



*"Anyone who wants to understand the Enderverse will have to read Ender's Game and Philosophy."* —MATTHEW WILHELM KAPELL

# ENDER'S GAME

AND PHILOSOPHY  
GENOCIDE IS  
CHILD'S PLAY

EDITED BY  
D. E. WITTKOWER  
AND LUCINDA RUSH

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# **Ender's Game and Philosophy**

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# Ender's Game and Philosophy

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*Genocide Is Child's Play*

Edited by  
D.E. WITTKOWER  
and LUCINDA RUSH



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# Rules of Engagement

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# 01

## Push 1 for Remote War

TIM BLACKMORE

The query: At Auschwitz, tell me, where was God?  
And the answer: Where was man?

—WILLIAM STYRON, *Sophie's Choice*

You just got up from the cockpit wringing wet with sweat. Being a combat pilot is rough work. It's a thrill at times, but also horribly tense, and the traffic on the way home can be murder. Well, maybe not quite murder. All afternoon, your aircraft flew around even if you didn't go with it. It was dull at times, but they said you were signing up to fly the dull, dirty, and dangerous jobs.

At one point you'd forgotten to breathe, you were so focused. You watched someone get into a van, and you nearly bombed them. You remember that your daughter's piano recital was that night, so when you finish fighting in Iraq at 5:00 P.M., you leave the airbase, stop at a florist and get some roses for her. The quiet of your house is a relief after the war that day.

It doesn't seem possible to be everywhere at once, to be both there and here, at home in the United States and also daily fighting a foreign war. But that's exactly what you do: you fly a missile-armed drone aircraft. Unmanned Aerial Vehicles, or UAVs as they're called, are controlled from remote locations and can fly for a day at a time. Some can stay in the air much longer. You control the craft from the US, but it flies 7,500 miles away in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries. No Americans get hurt if the drone crashes or is shot down. Combat stress is more mental than physical.

Every decade the distance between enemies on the battlefield has been widening. When your grandfather or great-grandfather fought in the trenches of World War I, machine guns kept people in their burrows until they were ordered over the top. During the Cold War when a relatively few pilots could destroy most of the human population with a few hundred hydrogen bombs, people described it as a “push-button war.” In Orson Scott Card’s *Ender’s Game*, you command a space fleet fighting intergalactic battles hundreds of light years away. You are there, and also here.

### Doing Brain Damage

There are different kinds of stress in fighting. Consider the pressure on you if you were in a nuclear missile silo command center, deep underground. There would be two of you, each facing a launch station, because the military knows that it’s better to have two people do a terrifying job rather than leave one alone to do it. Let’s say you were ordered to launch your missile. Could you? The order would probably be given only if there were already missiles flying at the United States.

If you have a good imagination, you might think about all the television shows and movies you’ve seen about zombies. Yeah, the post-apocalyptic world won’t be pretty. You might decide that it would be better not to launch your missile; that at least some people’s children should survive. That’s why the Air Force gave your bunker-buddy a gun: they have it out now and are screaming something at you about what’ll happen if you don’t turn your launch key. Overall, you’d rather be sailing. Or doing pretty much anything other than this.

Ender fights a war that is entirely removed from what he feels is his reality. He’s as distant from battle as the people in the missile silo are. He thinks he’s playing games, and he’s partly right. He doesn’t see a real enemy or the enemy dead. He sees only lights in a display. The drone pilot sees what the machine’s radar, infrared, and daytime cameras see. She sits facing a wall of five or more screens showing maps, chat rooms, aircraft information, orders coming from command centers, and flies using a sort of gaming joystick. Because there’s a one-to-two-second lag between the pilot shifting the joystick and the aircraft responding 7,500 miles away, the one thing a UAV

captain can't do is land or launch the machine. That must be done by someone close enough to it so that the aircraft responds immediately to a command.

In Ender's case, there's no lag. Orson Scott Card borrows some old science-fiction technology from another science-fiction writer, Ursula K. Le Guin, who invented a device called the "ansible" in her 1966 novel, *Rocannon's World*. The ansible makes instantaneous communication between people possible, no matter how many miles or even light years away they are. It's a phone that makes faster-than-light calls. Right now it's fiction, but so was sustained human flight a hundred years ago.

Part of the problem with fighting a war at such a distance is that it can be hard to feel that it's real. Hollywood rarely shows a war where your whole job is to wait, push a button, and then get out of a hole in the ground and go home. If everything passes through a series of screens, how do you know it isn't a test? If you were flying an actual plane, you'd feel sensations—the cold air, the smell of old sweat, the sun in your eyes, the sound and feel of the jet engines behind you, the feeling of gravity forcing you into your seat when you bank or throttle up. Instead, you have a mild back or headache from sitting too long at a desk.

