

# Deconstructing the Dichotomy of Identity and Intent in *Ender's Game*

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## Abstract

Orson Scott Card, the author of *Ender's Game* and its sequel *Speaker for the Dead* has stated that Ender, the main character in these novels, retains his innocence despite the genocide and other acts of violence that he commits. Card expresses his belief that a person's intent is the sole factor that should determine their guilt, and Ender retains good intention throughout the stories. However, this essay argues that the dichotomy of identities that Ender faces and the eventual reformation of his identity work against Card's proposed philosophy of intent. In observing Ender's physical and emotional detachment from his crimes, his manipulation by the military, and his response to trauma, the essay debates Card's philosophy. It emphasizes Ender as a complex human being who is coming to terms with identity and guilt rather than a character that is simply good or evil. This exploration of the human condition is more profound, Sander argues, than the philosophy of intent the author proposes.

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In all of the discourse surrounding the much beloved book *Ender's Game*, the question inevitably turns to one of intent: Is Ender Wiggin responsible for the deaths he causes? In one of the more well-known pieces of criticism on the subject, John Kessel calls Ender "the innocent killer," arguing that the author, Orson Scott Card, "sets up Ender to be the sincere, abused innocent, and rigs the game to make us accept that he does no wrong" (Kessel). Kessel recalls interviews in which Card has continuously argued in favor of intent, believing that "only intentions matter in making such judgments" (Kessel, original emphasis). Yet, when an author of such a popular work is so outspoken in his opinion, it is necessary to take a closer look at what the actual text asserts. To quote from Card himself:

There's always moral instruction whether the writer inserts it deliberately or not. The least effective moral instruction in fiction is that which is consciously inserted. Partly because it won't reflect the

storyteller's true beliefs, it will only reflect what he *believes* he believes, or what he thinks he should believe or what he's been persuaded of.  
(Nicholson)

I believe that Card falls prey to this very issue of conscious beliefs he warns authors against. Because he is so intent on having *Ender's Game* revolve around the question of intent, any evidence to the contrary would also serve as evidence against Card's philosophy of intention. Despite knowing the atrocities of which the young Ender Wiggin is capable, readers like Ender. Readers empathize with him. Readers root for him. It is, therefore, easy to see why readers eagerly grasp for an explanation that absolves Ender of wrongdoing. To empathize with a young boy in horrible circumstances that are being manipulated out of his control is one thing. To empathize with a killer and a young man who even as a child is capable of murder and grows up to commit genocide is quite another. Thus, when Mazer Rackham comforts Ender after the battle and says, "It wasn't your fault" (Card, *Ender* 208), both Card and the readers want to believe him. It seems, in fact, that the only person who does not believe him is Ender himself. At the end of *Ender's Game*, Ender reflects that he "killed ten billion buggers, whose queens, at least, were as alive and wise as any man... and no one thinks to call it a crime" (*Ender* 216), and Card—despite his intention to absolve Ender of responsibility—writes that "All of his crimes weighed heavy on him" (*Ender* 216). In *Ender's Game*, Card's insistence on an intent-based philosophy drives a schism into Ender's identity, and it is in overcoming that schism and reforming his identity that Ender's experience in *Speaker for the Dead* deconstructs Card's intent to promote an intent-based philosophy.

Throughout *Ender's Game*, Ender develops a split personality because of Card's insistence on an intent-based philosophy. From the outset of the story, Ender's identity is defined in terms of an either-or fallacy. With parents and adults largely absent from the novel and his birth the result of genetic engineering, Ender's identity is instead derived from the defining characteristics of his siblings, making him "half Peter and half Valentine" (*Ender* 18). Colonel Graff tells Ender that the military "requisitioned" him to "be Peter, but milder" but not as mild as Valentine (*Ender* 18). Thus, from birth, Ender was designed to have a split identity. As one would biologically receive half of his DNA from each parent, the division of Ender's identity turns his siblings into surrogate parents. The question of Ender's identity can be divided into two classifications: a Peter-like aggressor inclined toward violence—identity A—and a Valentine-like compassionate empathizer—identity B. Though it is represented as biological in

