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GAME OF THRONES

AND PHILOSOPHY

LOGIC
CUTS
DEEPER
THAN SWORDS

BLACKWELL PHILOSOPHY AND POP CULTURE SERIES

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**GAME OF THRONES
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PHILOSOPHY**

LOGIC CUTS DEEPER
THAN SWORDS

Edited by
Henry Jacoby



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FOREWORD

Elio M. Garcia and Linda Antonsson

“The man who passes the sentence should swing the sword.”

“Love is the bane of honor, the death of duty.”

“When you play the game of thrones, you win or you die.”

With phrases like these, George R. R. Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* reveals not only a powerful sense of drama, a rich setting, and complex characters, but an understanding that at the heart of his story—of any great story—lies conflict. Martin often cites William Faulkner’s statement that the only story worth telling is that of “the human heart in conflict with itself,” and that conflict appears again and again throughout the *Song of Ice and Fire* series in a way that seemed unprecedented in the epic fantasy genre back in 1996 when the first novel was published. Whether the conflict entailed one lonely, misshapen dwarf’s efforts to survive in a society that looks down on him, a friend’s struggle to keep an irresponsible king on his throne, or a mother’s choice between her family and her duty, Martin presented the moral complexity of people and societies that breathed reality. Though inspired by the likes of J. R. R. Tolkien—father of the epic fantasy—Martin took a

different path, and opened the door for a wave of new writers who explore characters and settings with an eye toward the darker side of human nature and society.

When it was announced that George R. R. Martin's series of fantasy novels, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, would be adapted by HBO in *Game of Thrones*, it caused a great deal of excitement and speculation among fans who had been following the saga for a decade. Casting, budgets, shooting locations, special effects—these subjects and more were up for discussion. Yet at the heart of all of these questions was a single, overriding concern for most fans: How much fidelity would the show maintain to Martin's novel, not only in terms of plot and characters, but in tone and themes? The first season came and went, and now we know that the producers largely stayed faithful on all levels, weaving together a drama that combined elements of the heroic epic with a moral scale that covered the range from the saintly to the monstrous.

Readers often cite the moral complexity of the novels as being a key part of their enjoyment, alluding to characters painted in “shades of gray.” Previous works of epic fantasy tended to operate with a straightforward moral compass where the antagonist was some variety of evil “Dark Lord” and the protagonists were defined by their opposition to this evil character based on their obvious moral goodness. In contrast, Martin's series has been written with no dark lord to speak of, instead focusing the narrative on the dynastic conflicts that rend the Seven Kingdoms apart beneath the shadow of a looming catastrophe. That catastrophe may be created by nefarious creatures and it may be the ultimate end point of the narrative, but Martin's choice to keep his eyes on the very human characters, with their very human flaws, was done well enough to win him legions of fans who appreciated the so-called “gritty realism” of the narrative.

Some of the post-Martin fantasists seem to pursue “grittiness” for the sake of grittiness—and that certainly is one

approach among many. But it's hard to find in some of these works the human core of the story. In contrast, Martin keeps a sharp focus on his characters, and though they suffer greatly at times, it tastes all the sweeter when they triumph. When they struggle, we struggle with them: Eddard Stark's struggle with questions of honor and honesty, Jon Snow's struggle to choose between vows and love, Tyrion Lannister's effort to win his father's approval because he has so little else. The inner conflict is absolutely integral to the weight of the story, to making *A Song of Ice and Fire*—and now *Game of Thrones*—such popular works. These and other questions—of ethics, political philosophy, and more—are the fulcrum on which the entire story turns. Despite the fact that many of the problems presented in the novel and on the screen are couched in the quasi-medieval context of lords and castles and personal honor, there's a relevance to the way the characters wrestle with choices that do not seem so dissimilar to choices that we are faced with on a daily basis.

George R. R. Martin's writing is ripe for introspection and consideration, not merely as examples of masterfully told popular literature, but as a genuine exploration of human nature in uncertain times. To provide some avenues for illumination, *Game of Thrones and Philosophy* presents essays on topics that run the gamut of philosophical topics, from ethics to metaphysics to political philosophy. Eric Silverman interrogates Plato's views on virtue and happiness, seen through the lense of Ned Stark's and Cersei Lannister's very different life strategies. Henry Jacoby explores the topic of consciousness in a series where magically created wights and supernatural direwolves exist. Richard Littman imagines Hobbes as a maester, looking on Westeros and considering the question of who should rule. These essays are just a few examples, of course; as Martin might write, there are "many and more" to engage with.

And all this, thanks to the sudden image Martin received one day back in 1991, while trying to write a science fiction novel: a huge wolf, found dead amidst summer snow. From such small beginnings, something great came, something worth reading, worth enjoying, worth examining.

A RAVEN FROM HOUSE WILEY

Editor's Note on Spoilers

Many of the philosophical quandaries of this series cannot be discussed without looking at events across the five books of the Song of Ice and Fire series that have been published at the time of this writing. However, we understand that some readers are fans of the HBO series and don't want to be spoiled for events beyond the first season. Therefore, with that in mind, you may wish to delay reading chapters 3, 11, 12, 14, 18, and 20 until you've read further into the series; the rest are safe and relatively spoiler-free.