Still, there's a sense of being immersed, as if you're living inside the world on the screens. There's also something weirdly mystical about it, like you've left your body, which is what Admiral Chamrajnagar tells Colonel Graff. He says that Ender will learn "the mysteries of the fleet," just like all those "who command by ansible know the majesty of flight among the stars." Being connected to armies light years away will let Ender perform "the graceful ghost dance through the stars, and whatever greatness there is within him will be unlocked, revealed, set forth before the universe for all to see." As amazing as it sounds, one of the nagging problems is that it involves the mass slaughter of another species.

### **Rib Caged**

While remote combat looks as if it should involve only reason and not the physical body, that's not how we're wired. When I play chess, even against a computer, my heart rate rockets up. Watch a video gamer play—it takes the whole body. Gamers

lean, lunge, turn, twist, yell and swear as they play. We get physically invested in all contests. A friend told me a story about a very calm guy, a pipe smoker, sitting in a tense meeting. As he sat staring at the table, his teeth gripping the stem of his pipe, there was a sudden snapping noise and half the pipe fell on the table. He'd bitten it in two. No matter how much we think we're calm, we're trapped in the cage of the body, the heart inside its rib prison.

If you ask someone to show you where "me" is, the thing we call the "self," the person might put a hand to their heart, or point at their head. But if your body isn't in danger when you're fighting at enormous remote distances, why would you get tense, have a fast heartbeat, get the sweats, or panic? Drone operators face the problem of bodily stress, even though they're as removed from danger as possible. Lots of people argue that video games and films make us more distant from killing, and desensitize us to violence, but drone pilots regularly suffer from PTSD, the same as soldiers on the ground.

Ender gets physically exhausted, gets ulcers, has nightmares, and is generally a wreck when he plays virtual games. Orson Scott Card shows us how easy it is to have something imaginary become real by making Ender's games thrilling. The first time I read *Ender's Game* I had to stay up all night to finish it—I had to know how each game came out.

Ender's games are real to him, and his fictional story is real to me. Partly that's because Card writes so well, but it's also because he doesn't ignore the body. He reminds us that we live in our flesh and are instinctively driven to protect it. He starts right off by slamming our heads into pain.

Blood from Stilson's nose spatters the ground. Peter chokes Ender—almost to death. Will Peter kill his little brother one day? Bonzo Madrid's body arcs upward, driven by Ender's savage desperate blow to his body. Madrid is already dead. On Earth, Peter plans for the future and pins live animals to the ground, watching them die. Card nails each act of pain, rage, or torture into our eyes.

What makes mental combat real is Card's repeated insistence that the body gets dragged into everything the mind does. The same is true for pilots flying remote aircraft or for us when we watch suspense or horror movies: how many of us stop breathing during a scene when the hero is in danger, or

have to keep reminding ourselves that “it’s just a movie”? There are at least two selves. One is somewhere in the brain, and the other lives in the body with all its reflexes, reactions, fears and panic attacks. Figuring out which one is the boss can be difficult.

### **Morals by GPS**

If you kill someone, no matter how remote they seem, you’ve still committed murder. We are there mentally, emotionally, and physically, even if we aren’t on the battlefield. Everyone is complicit in Ender’s murders, including Colonel Graff, Major Anderson, the Fleet, and even Valentine, who twice persuades Ender to go back to fighting.

Valentine’s moral dilemma is whether to betray her brother, or endanger the human race. The way she solves her problem is by trapping Ender in a similar one. She makes it clear to him that if he returns to battle, he will likely kill thousands if not millions of the enemy. But if he doesn’t go on fighting, the human race will probably be exterminated. No matter what Ender chooses, he will be implicated in millions or billions of deaths. Only when it’s much too late do we learn that the Buggers weren’t planning another attack.

Hindsight is wonderful and terrible. Figuring out what to do here and now is infinitely tougher. We forget how easily we can be persuaded to go along with things that we later decide are crazy. Society—especially our family, friends, teachers, religious advisors, and people in authority—acts like a huge magnet and sets the needle of our moral compass spinning. If we’re torn apart by guilt over killing others, it makes sense that we might begin to feel for the enemy.

### **Alienated Aliens**

Some enemies seem nastier than others. Many science-fiction horror movies, like *Alien*, show the enemy as some kind of insect. Boy, do people loathe insects. Ender’s great strength is that he understands his enemies no matter how they appear. That gives him the insight he needs to anticipate what they’ll do next. What will make someone understand an enemy more: is it better for people to be on the ground, see each other and



realize that for all their differences, there are also great commonalities between humans? Or is it better to stay back and kill with as little contact as possible? The advantage of the second way is that our soldiers are in less danger. One disadvantage is that it's easier to commit atrocities when everyone looks like an ant to you.