origin, this partitioning is largely dependent on the issue of intent. From the very first chapter, whenever Ender commits a violent act, he ascribes it to the Peter-identity within him. After fighting Stilson, he says, "I am just like Peter. Take my monitor away, and I am just like Peter" (*Ender* 6). Likewise, when Ender beats the Giant's Drink game during Battle School by unexpectedly killing the giant, he identifies with Peter, thinking, "I am a murderer, even when I play. Peter would be proud of me" (*Ender* 47). An integral aspect of identity A is the relationship it has with the identity label of "Murderer." Following Card's logic of intention, if Ender is like Peter, then he is a Murderer and responsible for his actions because he intends them. However, that is only half of the picture. Ender's other half, identity B, revolves around empathy and is what causes him to cry each time he hurts an enemy. As with identity A, the issue again turns to a question of intent. When "Ender began to cry... 'I didn't want to hurt [Bonzo]! ... Why didn't he just leave me alone!'" (*Ender* 150), the reader realizes that Ender's intent was not for aggression but for self-preservation. Like Val, Ender excels at "understanding how other people think" (*Ender* 167), yet unlike Val, he uses his propensity toward empathy to beat his enemy. It is the lack of intent not the lack of violence that separates Ender from Peter. If Ender is like Val, then he is not responsible for his violent actions because he does not engage in them with the intent to cause his enemy pain or suffering. Though identity B is derived from Val, it can be reconstituted as "Not Peter."

Yet, herein lies the dilemma. Ender "hadn't meant to kill the Giant" (*Ender* 47), yet he did so anyway. Even though it "was supposed to be a game ... not a choice between his own grisly death and an even worse murder," Ender still follows Peter's path of aggression and violence, becoming identity A before identity B responds (*Ender* 47). With each act of violence, Ender either assumes the identity-label of Murderer or rejects this identity on the basis that "I am not Peter. I don't have murder in my heart" (*Ender* 84), strengthening the connection between identity B and Not Peter. Behind the Peter-not-Peter dichotomy lies the question of intentionality: If Ender harms, he is like Peter, but if he doesn't intend to harm, then he is not like Peter. Val further strengthens this identification when, in talking to Graff, she exclaims,

I know what you're thinking, you bastard, you're thinking that I'm wrong, that Ender's like Peter. Well maybe I'm like Peter, but Ender isn't, he isn't at all. I used to tell him that when he cried, I told him that lots of times, you're not like Peter, you never like to hurt people, you're kind and good and not like Peter at all!" (*Ender* 105)

Although she has every intention of defending Ender from the Peter identification, her exclamation serves the reverse function and casts him even further into the Peter-not-Peter dichotomy; what does and does not make Ender like Peter is solely his intent. He cannot be like Peter because he does not like to hurt people, yet he is like Peter because he hurts them anyways. This identity A or identity B dichotomy—Peter or not Peter—revolves around the issue of intent but does not attempt to examine the character of Ender himself; rather, it remains oriented toward the proxy identities of his parental siblings. Ender breaks the dichotomy: he cannot be either Peter or Val because he causes pain and harm, does not intend to, but does so nonetheless. His crying, self-loathing, and suicidal actions prove he is not Peter. Yet, his desire to permanently end threats to himself through violence proves he is not Val. Like Card and the reader, Ender accepts that he must either identify as A or B, yet the self-hatred and the guilt of responsibility that he feels reveals there is more to his identity than just intention.

If a philosophy of intent constructed the identity dichotomy, does Ender's guilt and self-hatred deconstruct it? For each of his violent actions, Ender displaces responsibility by identifying with Peter or saying that "Peter might be scum, but Peter had been right, always right" (*Ender* 149). It is not until Ender leaves Battle School that he finally takes personal responsibility and acknowledges, "I've really hurt some people, Val. I'm not making this up" (*Ender* 168). By admitting that his actions have had consequences, Ender begins to reclaim some agency that his dichotomous identity has denied him. The act of killing does not mean he has to identify as a Murderer just as the lack of a murderous intent does not justify the actions that he took. Ender's self-hatred originates with the constraint of his situation: he feels guilty and responsible even though his intent was consistently self-preservation, but he lives within a world where responsibility is dependent upon intent. The intention philosophy declares him innocent, but Ender does not view himself as innocent. It is at this point that Ender's character begins to become divorced from Card's philosophy.

