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ENDER'S GAME

AND PHILOSOPHY

The Logic Gate is Down

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ENDER'S GAME AND PHILOSOPHY

The Logic Gate Is *Down*

Edited by Kevin S. Decker

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Contents

Introduction: What <i>Is</i> Ender's Game?	1
Part One THIRD: The Making of an Impossible Child	7
1 "The Teachers Got Me Into This": Educational Skirmishes ... with a Pinch of Freedom <i>Cam Cobb</i>	9
2 Illusions of Freedom, Tragedies of Fate: The Moral Development of Ender Wiggin <i>Jeremy Proulx</i>	21
3 Xenocide's Paradox: The Virtue of Being Ender <i>Jeff Ewing</i>	32
4 Teaching to the Test: Constructing the Identity of a Space Commander <i>Chad William Timm</i>	41
Part Two GAME: Cooperation or Confrontation?	53
5 The Enemy's Gate Is Down: Perspective, Empathy, and Game Theory <i>Andrew Zimmerman Jones</i>	55
6 War Games as Child's Play <i>Matthew Brophy</i>	66

7	Forming the Formless: Sunzi and the Military Logic of Ender Wiggin <i>Morgan Deane</i>	78
8	Do Good Games Make Good People? <i>Brendan P. Shea</i>	89
Part Three HIVE-QUEEN: All Together Now		99
9	Bugger All!: The Clash of Cultures in <i>Ender's Game</i> <i>Cole Bowman</i>	101
10	Why Ender Can't Go Home: Philotic Connections and Moral Responsibility <i>Brett Chandler Patterson</i>	112
11	Of Gods and Buggers: Friendship in <i>Ender's Game</i> <i>Jeffery L. Nicholas</i>	124
Part Four WAR: Kill or Be Killed		137
12	"I Destroy Them": Ender, Good Intentions, and Moral Responsibility <i>Lance Belluomini</i>	139
13	Ender's Beginning and the Just War <i>James L. Cook</i>	151
14	"You Had to Be a Weapon, Ender ... We Aimed You": Moral Responsibility in <i>Ender's Game</i> <i>Danielle Wylie</i>	163
15	The Unspoken Rules of Manly Warfare: Just War Theory in <i>Ender's Game</i> <i>Kody W. Cooper</i>	175
Part Five HEGEMON: The Terrible Things Are Only About to Begin		187
16	Locke and Demosthenes: Virtually Dominating the World <i>Kenneth Wayne Sayles III</i>	189

17	Ender's Dilemma: Realism, Neoliberalism, and the Politics of Power <i>Ted Henry Brown and Christie L. Maloyed</i>	202
18	People Are Tools <i>Greg Littmann</i>	212
	Convening Authorities of the Court Martial of Colonel Hyrum Graff	224
	The Ansible Index	230

Introduction

What Is Ender's Game?

In his introduction to *Ender's Game* written six years after the book was originally published, author Orson Scott Card goes both backwards and forwards in time to talk about the inspiration for the story and its public reception. One of the most interesting things about Card's novel is the diversity of its audiences. Now with the 2013 film adaptation of *Ender's Game*, starring Asa Butterfield as Andrew "Ender" Wiggin and Harrison Ford as Colonel Hyrum Graff, the story of a young boy under siege from all quarters in a not-too-distant future will get its widest reception yet, and never at a better time.

Card tells us in his introduction that he was fascinated by the underlying premise of Isaac Asimov's original *Foundation* series, the epitome of Golden Age science fiction, celebrating the marriage of reason and technological progress. Granted a one-time-only Hugo Award in 1966 for "Best All-Time Series," Asimov's *Foundation* (1951), *Foundation and Empire* (1952), and *Second Foundation* (1953) use the conceit of "psychohistory," an incredibly advanced form of mathematical sociology, to plot the decline, fall, and rise of a Galactic Empire and the secret "Foundation" colonies of scientists whose job it is to make sure that the cosmos doesn't descend into a new dark age. About *Foundation*, Card writes:

The novel set me, not to dreaming, but to *thinking*, which is Asimov's most extraordinary ability as a fiction writer. What *would* the future be like? How would things change? What would remain the same?

