asks Varys to at least smuggle a message to his family, Varys replies that he will read the message and deliver it if it serves his own ends to do so. Ned asks, "What ends are those, Lord Varys?" and without hesitation, Varys answers, "peace." Like a true Hobbesian, he explains, "I serve the realm, and the realm needs peace."<sup>12</sup>

### **Lion and Direwolf, Dragon and Leviathan**

"The High Septon once told me that as we sin, so do we suffer. If that's true, Lord Eddard, tell me . . . why is it always the innocents who suffer most, when you high lords play your game of thrones?"

—Varys<sup>13</sup>

Hobbes's way of thinking about politics differs greatly from that of most of the nobility of Westeros. Who is right—Hobbes, or the great houses, or neither? Hobbes would view himself as a realist who is willing to face some hard truths—truths that are dangerous to ignore. To his mind, ambitious nobles like Tywin Lannister endanger the realm by defying the will of the king. It may seem that such nobles are simply being selfish, as Hobbes recommends, but a sensible selfish person would realize that they put their own safety in great danger by playing the game of thrones, and would opt for obedience to the Leviathan instead. Honorable nobles like Eddard Stark endanger the realm no less than plotters like Tywin. Their obsessive concern with the rules of honor leads to the War of the Five Kings just as surely as Lannister greed.

Hobbes was right to recognize that political theory must take into account the degree to which people are motivated by self-interest rather than duty. The Starks in particular could have used some instruction from Maester Hobbes on this point. When Ned comes to King's Landing, he tragically puts his trust in Littlefinger to do the right thing, when it should have been obvious that Littlefinger's interests would be served by betraying Ned to Queen Cersei. When Robb first marches against the Lannisters, he expects his bannerman Lord Frey to answer his call to arms because that is Frey's sworn duty, while Catelyn understands that Frey will be moved only by his self-interest, including an advantageous marriage for his daughter.

On the other hand, Hobbes was surely mistaken that people are *only* motivated by self-interest. Like Eddard, whose attachment to honor is so great that he dies rather than serve an illegitimate king, people in real life sometimes die for what they believe in. Similarly, like Jon Snow, who gives up home, safety, and luxury for a life of hard service on the Wall, people sometimes make extraordinary sacrifices for the benefit of others. Tales of courage, honor, and self-sacrifice in fiction ring true for us when they capture something of the best in real humanity. If we were all motivated by self-interest alone, stories about people like Ned and Jon would be absurd, even incoherent. We understand the motivations of characters like these precisely because we understand that a human being can be motivated by higher concerns.

Perhaps it is his oversimplification of human psychology that leads Hobbes to miss the way that overcentralization of power can weaken, rather than stabilize, a state. When Aerys went insane, it was the very fact that he held the reins of power so tightly that left civil war as the only alternative to enduring his abuses. After all, he could not be voted out, forced to abdicate, or restrained by law in any way. Perhaps Robert's rebellion could have been avoided if only the Targaryen Leviathan had not been so powerful! The same problem arises under the

reign of Joffrey. The War of the Five Kings erupted because the only way to replace Joffrey was to rebel. Hobbes really ought to have learned from events in Britain that flexibility in a ruler can be more important than the will to dominate. Few supporters of the English parliament even *wanted* to get rid of the monarchy, until Charles I made it so clear that he would never share power that the parliamentarians were left with a choice between servility and civil war.

For all his failings, Hobbes understood the horrors of war a little more clearly than the scheming nobility of Westeros. The War of the Five Kings was every bit as terrible as Maester Hobbes feared it would be. Tully forces are slaughtered at Riverrun and Mummer's Ford, Lannister forces at Whispering Wood and the Battle of the Fords, and Stark forces at the Green Fork and at the Red Wedding. From Stannis Baratheon's terrible defeat against the Lannisters at King's Landing to Loras Tyrell's Pyrrhic victory against Baratheon defenders at Dragonstone, from Ramsay Bolton's murderous sacking of Winterfell to the terrible carnage inflicted by Greyjoy Ironmen invading across the north and west of Westeros, the history of the war is a tale of shocking loss and human suffering. Worse yet, all of this happens when the realm is most in need of a unified response to external threat. Winter is coming and the Others are returning to reclaim their old stalking grounds, while in the east, a Targaryen *khaleesi* with a sideline in hatching dragons prepares to reclaim the Iron Throne. Wherever we situate the point at which a people simply *must* rise in rebellion against dishonest, vicious, or incompetent rulers, surely the cost of the War of the Five Kings is so great that the decision to go to war should have depended on more than a matter of principle regarding legitimate succession.

The lesson that the nobles of Westeros should have learned from Maester Hobbes is not that they should never rebel, but that civil war is so horrific that it must be avoided at almost any cost. Appeals to lofty principles of justice and honor that are

never to be violated are all very well, but these principles must always be weighed against the consequences our actions will have for human lives. Our most fundamental need as humans is not justice; our most fundamental need as humans is avoiding having a greatsword inserted up our nose. As citizens of Western democracies with the duty to vote for our leaders, we are all, in a way, required to play the game of thrones, in our own nation and across the world. When we forget the cost of our principles in terms of human suffering, to ourselves, or to those who fight for us, or even to those we fight for and those we fight *against*, then we are in danger of doing more harm with our good intentions than any Targaryen tyrant ever inflicted with his greed for power.

## NOTES

1. George R. R. Martin, *A Game of Thrones* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 253.
2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. J. C. A. Gaskin (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2009), p. 100.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 84.
5. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 620.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 796.
7. George R. R. Martin, *A Clash of Kings* (New York: Bantam Dell, 2005), p. 796.
8. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 687.
9. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 122.
10. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 44.
11. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 147.
12. Martin, *A Game of Thrones*, p. 636.
13. *Ibid.*