Card's response is revealed in the manner in which *Ender's Game* ends. As Ender's identity begins to evolve beyond the identity A or identity B binary, Card's emphasis on intention and the desire to maintain an empathetic character cause him to choose identity B as Ender's final destination—extending and exaggerating the division rather than removing it. What began as the Peter-identity characterized by aggression and violence becomes epitomized by the Xenocide of the Buggers. However, as Ender's violence escalates from Stilson to

Bonzo to every bugger in existence, save one, so too does his capacity for empathy. It is from this exaggerated place of empathy—of identity B—that Ender writes *The Hive Queen and the Hegemon* and responds to Peter's lifelong aggressive power with empathetic understanding. Through writing this book, Ender begins to process the trauma that is produced by identity A. Nonetheless, Card's insistence on Ender's innocence splits Ender's identity into two seemingly irreconcilable halves: Ender the Xenocide or Ender the Savior of Humanity. Thus, if Ender begins *Ender's Game* as Peter-or-Val and ends as Xenocide-or-Savior, what has changed in terms of the development of his identity?

At the beginning of *Speaker for the Dead*, Stryka, one of the Ender's students on Trondheim, raises the issue of intention once again, declaring that "Xenocide is Xenocide" (*Speaker* 39). She refuses to exonerate Ender's guilt since "just because Ender didn't know [the buggers] were ramen doesn't make them any less dead" (*Speaker* 39). Though this is the same viewpoint that Ender shares at the end of *Ender's Game*—and it was the very motivation for his writing *The Hive Queen and the Hegemon*—he dismisses Stryka. Even when Ender's character shares these very concerns about the morality of intention—as evidenced by his creation of Speakers and his immense guilt over his actions—Card still has Ender dismiss the student's objections, stunting Ender's processing of the trauma.

To understand what has changed in Ender's development from the beginning of *Ender's Game* to the beginning of *Speaker for the Dead*, it is necessary to examine Ender as a survivor of a trauma. The question of intent aside, it is undeniable that the manipulations of Ender's actions by Graff, Rackham, and the other adults leaves him feeling numb, lost, confused, guilty, and angry. Similarly, the entirety of Ender's battle school training—from the very moment he fought Stilson to the last day of Command School—was designed around self-destructive actions. The Giant's Drink game by which they measured the "readiness" of the students also measured "a child's persistence at this game of despair to determine his level of suicidal need" (*Speaker* 141). Colonel Graff and the others pushed Ender to the brink of suicide to elicit from him the level of creative ingenuity that would enable him to destroy the buggers, despite knowing that Ender and Alai's mock battles "might be the last time in [his] life" that he would be happy (*Ender* 111) and that they were "pushing Ender to the edge of human endurance" (*Ender* 124). It is without a doubt that the entire experience was traumatic, and the ending of the first novel only exemplifies that trauma. Regardless of what his intent was, Ender's actions caused the Xenocide of the Buggers, yet Card crafts an ending that absolves Ender of blame. When

Ender writes as Speaker for the Dead, Card wants the reader to forget, remove, or disregard Peter and identity A and view Ender instead in terms of Val and identity B. As Graff cleverly and silently manipulates Ender's reality, so too does Card manipulate the reader's. Card attempts to absolve Ender of responsibility in four ways.

First, he is not tried for his actions. Because the courts cannot prove intent, Ender is not held legally responsible. "Ender Wiggin isn't a killer," Card repeatedly insists, "He just wins—thoroughly" (*Ender* 159). Thus, Card removes the identity label of Murderer that Ender has so often placed upon himself and provides justification for the extreme actions taken by the military in grooming Ender: "If anybody's going to be scared, let it be the buggers" (*Ender* 159). However, the various quotes like this throughout the first book are problematic to Ender processing the trauma and loss. These lines are Card consciously inserting his philosophy, and they are enticing to believe. Readers want to believe them because then they won't feel bad about empathizing with a killer. After all that has happened, readers are rooting for Ender and want to see him succeed. By building an "us" versus "them" mentality around the bugged war, the story primes the readers' sense of shared identity through group membership. However, by encouraging the reader to think solely in terms of intent, Card absolves Ender of all responsibility for his actions. Similarly, Mazer attempts to absolve the adults from feeling responsible for the Xenocide by emphasizing Ender's role in the attack: "You made the hard choice, boy.... You beat them, and it's all over" (*Ender* 207, emphasis added). The issue of who is responsible for the Xenocide is a proxy; it disguises the difficulty Ender faces at trying to process the trauma of what happened to him at such an early age and still be able to live the rest of his life.