The premise of *Foundation* seemed to be that even though you might change the props and the actors, the play of human history is always the same. And yet that fundamentally pessimistic premise (you mean we'll *never* change?) was tempered by Asimov's idea of a group of human beings who, not through genetic change, but through learned skills, are able to understand and heal the minds of other people.¹

This idea had immense appeal to Card when he read of Asimov in the late sixties, near the peak of American entanglement in Vietnam and social unrest tied to the war and the civil rights movement. It's no surprise, then, that as a young person Card turned to sci-fi for healing rather than mere entertainment.

Like Asimov's predictions about the distant future, Card's (although centered closer to the present) concern things that haven't happened yet and some things that may never happen. This doesn't make them wholly fantastical, though, as Card's uncanny predictions of the Internet, the use of child soldiers, and biological warfare (in *Speaker for the Dead*) show. Like Card, philosophers often pose questions about the intersection of time, change, and human nature: can we ever change? What resources from our past have we forgotten? Is human nature inherently violent and disruptive, does society or some malevolent force guide us to be so, or can we ever transcend our temptation to cruelty and the use of brute force?

As Card himself admits, *Ender's Game* is a disturbing novel. It's unrelenting in the degree to which its protagonist is oppressed in social, military, and ethical ways. In the chapters in the first part of this book, "Third: The Making of an Impossible Child," four philosophers and educators consider how Ender's character and moral development are affected by the system of monitoring children on Earth for the correct temperament and abilities to become a child soldier. Ender's existence as a "Third" is a rarity in an overpopulated world in which parents are restricted to two children. So not only is Ender's very birth a consequence of the policies of the military regime that both protects and controls the Earth, but his education and socialization—at least after Colonel Graff spirits him away to Battle School—are carefully controlled to produce the result Earth needs. But is this any way to treat a child?

In one of the letters Card received after the publication of *Ender's Game*, an army helicopter pilot confesses:

I read *Ender's Game* during flight school four years ago. I'm a warrant officer, and our school, at least the first six weeks, is very different from the commissioned officers'. I was eighteen years old when I arrived at Ft. Rucker to start flight training, and the first six weeks almost beat me. Ender gave me courage then and many times after that. I've experienced the tiredness Ender felt, the kind that goes deep to your soul. It would be interesting to know what caused you to feel the same way.²

Of the many audiences that have appreciated Card's book, the men and women in uniform are the most surprising in their identification with the main character. As in the case of the army aviator, their sympathy mainly has to do with the shared experience of training and combat and the resultant transformation of a person's entire worldview. In the second section of this book, "Game: Cooperation or Confrontation?" four authors take on the philosophical connections between war and games that make up the bulk of the novel's adventures. These chapters show that empathy as well as strategy, and the ability to commit oneself to something for its own sake, are all vital needs of space commanders.

And what about the poor buggers? The hive-queens and their drones are portrayed by the International Fleet Command of Ender's time as merciless and predatory. All they care about is eliminating every human from the face of the galaxy. Only a select few—Mazer Rackham, and eventually Ender—can understand what they might do next. But Leon Perniciaro, who wrote a master's thesis entitled "Shifting Understandings of Imperialism: A Collision of Cultures in *Starship Troopers* and *Ender's Game*," points out how different the portrayal of giant, insect-like alien invaders appears in Robert Heinlein's 1959 shoot-em-up *Starship Troopers* versus *Ender's Game*, with Card's surprising use of the buggers, or Formics, as foils but not enemies.³ Card's sympathetic portrayal of the aliens opens up the possibility that philosophy can assist us in understanding, rather than demonizing, those who seem to present themselves as our enemies. So in the third section of this book, "Hive-Queen: All Together Now," three philosophers discuss all things Formic and philotic, showing how "others" from different cultures have contributed to the development of humanity's image of itself.

“We’re saving the world, after all. Take him,” says one of Graff’s colleagues when the decision is made to recruit and train Ender Wiggin. Some of Ender’s most peculiar and incompatible traits—his ability to empathize with and even love his enemy as well as his violent streak—have emerged in the I.F.’s analyses as “the right stuff” for a commander who will lead a strike at the bugger homeworld. From the very beginning—as a number of the authors in these pages point out—Ender knows what he’s being trained for, and the logical limit of what he’s being asked to do is complete destruction of the buggers—xenocide. So why does he continue to play along? In the fourth section of this book, “War: Kill or Be Killed,” four authors—including an Air Force colonel—scrutinize ethics in times of war to assess the degree to which Ender, Graff, the International Fleet Command, and humanity as a whole are responsible for the “evil that men do” in times of conflict.

