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Ender/Shiva, Lord of the Dance

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“Soon enough Ender Wiggin will...dance the graceful ghost dance
through the stars...”

—*Ender’s Game*

Believe it or not, it’s no exaggeration to say that *Ender’s Game* has been the most transformative book of my life. In fact, when I first read it, at the age of fifteen, it almost single-handedly initiated a crisis of faith in me that ended up lasting for eight long years. It should come as no surprise to fellow science fiction fans—and especially fans of *Ender’s Game* in particular—that science fiction is full to bursting with philosophical ideas. But the skeptical reader need not fear; in this case, at least, you don’t have to take my word for it. Although Orson Scott Card encourages the reader to “skip this intro and go straight to the story” in his introduction to the 1991 edition of *Ender’s Game*, he also mentions his master’s degree in literature, and that all “the layers of meaning are there to be decoded, if you like to play the game of literary criticism.” So if you think you might have found a hidden layer of meaning in *Ender’s Game*, it’s a lot less likely that he or she is just crazy, and a lot more likely that there really is some hidden meaning there—and maybe even one that Card himself consciously put there to be found! Without further ado, then, let’s get right to one interesting example of *Ender’s Game*’s hidden meanings.

An Ancient Hindu “Battle Room”

What we call “Hinduism” is widely considered one of the most important philosophical and religious traditions of Asia, and is the original source of such important ideas as *karma* and *reincarnation*. Its most famous scripture, called *The Bhagavad Gita* (or just the *Gita*), is an excerpt from one of Hinduism’s two central epic poems. Literally translated from Sanskrit into English as the “Song of God,” the *Gita* can be usefully understood as a kind of Hindu New Testament, since it comments on and updates what could be thought of as the Hindu Old Testament, a group of sacred theoretical and practical writings known as the *Vedas*.

The setting for the *Gita* is a war for succession between two sets of cousins, the righteous Pandavas and the treacherous Kauravas. And the central conflict is that the hero, Arjuna, filled with doubt about engaging in this familial civil war, seeks out the (ultimately shocking) advice of his personal chariot-driver, Krishna, who turns out to be a divine incarnation of the god Vishnu. The gist of Krishna’s divine advice is that every person on earth possesses an immortal soul, has lived an almost infinite number of past lives, will live an almost infinite number of future lives, and must therefore merely carry out their sacred duty without regard for causing or experiencing death.

In Arjuna’s case (since he belongs to the warrior caste) this sacred duty amounts to waging a just war against his family, realizing that killing them really only amounts to bringing about their next reincarnations (as opposed to destroying them forever). In other words, the apparent life-and-death battle that is about to begin at the end of the *Gita* is actually better

understood as a kind of *Ender's Game*-style battle room, because the whole thing is ultimately a staged exercise, used for (spiritual) training, from which the soldiers' souls emerge unscathed.

The similarities between *Ender's Game* and Hinduism in the *Gita* don't end there, however.

The Divine Wiggins Trinity

The three primary gods of the Hindu pantheon—Brahman, the creator-ruler, Vishnu, the savior, and Shiva, the destroyer-renewer—have a surprising amount in common with the three Wiggins siblings in *Ender's Game*. It's worth mentioning, though, that the issue of gods in Hinduism is quite complicated. On one hand, there are a theoretically infinite number of Hindu gods; and on the other hand, Hinduism is often characterized as a pantheistic religion, meaning that God is in some sense everything/everything is a part of God. Thus, at one level, Brahman (especially when it is spelled without the final "n") can be understood as the entirety of the cosmos. At a second level, Vishnu and Shiva are also central parts. And at a third level, every sentient being together makes up both God and the cosmos. In regard to this third level, however, we humans—and this is the most important thing to remember—don't yet know that we're God (at least not for as long as we're living uneducated earthly lives).

But with the help of the sacred teachings of Hinduism, we slowly begin to figure it out. When this happens, at the moment of death, we become free from the cycle of births, deaths and rebirths (called *samsara*), and thus reunite (or re-identify) with God (an experience called *moksha*). The God to whom we thus reunite is where Brahman comes in, as he is the one who symbolizes the fact that we are all part of God. Now, whenever each soul (or *atman*) achieves

liberation in this way, the cosmos literally gets just a little bit smaller. This is where Vishnu's salvation comes in, as he is the one who symbolizes this liberation. Eventually, every single *atman* eventually achieves this realization and freedom, at which point the entire cosmos winks out of existence, leaving only God behind—alone, and perfectly conscious of himself. This is where Shiva's dance of destruction comes in, as he is the one who symbolizes the end of the cosmos. But things don't end there, with the destruction of the world. Every time the world ends—because this entire meta-cycle (a *kalpa*), according to Hinduism, has happened, and will happen, an infinite number of times—God, as it were, eventually begins to fall back asleep, to dream the dream that we call the world. Essentially, this means that God again splits himself into the seemingly-separate souls, us, who find ourselves bound all over again in the cycle of reincarnation. This, finally, is where Shiva's dance of re-creation comes in, as he also symbolizes the beginning of each new “round” of the cosmos.