In the second step in absolving Ender and completing the separation from the Peter-identity, Card sends Ender and Val to the new colony. On Eros as on Earth, Ender again encounters colonists who "worship" him, who tell him that "They didn't blame him for any of his murders because it wasn't his fault he was just a child" (*Ender* 216). Through Val, Card attempts to sever connections with the past and give Ender a "chance...to get away" because "what's done is done" and all they have left is the future (*Ender* 218). On the new colony, Ender is not held accountable for his actions on Earth; he is instead judged by the quality of his governance and understanding of the buggers.

The final two ways in which Card establishes Ender's B identity are through *The Hive Queen and the Hegemon* and the creation of the *Speaker for the Dead*. The citizens who read Ender's book are transplanted into the mind of the Other, enabled to feel the Speaker's empathetic love toward the Buggers and experience the loss of what it means to have this intelligence annihilated. In this way, Ender's book parallels Card's. The people who read *The Hive Queen and the Hegemon* feel connected to the author and his power for empathy; likewise, the readers of *Ender's Game* have spent two hundred pages inside the head of Ender Wiggin and have truly come to empathize with him. It is tempting to absolve the hero of all wrongdoings. It is easier as a reader to relate to a character whose actions are justifiable, understandable. The average reader does not want to face processing Ender's trauma; the average reader wants him to be able to go back to being a kid, go back "to school till [he is] seventeen" (*Ender* 212) and be able to live out the rest of his childhood. Card must realize the fallacy of this wish, knowing that he cannot leave his hero in emotional shambles at the end of the text, because Ender's evolution from Xenocide or Savoie to Speaker begins the first step in processing his trauma.

However, in becoming the Speaker, Ender swings from a super-Peter to a super-Val. In each of the four events previously discussed, there is a denial of the Peter-identity that represents the aggressor, the Murderer, the Xenocide. It cannot be ignored that Ender is not tried for his actions. He is not held responsible for any of the deaths he caused throughout the book. On the question of responsibility, "Ender had his own opinion, but no one asked him" (*Ender* 216). He leaves Peter behind on Earth, making physical the separation of identity, but cannot ignore the irony that "Peter would save millions of lives ... While I killed billions" (*Ender* 218). He abandons the military and a life of violence for one of seclusion and governance. And finally, after deciding to travel "from world to world" with Val (*Ender* 226), he abandons the name Ender in favor of Andrew. With each of these denials, Card enhances the division of Ender's identity, ripping away the Peter half and leaving Ender with only half an identity rather than trying to repair him as a whole. The act of denying his name mirrors this denial of true self. Like the rest of the characters, the reader becomes complicit in Card's belief that the ends justified the means. Like Graff's training of Ender or Ender's assault on the buggers' home planet, the intent is good—Graff wants to protect the Earth, Ender wants to protect himself, and the reader wants to protect Ender's innocence—but Ender cannot help but internalize guilt. In the ultimate act of forgiveness, the Hive Queen "forgive[s] [Ender and the humans] for our death" (*Ender* 224), yet Ender himself cannot. Even though he

knew he didn't intend to wipe out the entire Bugger population, even though he knew he thought he was playing a simulation game, he cannot accept that he was not responsible. Thus, *Ender's Game* ends as *Speaker for the Dead* begins—with Ender living with and forming his identity through pain (*Ender* 226). Forgiveness itself is not enough because forgiveness excuses actions in favor of intentions; Ender instead must understand, process, and accept his role in the trauma. As *Speaker*, Ender is able to understand and process the lives of those whose story he tells, in practice for the day in which he will be able to accept himself as a human who, despite his best intentions, cannot always control the effect his actions may have.