Ender’s Game may be unique in science fiction in that it has at least two sets of sequels. On the one hand, three books, beginning with *Speaker for the Dead* (1986), continue the sociocultural prophecies as Ender travels the universe and gets married on the planet Lusitania. On the other hand, the “Shadow” series, beginning with *Ender’s Shadow* (1999), tells the story of *Ender’s Game* from Bean’s perspective and then dives into the fate of Earth after the Third Invasion. No one can fault Orson Scott Card for the “big picture” thinking of his Enderverse, with developments that are both shocking and challenging to our sense of what’s good and true. In the final section of this book, “Hegemon: The Terrible Things are Only About to Begin,” four philosophers sketch the world that war and invasion have created—a future Earth in which the experience of every child is electronically overseen by the military and in which anonymous personalities on the nets determine international relations.

So it’s time to begin the exercise. The battleroom door is opening. Your reactions will be monitored. Don’t settle for anything less than victory, and remember: *the enemy’s gate is down*.

Notes

1. Orson Scott Card, “Introduction” to *Ender’s Game, Author’s Definitive Edition* (New York: TOR Books, 1991), xii.

2. Ibid., xxii.
3. Leon Perniciaro, "Shifting Understandings of Imperialism: A Clash of Cultures in *Starship Troopers* and *Ender's Game*," MA Thesis, University of New Orleans, May 2011, <http://scholarworks.uno.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2322&context=td>, accessed October 1, 2012.

Part One

THIRD

THE MAKING OF AN IMPOSSIBLE CHILD

CHAPTER 1

“The Teachers Got Me Into This”

Educational Skirmishes ... with a Pinch of Freedom

Cam Cobb

What does *Ender's Game* tell us about the art of education, or pedagogy? And what on Earth does this have to do with freedom? To answer these questions, we need to step back in time. For thousands of years, people have debated the structure learning should take. For Socrates (469–399 BC), education was an interactive experience involving critical inquiry, dialogue, and a collaborative process that encouraged people to question the world around them by reasoning things out. Socrates left quite an impression on his students, most notably Plato (429–347 BC). Intermingling his own views with Socrates' in a long dialogue called the *Republic*, Plato envisioned education as the identification of natural skills of children with the aim of preparing them to take on roles in society that corresponded to their perceived abilities. Children gifted in the use of reasoning, for instance, would join the “guardians” and rule the state. For Plato, then, education would be highly selective, and would also train the young for their future work. In this regard, Plato emphasizes his own kind of vocational education, centering on training in a skill or trade to prepare for a career. While Socratic critical inquiry and Platonic “vocational prep” aren't exactly opposing philosophies of education, they do at times conflict with one another.

And this conflict returns us to Ender. In this chapter we'll consider what Ender's experiences tell us about the differences between liberal

education, vocational training, critical inquiry, and that elusive matter of freedom *in*, and as a result *of* education. Specifically, we'll address the following questions: Does everyone need a liberal education? Are schools training grounds for the workplace? And finally, is critical inquiry essential to being an educated person?

Liberal Education Is Paideia's Game

A liberal education is one that is meant to free or “liberate” a person's mind. It has nothing to do with being liberal or conservative in the way those terms are used in contemporary politics. A liberal education involves studying subjects such as mathematics, logic, ethics, aesthetics, music, poetry, rhetoric, and biology. In Plato's Athens, these subjects were known collectively as *paideia*, which, in a very general sense, means to educate. Yet *Ender's Game* devotes so much attention to non-liberal topics—the social life of Ender and his schoolmates, the interactive learning of the war games in the battleroom, and the individual problem solving in the virtual reality of the Giant's Drink—that it's easy to believe that Ender had very little liberal education at all.

Plato felt that vocational learning was important, but he also saw liberal education as complementing it. True education was a matter of balancing one's body and mind. When sketching the details of his ideal city-state in the *Republic*, Plato carefully described the military training of the rulers of the city: “The person who achieves the finest blend of music and physical training and impresses it on his soul in the most measured way is the one we'd most correctly call completely harmonious.”¹ Plato reasoned that learning music and poetry would inspire a more harmonious soul in soldiers, enhancing their courage and lessening their tendencies toward cruelty. Ultimately, for Plato, a well-balanced curriculum helps foster harmony in individuals and societies.