All citations for the first four books are from the Bantam Dell mass market paperback editions, and, of course, the citations for the fifth book are from the 2011 hardcover edition.

Episodes from the television series are referenced by their titles in the text.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

How I Was Spared from Having
to Take the Black

If it had not been for all the generous help I received while working on this book, my honor surely would have been compromised. Therefore, I wish to thank the following:

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My fellow philosophers—true masters all—authored terrific essays that reflect both their expertise and their love of the source material. I'm proud to have worked with them.

My longtime friend, Ser Robin of House Riebe in the North (it's been how long since I've seen you?), read everything I wrote and improved everything I wrote with detailed comments and

suggestions. I looked forward to reading every raven he sent—always fun and instructive, as he is himself.

My good friend and colleague Ser John of House Collins provided helpful suggestions on my mind and metaphysics chapter and was always willing to listen and help out with any difficulties I had while working on this volume. I always appreciate and benefit from our discussions.

I want to thank two long-distance friends and colleagues as well. Ser David Kyle of House Johnson, a trusted associate of the Lord of Pop Culture, contributed valuable suggestions on Lord Schoone's chapter on evil. And Lady R. Shannon of House Duval, "The Wonderninja," not only wrote a very fine chapter of her own, but graciously shared her wisdom concerning Eastern philosophy and martial arts, and in so doing, enabled my Water Dance chapter to go on dancing.

I'm especially grateful to Lord Elio M. Garcia and Lady Linda Antonsson for contributing their beautifully written foreword. They perfectly captured why the works of George R. R. Martin are, in their words "worth reading, worth enjoying, and worth examining." Their wonderful website, westeros.org, as well as another great site, winter-is-coming.net, entertained me, kept me updated on all the *Game of Thrones* news while I was working on this volume, and were there for me to always make sure I had my facts straight!

And speaking of George R. R. Martin, without him there would, of course, be no book to write. Thank you, ser, for my all-time favorite books. And further thanks go to everyone at HBO who bought it all to life, better than I could have imagined or hoped for.

My brother Alan, now a retired Lord, provided good humor and enthusiastic support throughout, and I thank him for that and for everything else he does for me. Like Tyrion

(his favorite character), he's exceedingly clever; I doubt that I could beat him at *cyvasse*.

Finally, my wife, Kathryn, the Lady of the Looms. Born in Craven County (I'm not making this up), but certainly no craven. As proof, she puts up with me. As long as I have you, it matters not that winter is coming.

INTRODUCTION

So What if Winter Is Coming?

Henry Jacoby

Winter is coming; the Wall may not hold, and the Others may kill us all. Yes, all men must die—*valar morghulis*, as they say in Braavos.

In Braavos, they also tell us *valar dobaeris*—all men must serve. So shall we serve the gods? Or those who rule? What good is serving anyone if winter is indeed coming? Maybe we should just drink wine and sing a few choruses of “The Bear and the Maiden Fair.”

The House Words of the Starks remind us that we must be vigilant, and even though the future may be grim, we should hold our heads high . . . at least while we still have them. We have our honor, our duty; we can yet lead meaningful lives. As Ygritte told Jon Snow, all men must die, but first we’ll live. He knows nothing, that Jon Snow.

“Fear cuts deeper than swords.” This is a lesson Arya learned well from her Braavosi sword master. The words become a recurring refrain in her mind whenever she needs to find some inner strength and push on. They can help us, too. And here’s

another lesson: “Logic cuts deeper than swords.” When wielded properly, swords can be used against an enemy. Logic, likewise, can be a powerful weapon. When applied correctly, logic can disarm or defeat opponents—or at least their arguments—and usually without too much loss of blood. While swords can defend our bodies, logic indeed goes deeper, defending our ideas, our beliefs, our values—the things that define who we are and how we see ourselves in relation to the rest of reality. Socrates said that no evil can befall a good person. One’s body can be harmed easily enough by swords, but not the inner self. The person of virtue and integrity has a soul in harmony that stands steadfast against desires and influence.

Yes, fear cuts deeper than swords, but so does logic. In philosophy, one has to learn not to fear where logic leads. All men must serve, and philosophers serve the truth. The authors in this volume have done just that. No tongues were ripped out, no fingers removed; the truth was fearlessly pursued. Maybe Hobbes would’ve made a great maester; maybe chivalry is a bad thing; maybe Robb’s war isn’t so just after all; maybe Arya can teach us about Zen; and you know, Ned really would have benefited from reading Machiavelli. Speaking of reading, in *A Dance with Dragons*, the master himself tells us that “a reader lives a thousand lives. . . . The man who never reads only one.”¹

So get to it. Winter will be here before you know it.

NOTE

1. George R. R. Martin, *A Dance with Dragons* (New York: Bantam Books, 2011), p. 452.

PART ONE

“YOU WIN OR YOU DIE”



MAESTER HOBBS GOES TO KING'S LANDING

Greg Littmann

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 Pycelle¹

Hobbes believed that people act only out of personal self-interest, claiming that “no man giveth, but with intention of good to himself.”² 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.”³

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.”⁴ 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*⁵

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.”⁶ 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 Lannister⁷

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