Ender has been set apart from the human race. He's the forbidden Third child, an outcast. In Battle School he's even more alone because he's better than the rest. He's been pushed outside not once, but twice. The wolf children who devour Ender in the Giant's Drink game show him how dangerous absolutely everyone is. No wonder Ender comes to be fascinated by and even love the Hive Queen, light years distant, on her home planet. Like him, she's an alien. She's a winner. She's hated. She's unique. She teaches him because they're alike. The more he learns from the Hive Queen, the more he sympathizes with her. Unfortunately, he also kills her.

### **That's Not Denial**

When someone tells me off for doing something dumb, my first reflex is to say that someone else made me do it, told me to do it (and I could hardly say "No"), or that I was stressed out of my mind. The first two of these dodges put the responsibility on someone else. During the Nuremberg trials after World War II, German officers who explained that they had committed war crimes because they were just following orders were found guilty. That's why blaming someone else for "making" you do what you knew was wrong is sometimes called the "Nuremberg defense." The final excuse is that someone else somehow got inside me and did all the bad things.

All of it is denial. If we feel terrible guilt and know that we should have said no, or refused an order, then the easiest thing to do is to deny that we were ever involved. If I'm a drone pilot, and I see the missiles I fire kill a target who's just planted a roadside mine or Improvised Explosive Device (IED), I may feel sick at having killed someone, but I can reassure myself I'm protecting troops on the ground. If I fire a missile at a rebel outpost but, once the smoke has cleared, see the local villagers drag childrens' bodies out of the rubble, my conscience may ache. I could tell myself that I acted under orders, or that I

worked with the best information I had, or that I didn't have any control over the situation. And anyway, the next pilot would have fired. I might be upset, but I'm a soldier and understand that this is war, after all.

The trouble usually starts when soldiers leave the war zone and try to forget what they've done. If I'm convinced, now, that there weren't any Weapons of Mass Destruction, or Saddam Hussein didn't have anything to do with 9/11 and the World Trade Center, ghosts might begin to haunt me. I have to wonder if the war made sense at all. Why did my friends die? I killed other people to keep my friends safe, but I also killed people who might have been innocent. People firing guns in the air at a wedding celebration can look an awful lot like armed soldiers going to war through the lens of a UAV camera. My explanation that I served my country and am a patriot isn't helping me with the terrible panics and flashbacks I'm having, and it certainly doesn't help the couple whose new life together was cut very short.

It's hard to look back and find wars that either have clear outcomes or Darth Vader bad guys. Soldiers everywhere struggle with what American psychiatrist Robert J. Lifton calls "surd evil." It's so senseless that even the word "absurd" doesn't do it justice. In two of his most famous books *Home From the War*, and *Death in Life: Survivors of Hiroshima*, Lifton says that when there are no good explanations for wanton torture or sadistic murders, we're confronting surd evil.

When Ender turns Dr. Device on the Buggers' home planet, he commits genocide. He could defend himself by saying that he didn't know he was fighting real battles. That's true. He could say that the military ordered him to win in any way possible. That's also true. If Ender tried to use the Nuremberg defense, we'd allow it because Ender is a kid, and we don't expect kids to know better, yet.

Robert Lifton has connected what we understand as surd evil and killing at a distance. The United States has perfected killing by remote control. People who operate lethal injection machines used in prisons don't know who administers a killing dose to an inmate. Their ignorance is supposed to prevent them from feeling guilty. The more distant we are from killing, the more that death can seem pointlessly brutal. It can leave what Lifton calls a "death imprint" on the survivor. The death

imprint is a sense that the dead are more real and present than the living. The burden of survival is one of the things driving the military's suicide rate to its current record highs. There are times when grief about pointless death is too much to bear.

### **Human Guidance**

In *Ender's Game*, people in power see and record everything all the time. Drone warfare is also about seeing. At the beginning of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan there were a few dozen drones in the air. Now there are nearly ten thousand. They hang high out of sight, but produce truckloads of information every hour, enough to cause the Central Intelligence Agency to move thousands of workers into drone image analysis. Drones now fly along the Mexican-American and Canadian-American borders. In the next ten years probably between a third to a half of all flights will be made by drones instead of jets with human pilots. We're living in a world of remote control.

*Ender's Game* suggests that remote war has terrible effects on us, just like all wars, because we live in a moral universe from which there is no escape. Card warns us that if we remove ourselves from killing or try to deny we're part of it, things only get worse. We may have already lost our way because our moral GPS doesn't work anymore. Ender finds redemption when he discovers the queen the Buggers left for him.