In *Ender's Game*, similarly, the three siblings, Peter, Valentine and Ender Wiggins, are obviously the three most important characters, and one can already see a connection between them and the three central Hindu gods in the Wiggins' names. First, “Peter” means “rock,” which is connected to the fact that Jesus allegedly chose Peter to be the first Pope (that is, the rock-like foundation of the Catholic Church). And by the end of the novel Peter Wiggins has become the “Hegemon,” or supreme ruler, of Earth. Second, the most famous historical figure named “Valentine” is of course the saint who inspired Valentine's Day, an important symbol of love in Western culture. And Valentine Wiggins is the most likable and loving of the three siblings, doing her utmost throughout the novel to save both Ender and Peter. And third (pun intended), “Ender,” the nickname that Andrew Wiggins gives himself, could be understood as a

synonym for “finisher.” And Ender eventually finishes off both the war and (almost) the entire “bugger” species.

Good Old Videogame-Style Detachment

A second important similarity between *Ender's Game* and Hinduism in the *Gita* is that ethically right action according to both of them involves nothing more than the detached fulfillment of one's duty. In the Sanskrit language of the *Gita*, the phrase for such detached action is *karma yoga*, which one translator, Barbara Stoler-Miller, translates as “disciplined action.” Disciplined action, she explains, is any action performed, not impulsively or with calculating self-interest, but rather as a form of worshipful service to God. In fact, detached action is so important that the *Gita* even attributes it to God himself.

In *Ender's Game*, similarly, what allows Ender to be so successful in the near-genocide is that he coldly and cerebrally carries out the battle “simulation” as ordered by his superiors. It is also crucial in *Ender's Game*, as in the *Gita*, that this detached attitude not be natural, nor pursued and enjoyed for its own sake or its consequences, because the result of this is, in *Ender's Game*, Peter's sociopathic viciousness, and, in the *Gita*, the demonic type of human being.

The World-Soul's Hive-Mind

The last important similarity I'll discuss between *Ender's Game* and Hinduism in the *Gita* involves the aliens' "hive mind" and the Hindu concept of the "world soul." The Hindu concept flows naturally from the idea of pantheism, because if God is (in some sense) everything, or at least *everyone*, then ultimately all thinking is really just God's own thinking—even though that thinking is scattered across billions of different human brains. In other words, when anyone has a thought, it is really God that is having the thought. Therefore, each of us is actually plugged into one giant divine mind, even though we don't experience things that way.

In the thirteenth chapter of the *Gita*, Krishna explains this idea with the analogy of a military general coming to know a field of battle. God, he explains, is the "field-knower in all fields," experiencing the world from the perspective of each human being, and knowing the world through the sum total of each human being's seemingly-separate knowledge.¹ For what it's worth, the only important difference between this Hindu idea of a world-soul and *Ender's Game's* alien hive-mind (at least in this, the first volume of the series) is that the aliens (or, rather, the queen) experience their communal mind *as* communal.

So What?

Even if I'm right that there are meaningful similarities between *Ender's Game* and Hinduism in the *Gita*, why is it worth thinking about these similarities, much less reading about them?

¹ *The Bhagavad-Gita: The Song of God*, trans. and ed. Swami Prabhavananda & Christopher Isherwood (New York: Signet, 2002), 100.

One interesting aspect of these connections is their function as a subtle form of foreshadowing. If you know anything about Hinduism before you read *Ender's Game* for the first time, then you might know that parts of Hinduism are deeply counterintuitive and troubling to our commonsense way of looking at the world. And if you were to pick up on these connections that I have suggested, you might even guess that, although Ender is the protagonist of the novel, he may not turn out to be a perfect hero. Remember, as one example of this foreshadowing, that the Hindu god to which Ender is connected is the same one that callously destroys the entire cosmos, and on a regular basis! Even more interesting, though, is that this connection frames *Ender's Game* as, in part, a criticism of Hinduism and, by extension, Western stereotypes of Asian politics and political philosophy. To see this, all we'll need to do is to quickly go back over each of the three important similarities from before—but this time, with an eye to the critical dimension hidden in each of those similarities.

Pathological Deities

It's clear as early as *Ender's Game's* first chapter that Ender comes from a screwed-up family. First, there is his older brother Peter's abusive behavior toward Valentine and himself. Peter, at first among his siblings, and then later in his political activities, is a true tyrant. And in light of the connection I have shown between Peter and Brahman, one result of this connection would seem to be that there is something similarly tyrannical about this Hindu supreme God. For one thing, Brahman, at least in some respects, literally incorporates the entire world into himself, and with apparent disregard for the tremendous suffering of those he rules. Similarly, Peter

compares himself, in chapter two, to a puppeteer, and Card also describes Peter, in chapter nine, as perfectly controlled and perfectly self-interested.