Though Card still attempts to impose an intent-based philosophy on Ender throughout *Speaker for the Dead*, Ender's identity undergoes a serious transformation as a result of processing the trauma of his childhood. Instead of embracing identity B in place of identity A, by the end of *Speaker for the Dead* Ender is finally free of this dichotomous identity and is ultimately ready to move on. To formulate an understanding of how Ender is able to do this, it can be useful to view Jane—the Artificial Intelligence that befriends Ender—as a case study.

Like Ender, Jane derives her identity from a surrogate parental figure. In the Giant's Drink game from Battle School, "Jane discovered a program whose memories became the core of her identity. She adopted its past as her own, and out of its memories she drew her emotions and desires, her moral sense" (*Speaker* 140-1). As Ender was created in the image of Peter and Val, Jane "remembered creating herself in response to [Ender]" (*Speaker* 142). From that moment forward, Jane's identity coalesced with Ender's. He became the sole human to whom she oriented her life; "her vast intelligence was intensely focused on only one thing: walking with him, seeing what he saw, hearing what he heard, helping with his work, and above all speaking her thoughts into his ear" (*Speaker* 139). As Graff taught Ender loneliness and leadership, Peter taught him violence and power, and Val taught him compassion, Ender "taught [Jane] what it meant to be alive" (*Speaker* 140). Therefore, in the moment of thoughtless action when Ender turned off his connection to Jane, "Jane did not feel it as the meaningless switch-off of a trivial communications device. She felt it as her dearest and only friend, her lover, her husband, her brother, her father, her child—all telling her, abruptly, inexplicably, that she should cease to exist" (*Speaker* 142). Jane's loss of Ender mirrors Ender's feelings of loss and emptiness when he receives Valentine's letter in Battle School (*Ender* 107). When Ender



reads and rereads "Val's empty asked-for letter," "the silence in the room was deep" (*Ender* 107). Likewise, Jane experienced "several excruciating seconds, which to her were years of loneliness and suffering" and found herself "unable to fill up the sudden emptiness" (*Speaker* 142).

However, what differentiates Jane's and Ender's experiences are their reactions to the emptiness; Ender reacts with despair and rage and Jane with cool logic of forgiveness, yet both are permanently changed by the trauma of the lost connection. Ender is driven to suicidal apathy in response to the manipulation, whereas although Jane tries to view Ender as "innocent of wrongdoing" and forgive him, their relationship is forever changed (*Speaker* 143). Jane, however is able to process her loss in a way that Ender was not. She realized that "those few seconds in which parts of her mind came to a halt were not trivial in their effect on her. There was trauma, loss, change; she was not now the same being that she had been before. Parts of her had died" (143). What characterizes Jane's ability to process is that she is aware of the trauma and, as an AI, she is able to empathize with Ender enough to understand that he was "just beginning to feel [the] loss" of Valentine "for the first time in years" and that he "identified powerfully with Novinha's loneliness, pain, and guilt" because "he knew what it felt like to bear the blame for cruel and undeserved death" (*Speaker* 142-3). In this realization, Jane identifies the traumas to which Ender has borne witness and to which he must process. She also realizes that she must create "a self that was not utterly linked to Ender Wiggin, though she was still devoted to him, still loved him above any other living soul;" she must transform her identity into "someone who could bear to be cut off from her lover, husband, father, child, brother, friend" and still maintain a self of her own (*Speaker* 143). It is by this example that the schism in Ender's identity can finally be healed. As Jane is able to form an identity that is separate from Ender's, Ender needs to separate his identity from the ghosts of Peter's and Val's influence.