Ender learns that everything we do will be remembered by someone. If we've done something we're sorry about, we have to find a way to connect with those who were once our enemies and become the people who speak the truth about their deaths. That's the idea of the Speaker for the Dead. But only a human being can Speak for the Dead. No machine, no drone, can do the job. It can't be done by remote.

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## 02

# What Would Saint Thomas Aquinas Do?

JENNIFER SWANSON

In *Ender's Game*, Ender Wiggin is faced with an enemy who wants him dead—Bonzo Madrid. In *Ender's Shadow*, Bean is faced with the same thing in Achilles. The two boys deal with their similar situations in very different ways. Ender waits for Bonzo to make the first move and then acts to defend himself. He kills Bonzo in the fight, but this was not his intention—he simply wanted to deter Bonzo from ever attacking him again.

Bean, on the other hand, moves against Achilles almost immediately after Achilles's arrival at Battle School. Bean ultimately does not kill Achilles, but he makes it clear that without a confession, he will leave him to certain death, suspended in the air ducts. While Bean's goal is to save his own life, his plan is to kill Achilles if he will not confess to his murders.

What, if anything, is the moral difference between Ender's and Bean's actions? Does it matter that Bonzo ends up dead while Achilles does not? Or is it the intentions of the boys that matter?

### **But I Didn't Mean for That to Happen!**

Thomas Aquinas was a thirteenth-century Catholic priest who is considered to be the Church's greatest theologian and philosopher. One way that Aquinas's work still influences current philosophy is with the *principle of double effect*, which originates in his discussion of homicidal self-defense in his *Summa Theologica*. This principle is concerned with evaluating the moral permissibility of an action that will lead to a

foreseen yet unintended effect that we usually think of as wrong. It is most commonly used today in the moral debate over euthanasia.

If a terminally ill patient is in a terrible amount of pain, sometimes the physician will administer an extremely high dose of painkillers. While the doctor's intention is to alleviate the patient's pain, he also knows that his action will result in the death of the patient. According to the principle of double effect, this is a permissible action even if we believe that doctors are morally obliged to never act to end a life. This is because the patient's death is merely a side effect of the attempt to relieve his pain, and not the intended result of the doctor's action.

### **Why Didn't He just Leave Me Alone?**

Ender meets Bonzo ("Not bahn-zoe. Bone-so. The name's Spanish") Madrid shortly after he arrives at Battle School. Bonzo is the commander of Salamander Army, which is where Ender has been assigned. He insults Ender because of his small size and tells him that he is not allowed to practice with the others or take part in their battles.

When Ender begins practicing with some of the students from his launch group instead, Bonzo attempts to stop him until Ender reminds him that no one can give orders regarding free play time. Furthermore, the more Ender practices, the more his trade value is enhanced—and trading him is exactly what Bonzo wants to do.

Bonzo is forced to rescind his order, but Ender continues to obey him regarding participation in battles until the day that Salamander is facing certain defeat by Leopard Army. Ender disables three opponents and the battle ends in a draw.

While most of the other students assume that this was Bonzo's strategy, the members of Salamander Army know better. Bonzo becomes even more filled with hatred towards Ender. That very day, he trades Ender to Rat Army. Before Ender can leave, however, Bonzo punches him and berates him for disobeying orders.

When Ender gets promoted to Commander of Dragon Army, he turns a group of underage, undersized, and inexperienced boys into the best army in the school. When they face

Salamander Army—Bonzo’s army—Dragon wins in less than a minute, despite Bonzo having a twenty-minute time advantage. Ender realizes that the situation has only succeeded in adding fuel to the fire—turning Bonzo’s already boiling rage murderous.

Things come to a head when Bonzo and some of the other boys corner Ender while he’s taking a shower, and Ender convinces Bonzo to face him alone. Ender knows that he must win quickly or not at all.

When Bonzo goes for the attack, Ender succeeds in getting him off balance and manages to position himself with his back to Bonzo. Ender then lunges upward, driving his head into Bonzo’s face. As Ender turns to see blood pouring from Bonzo’s nose, he knows that he has won the fight and he can just walk away. But it’s not that simple—Bonzo will come for him again. The fight must be finished now, and for good. Ender kicks Bonzo in the chest with both feet and then maneuvers under him in order to deliver a final blow to his crotch.

When Bonzo finally collapses to the ground, Ender knows he has done something terrible. He returns to his room with his friend Dink, where he begins to cry. “I didn’t want to hurt him!” he cries. “Why didn’t he just leave me alone!”