Second on the “screwed-up” charts, Valentine, although a loving and supportive sister, is ultimately only able to lessen slightly the horror of Peter’s behavior, and even ends up getting caught up in—and becoming partially responsible for—some of the worst political things that Peter does. In fact, Card describes Valentine, in chapter nine, as not only being a master manipulator, but also as someone who enjoys being manipulative. As a result of this connection, then, the salvation offered by her Hindu counterpart, Vishnu (aka Krishna), would ultimately be empty, a merely apparent delivery from one type of bondage (to Peter-Brahman) to another.

And finally in regard to screwed-up-ness, Ender, in chapter ten, self-consciously repeats, on other kids (such as Bean) in the military school, the exact same manipulations of which he has been the victim. Similarly, in the final chapter, Card describes Ender as being most exhilarated by the possibility that the battle “simulator” possesses for control. But what’s even worse is that Ender even finds himself wondering, in chapter eleven, whether his own manipulations are even managing to undermine the manipulations of those above him. One result of this connection, then, would be that whenever Shiva dances a new cosmos into existence, his dance is always ultimately choreographed by Brahman, and all for the sake of Brahman’s hegemonic control—which, as it turns out, is exactly what Hinduism tells us is the case!

Unethical Indifference

That Ender pursues an ethics of detachment becomes clearer and clearer as *Ender's Game* progresses, as when, for example, in the seventh chapter, Card describes Ender's anger as "cold, and therefore useful." More disturbingly, near the end of *Ender's Game*, Ender goes forward with what he believes to be his final battle simulation even though he believes his intended course of action will disqualify him from becoming supreme commander—and thereby leaving the human species without its only hope. At this point, I would argue, the game has truly become Ender's entire world.

But the most obvious objection to Ender's ethical attitude of detachment, of course, is his near-xenocide of the alien species. His method there, as throughout *Ender's Game*, is to accept the inevitability of the game, and then play it as well as he can—his only passion being breaking as many rules and undermining as many of the gamers' plans as possible. You can already see this in the first chapter, where Ender consciously violates the etiquette of school-fighting by kicking the bully when the bully's down (which is, as it turns out, is exactly what the officers watching him wanted him to do, namely, to be ruthless in pursuing his self-interested objective). The deepest problem with Ender's method, though—and this is certainly true in the real world—is that the "powers that be" are perfectly comfortable with their pawn trying to fight them. In fact, having the energy to fight them is actually required to be a good pawn in the first place. Since Hinduism, along with many other aspects of classical Asian thought, affirms this same ethics of detachment, the implication seems to be that it (and they) too can have potentially disastrous political results.

Yellow Bugger Hordes

The final implied criticism of Hinduism and Asian political philosophy that I will discuss is the one that flows from the similarities between the aliens' "hive mind" and the concept of a "world-soul" in Hinduism. From the very beginning of *Ender's Game*, Ender shows a troubling openness to such group-think, as Card describes him as being "too willing to submerge his will in that of another, unless that other is an enemy." Also along these lines, it makes Ender weird that, when he plays "Buggers and Astronauts" with his brother Peter, he actually ends up sympathizing with the aliens.

As Ender matures in the school, however, he becomes more and more committed instead to a kind of defiant individualism, with his primary innovation as a commander being his decision to break his team down into smaller, self-directed groups. But this individualism remains deeply indebted to the very socialism it opposes. For one thing, Card describes Ender's fleet, because of their formations and movements, as resembling an alien fleet. And for another, Ender's primary weapon in the war against the aliens, "Dr. Device," like all of the cutting-edge human technology of the time, was originally ripped off from the aliens' own technology.

Similarly, the main earthbound enemy in *Ender's Game*, originally published during the height of the Cold War in 1977, is Russia, and one of the most disturbing things about the aliens to the humans in *Ender's Game* is the queen/worker structure of their society, with the concept of "worker" being of key importance in communism. Finally on this point, the most menacing thing of all about the aliens is that they appear as a homogenous horde, with a hive-mind like those found in ants and bees, and this is the same racist stereotype that continues to influence many Westerners' perception of Asian peoples.

A Political Warning

In conclusion, the way that the humans in *Ender's Game* deal with the aliens after the aliens' near-xenocide is troubling in several specific ways. First, Ender only leaves Earth to learn more about the aliens, like a Eurocentric anthropologist preparing for a dig among "the natives." Second, Card puts an implied justification of the near-xenocide in the mouth of the queen herself—namely that, since the aliens were the initial aggressors against the humans (based on an underestimation of humans' capacities), the queen feels no resentment at the attempted xenocide. This, I would suggest, sounds alarmingly similar to the kind of stories that people in the Western world have historically used to justify European imperialism and colonialism in Africa, Asia and the Americas. In other words, the only thing that appears to lessen Ender's crime in *Ender's Game*, and the only thing that prevents Ender from being presented as a complete monster, is that the beings he destroyed are presented as nothing more than slaves bound to their hive-mind. Unfortunately, finally, this is something which many people in our world still attribute to Asian nations today. And it is past time that we—inspired by *Ender's Game*—overcame this prejudice.