Before he can reform his identity, Ender must accept that his split identity is a false dichotomy. Rather than being identity A or identity B—more Peter-like or more Val-like—Ender must accept that he can be and is both. Olhado, one of Novinha's children, realizes this irony, saying, "Funny... If I asked somebody whether they'd trust Ender with a decision that might affect the future of the human race, they'd say, of course not. But if I asked them whether they'd trust the Speaker for the Dead, they'd say yes, most of them. And they wouldn't even guess that they were the same person" (*Speaker* 307). Despite the perception that he is either "loathe[d] as the Xenocide ... or ... worship[ed] as the Savoir of

Mankind" (*Speaker* 33), Ender begins to understand that they are not "two faces of the same coin" (*Ender* 166); rather they are different perspectives of the same face of the same coin. In combining these two conflicting identities, Ender must confront "why [he] hate[s] [him]self so badly" (*Ender* 167):

In the moment when I truly understand my enemy, understand him well enough to defeat him, then in that very moment I also love him. I think it's impossible to really understand somebody, what they want, what they believe, and not love them the way they love themselves. And then, in that very moment when I love them ... I destroy them. (*Ender* 167-8)

Once Ender accepts that what enabled him to commit violence was not blind brutality but empathy, he finds that there are people close to him—Val, Alai, Bean, Jane, Val's children, Novinha and her children—who love him as a person, even when he was "thought in every world to be a monster... or a martyr" (*Speaker* 65). Thus, in accepting that he is more than just identity A or identity B, *Speaker for the Dead* speaks for Ender with "full candor, hiding no faults and pretending no virtues" (*Ender* 225). Ender gives up identity names like Xenocide and Speaker when he decides to finally settle down on Lusitania.

There are two actions that can be highlighted as the culmination of Ender's evolution toward a healed identity. The first is Ender's identification with humanity. In jest, he said that "the human race kicked me out a long time ago" (*Speaker* 189), yet he has in truth been cast out of every meaningful human community connection—as Third, at Battle School, as Xenocide. In his Speaking, Ender realizes that being human—or to use the wider term "ramen" to include the non-human species—means being capable of faults and mistakes. Although "the Speaker for the Dead, the one who wrote this book, [is] the wisest man who lived in the age of flight among the stars," although "Ender was a murderer [and] killed a whole people, a beautiful race of ramen that could have taught us everything," Ender finally responds to the question of intention, whispering, "Both human though" (*Speaker* 196).

The second and final act is reclaiming the name "Ender." To seal the treaty he made with the piggies, Ender unifies aspects of himself that had thus far been kept divided. In a single act, Ender grants the piggy named Human the greatest honor a piggy can have—passage into the Third Life—by murdering him (*Speaker* 289-292). This symbolic act that ensures the peace among the three forms of intelligent life—the piggies, the buggers, and the humans—gives Ender back his by forcing him to see that identity A and identity B do not have to be polarities. "It wasn't death... It was resurrection" (*Speaker* 293). Inside of a copy of *The Hive Queen and the Hegemon* in which the treaty is written, Ender signs it

"Ender Wiggin," believing that "maybe the presence of that name on the first treaty ever signed between humans and ramen will do something to change the meaning of the name" (*Speaker* 289). Finally at peace within himself, Ender—like Jane—is able to envision a future. Jane finds companionship with Miro; Ender with Novinha and her family.

Thus, the evolution of Ender's identity in *Speaker for the Dead* and the deconstruction of his dualistic identity serve to similarly deconstruct Orson Scott Card's insistence throughout *Ender's Game* that intention is more important than action by showing the dichotomy to be false. Despite Card's intention for Ender to promote his intent-based philosophy, Ender's experience instead proves that one cannot process and move on from a trauma if he is absolved of the responsibility for his actions by his intent. This is not to say that actions should be divorced from intent and interpreted on their own; it is to say that the question of intent cannot hope to formulate the whole picture. As Card said in the interview quoted above,

When you write without deliberately expressing moral teachings, the morals that show up are the ones you actually live by. The beliefs that you don't even think to question, that you don't even notice-- those will show up. And that tells much more truth about what you believe than your deliberate moral machinations. (Nicholson)

Can it then be argued that, despite Card's insistence on the role of intention in his works, his writing invokes a more comprehensive view of what makes us human? Is his own belief about the moral teachings of *Ender's Game* merely "what he believes he believes" (Nicholson) and not an accurate representation? Is there something to be said for the way that the actions we make—be they good or bad, intentional or not—shape our identities? We can allow them to rule our lives, removing our agency and keeping us stagnant—forever identity A or identity B—or we can choose to process and begin to reconstruct our own identities in a way that allows us to finally move forward.

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