Those in charge don’t confirm the death, saying merely that Bonzo has been graduated and sent home, but eventually Ender realizes the truth. Although it was in self-defense, even though his own life was at stake, Ender feels terrible about what happened. He has killed another student, another boy.

### **Aquinas, Meet Ender Wiggin**

What would Aquinas say about Ender’s actions? Well, according to the doctrine of double effect, Ender has done nothing morally wrong. Bonzo presents an immediate threat to Ender’s life in the moment, meaning that Ender is acting in self-defense. As long as Ender is defending himself, his actions are permissible.

Furthermore, Ender is aware that Bonzo will try again to kill him, and he wants to send a message that will prevent that. He does *not* want to kill Bonzo, nor does he intentionally try. He simply wants to prevent future confrontations. Bonzo’s death is merely a side-effect of Ender’s attempt to save his own

life both in the moment and going forward. This being the case, the application of Aquinas's principle of double effect does not make it appear as though Ender has done anything wrong.

### From the Streets to the Air Ducts

In *Ender's Shadow*, Bean faces a similar situation. Growing up in poverty on the streets of Rotterdam, children form groups, known as "crews." Bean tells Poke, his crew boss, that what she needs is a bully to protect her crew. He says, "You give food to bullies every day. Give that to *one* bully and get him to keep the others away from you." But there's just one question—what to do if once the bully is bought, he won't hold up his end of the bargain? "If he won't," says Bean, "you kill him."

Rather than choosing someone "big and dumb, brutal but controllable" as Bean prefers, Poke chooses a smaller boy, smart, with a deformed leg, one who calls himself Achilles. ("The name is not pronounced uh-KILL-eez, it's pronounced ah-SHEEL. French.") The children successfully overpower him, but Achilles outsmarts them all, seizing leadership of the crew even while lying helpless on the ground. Bean alone sees the danger, telling Poke, "Kill him. If you don't kill him now, he's going to kill *you*." But then it's too late. Achilles takes over the crew, but he never forgets Bean's exhortation to Poke. And Bean knows it. Fortunately, he leaves for Battle School shortly afterwards, becoming a member of Ender's Dragon Army.

When Bean is promoted to Commander of Rabbit Army and meets his soldiers for the first time, there is a new Launchy in the army. In the back of the barracks, "several inches taller than Bean remembered, with legs of even length now, both of them straight," stands the new boy. "Ho, Achilles," says Bean.

Bean knows that a confrontation is inevitable, and that Achilles still wants to see him dead. He knows that he must remove Achilles from the school one way or another in order to save his own life. But he's half Achilles's size—he has no chance at defeating him the way Ender defeated Bonzo. He will have to find a different way.

One night soon after, Bean calls Achilles to his room and tells him that they're going into the air duct system together. That's how Ender won all those battles, he says—they spied

on the other commanders and the teachers through the air ducts. Achilles is thrilled. This is his opportunity to get Bean alone.

Unfortunately for Achilles, he soon finds himself suspended in midair by a deadline. He can't climb the line, nor can he reach any walls. He is at Bean's mercy. When he points out that Bean isn't a killer, Bean tells him, "But the hot dry air of the shaft will do it for me. You'll dehydrate in a day. Your mouth's already a little dry, isn't it? And then you'll just keep hanging here, mummifying."

Bean demands a confession—for the murder of Poke, for everything he's done. He tells Achilles he has a choice—to "dry out on the line, or let the teachers know just how crazy you are." Achilles confesses to the seven murders he's committed and is removed from Battle School.

### **Aquinas, Now Meet Bean**

What would Aquinas say about Bean's actions? While it's true that Bean does not actually kill Achilles, it's clear that he would have had no problem leaving him to die if Achilles had not met his conditions. Achilles avoids this by confessing, but Bean could not have been certain that this was going to be the outcome. He was fully prepared to bring about Achilles's death.

Bean's behavior is different from Ender's in that while Ender actually does kill Bonzo, that isn't his goal. All he wants is to scare Bonzo so much that he will never attack Ender again. While it may have been unrealistic, he continued to hold out hope that they could continue to coexist at Battle School. Bean, on the other hand, knows that there is no chance that he and Achilles can stay there together, and his ultimate goal is to make sure that Achilles is gone—no matter what it takes. Even if it means Achilles has to die.

The problem is that when Bean implements his plan, when he invites Achilles into the air ducts, he's in no immediate danger. Therefore Bean's actions cannot be interpreted as self-defense. He intends to kill Achilles if that's what the situation requires, and Achilles's death would have been no accident. It would have been murder, and Aquinas would never have condoned it.



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