Support for liberal education has fluctuated over the years. Mortimer Adler (1902–2001) reasoned that everyone is owed a liberal education because “the best education for the best is the best education for all.”² Yet public schooling in the United States in the late twentieth century was riddled with problems in Adler's view, mainly due to low expectations. In his words, “A part of our population—and much too large a part—has harbored the opinion that many of the nation's children are not fully educable.”³ Unimpressed with the prevalent practice of

“tracking” learners according to their abilities, Adler argued that we have not “always been honest in our commitment to democracy and its promise of equality.”⁴ *The Paideia Proposal*, Adler’s 1982 manifesto, mapped out an alternative system in which every learner would study a blend of classically oriented courses for 12 years.

Alas, the future society of *Ender’s Game* does not follow *The Paideia Proposal*. Still, Ender does get a kind of liberal education with three core aspects. First, in terms of comprehension and performance, Ender learns about military history, military tactics, and strategic-oriented mathematical calculations in the classroom. Second, he develops problem-solving skills in the cyber-reality of the computer game, the Giant’s Drink. Third, in terms of interactive performance and cognition, Ender learns about hand-to-hand combat and command in the simulated war games of the battleroom. Though these three pieces of Ender’s education lend variety to the content and delivery of the Battle School curriculum, the variety is admittedly limited.

For Ender and his fellow trainees, Battle School is an intense, emotionally draining experience. Anderson warns Graff after Ender is promoted to the rank of Commander, “We want to teach him, not give him a nervous breakdown.”⁵ Anderson’s fear is well-founded. Competition is fierce and the pace is demanding. Children’s performances in the battleroom are ranked on a daily basis, and rankings are circulated for all to see. Battle School isn’t a place where children feel free to show or talk about their emotions. Dink observes, “That’s right, we never cry. I never thought of that. Nobody ever cries.”⁶ In this unforgiving setting, Ender has a series of violent entanglements with his peers, fights and arguments that he deeply regrets. “I’m doing it again, thought Ender. I’m hurting people again, just to save myself. Why don’t they leave me alone, so I don’t have to hurt them?”⁷ While Wiggin doesn’t initiate any of these conflicts, his lashing out often has fatal consequences.

Plato would likely chide Colonel Graff, saying that Battle and Command School fail to offer the sort of balanced curriculum called for in the *Republic*. Nowhere in Ender’s learning is there any poetry, music, or visual arts. Nowhere is there any learning about grammar, rhetoric, or biology. Graff would perhaps counter that education is a matter of *realpolitik*, pointing out that Ender didn’t need liberal education to lead Earth to victory.⁸ In response, Plato would counter that educating an army of soldiers who aren’t harmonious souls would lead to cruelty, which has wider social implications.

Vocational Prep: A Heaping Tablespoon, or the Main Dish?

Philosophers of education have argued that vocational training is an important part of education, but they're also conflicted about *how much* of a part it should be. If these thinkers were chefs, we might say that some call for a pinch of trade preparation while others believe it should be the main dish itself.

So where does this leave Ender? Wasn't his education entirely vocational? Certainly, Battle School is designed to select, stream, and ultimately train different types of soldiers for Earth's army. But, looking more closely, further questions spring to mind: What sort of vocational education did Ender experience? Was Ender's occupational training balanced with other subject areas? Was Ender simply compelled to follow orders and forego critical inquiry, or was he educated to develop his own strategies when faced with complex problems? In reaching for answers, we need to consider two versions of vocational learning, one put forward by Plato and another set out by thinkers concerned with what's called a "Taylorist" view of increasing social efficiency.

For Plato, a balanced education would mix vocational learning with a broad-based liberal education. On the vocational side, schools should identify the aptitudes of learners and sort them into different streams, which would eventually lead to different occupations. Curriculum—the content, depth, length, and method of one's studies—would be designed to match an individual's aptitudes and career path. Plato's choices for career paths are rather limited. He worked from the idea that children are predisposed by their natural proficiencies to enter one of three general classes, all of which are necessary to a harmonious society. These are the guardians, "auxiliaries" (or peace-keepers), and skilled producers of crafts. Some children are bound to become carpenters, others to become retailers, and still others—but only a select few—to become rulers. To sell this idea to the public we are given the "myth of the metals," a story told in Book III of the *Republic*. According to this myth, the natural aptitudes of children are spelled out by their souls, which contain different mixtures of gold, silver, and bronze. Each person is either dominantly gold (rulers), silver (auxiliaries), or bronze (artisans). Because the divine creator

made every citizen's soul out of alloys of all these substances, it's possible for families to include members of different classes. Plato felt that this myth should be told to people as a "noble lie," because some people would be dissatisfied with their place in society. But people aren't always the best judge of their own interests. Plato thus favored a fairly rigid class system in which people are trained according to their merit. This class system would lead to a society in which people are trained to do better what they can already do. Of course, the drawback is that Plato's state is one in which individuals can't *choose* their careers, and class mobility is severely limited.

Since the *Republic* first appeared over two millennia ago, Plato's ideas have been crucially influential on the way we think about schooling. "Plato laid down the fundamental principle of a philosophy of education," American educator John Dewey (1859–1952) observed, "when he asserted that it was the business of education to discover what each person is good for, and to train him to mastery of that mode of excellence."⁹

But some educators didn't think Plato's "heaping tablespoon" model for vocational learning went far enough. As public schools sprang up in the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a heated debate arose between those who favored vocational training, those who supported a liberal education, and those who championed critical inquiry. In the first camp, a collective—or, perhaps "cartel" is a better word—of thinkers argued that the purpose of education is to enhance worker productivity.¹⁰ They felt that public schools should be designed to prepare children for the specific tasks of an industrial society.

Before delving further into this vocational-oriented view of education, we need to take a step back and consider "Taylorism." In the late nineteenth century, mechanical engineer F.W. Taylor looked at the manufacturing industry through a scientific lens. To enhance labor productivity he called for a greater degree of managerial control, tighter standardizations of practice, and more prescriptive forms of training.¹¹ Drawing from the ideas of "Taylorism," educators like W.W. Charters, Franklin Bobbitt, and David Snedden unleashed a flurry of rules, guidelines, and procedures to steer schooling away from a liberal curriculum's perceived frivolity.¹² Snedden argued that a vocational school must "reproduce practical processes, must give the pupil many hours of each working day in actual practical work, and

must closely correlate theoretical instruction to this practical work.”¹³ Like the budding soldiers in Battle School, children would listen to instructions, follow them, and memorize a range of workplace-oriented tasks through repetition. What children would *not* learn in this setting is how to critically question the world around them.

Is Battle School Just Trade School?

Does the I.F.’s Battle School aim to prepare its students for specific occupations? To increase their efficiency as soldiers, or to make them “well-rounded persons”? To answer these questions, let’s consider the purposes and organizational design of Battle School.

We’ll begin with the purpose of Battle School. Colonel Graff, the principal of the school, offers some useful remarks. While recruiting Ender, Graff says, “Battle School is for training future starship captains and commodores of flotillas and admirals of the fleet.”¹⁴ Later, when strolling with Ender from the shuttle to the school, Graff elaborates on this point, “My job is to produce the best soldiers in the world. In the whole history of the world.”¹⁵ Here, Graff provides us with the first part of Battle School’s mission statement: the school aims to train soldiers and produce an effective army.

But with a new phase of an interplanetary war looming on Earth’s horizon, there’s a second, more urgent, aspect to the mission. Graff later adds, “We need a Napoleon. An Alexander.... My job is to produce such a creature, and all the men and women he’ll need to help him.”¹⁶ Clearly, the Battle School aims to identify and develop a general who will be able to lead Earth to victory. And this aspect of the mission is personally significant for Ender, whom Graff expects to fulfill this very role. If we were to judge Battle School strictly by Graff’s mission statement, we’d say that it is specifically aimed at producing skills and, as such, is highly vocational in focus.

But does the design of Battle School correspond to its vocationally driven core purpose? Let’s begin with streaming, the process of directing learners along pathways: children enter Battle School when they’re five or six years old. They’re chosen based on observations gleaned from a vast surveillance network and a series of tests. Very few children are actually invited to attend Battle School, so in a sense streaming begins at birth. But further streaming occurs inside the