

ABSTRACT

Exploring the Philosophical and Cultural Significance of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*

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The Nickelodeon television series *Avatar: The Last Airbender* is a popular children's show, which aired from 2005-2008. My thesis explores the various philosophical traditions and cultural significance of the show to display how it would be considered 'appropriate' media by Plato, and therefore, another text of philosophy, introducing the audience to various, realistic depictions of human nature, and virtue ethics. First, I discuss the friendships in the show, while relating them to the different friendships outlined by Aristotle. Friendships were categorized as either having virtue or exhibiting qualities that resembled virtue. In my second chapter, I discover the different eastern and western philosophical influences of the show. I look at Hinduism, Taoism, Confucianism, Kung Fu, and the Presocratic philosophers, Plato, Aristotle, and Heidegger. The show embeds these philosophical traditions in a very respectful and never-done-before way. I found the show to be a potential model for a new type of storytelling that would encompass more complex thoughts about traditional notions of good versus evil. In my third chapter, I analyze a few key characters and their moral formations while using Aristotle and Machiavelli as the framework to view their actions and individual journeys. In my final chapter, I interpret the various contemporary, real-world topics that the show masterfully embeds into various episodes. These include the environment, disabilities, censorship, Asian representation in the media, feminism, and imperialism. I also reflect on my thoughts on the show, both when I saw it as a child and later as an adult, and other viewers' thoughts on the show, to display the impact it has on people's lives.

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EXPLORING THE PHILOSOPHICAL CONTEXT OF *AVATAR: THE LAST*

AIRBENDER

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis, I analyze the popular Nickelodeon children's television show *Avatar: The Last Airbender* as if it were a philosophical text to illuminate the philosophical and cultural significance of the show. The show incorporates the adventure, fantasy, action, and comedy genres, while also mixing eastern and western philosophical traditions. Additionally, the show takes on socio-political topics to engage in a greater social commentary of the real world. The reason that I chose this show to analyze is because of its realistic depiction of human nature and of contemporary social issues. With this thesis project, I plan to prove how this show can be viewed as a philosophical text, educating people on the complexities of life, ethics, and eastern and western philosophies. I reference various Presocratic philosophers, Platonic dialogues, Aristotle, Machiavelli, and Heidegger to aid my analysis of the show's philosophy.

To provide further context for my arguments, here is a brief overview of the show and many of its characters. The animated show aired for three seasons (I refer to the seasons as books from here on) from 2005-2008. The show depicts the coming-of-age journey of a physically 112-year-old, but mentally 12-year-old boy named Aang, the current "Avatar" and the hero of the series. Accompanied by a few friends he meets along the way, Aang goes on a journey to master all four elements to defeat evil and restore balance to the world. The type of "superpower" introduced in this show is the concept of "bending." This concept, which I expand on in the second chapter, is a fictional power that lets characters manipulate the various earthy elements—air, water, fire, and earth.

Only some individuals in the world possess this ability—and no one person can “bend” more than one element, except for the Avatar. The Avatar also has the power to enter into a meditative state in which their power is at full capacity—known as the “Avatar state” (“The Avatar State”). Therefore, it is the Avatar’s duty to learn all four elements and rid the world of evil, ensuring peace and balance in the world. In the first episode, Katara, a waterbender from the Southern water tribe—a major character in the show—narrates, “My grandmother used to tell me stories of the old days—a time of peace, when the Avatar kept balance between Water tribes, Earth Kingdom, Fire Nation, and Air Nomads. But that all changed when the Fire Nation attacked. Only the Avatar mastered all four elements. Only he could stop the ruthless Firebenders. But when the world needed him the most, he vanished. A hundred years have passed, and the Fire Nation is nearing victory in the war. Two years ago, my father (Hakoda, leader of the water tribe and the father of Sokka and Katara) and the men of my tribe journeyed to the Earth Kingdom to help fight against the Fire Nation, leaving me and my brother to look after our tribe. Some people believe that the Avatar was never reborn into the air nomads and that the cycle is broken. But I haven’t lost hope. I still believe that somehow the Avatar will return to save the world” (“The Boy in the Iceberg” 23:20). This intro sets up the show’s premise, which I analyze and contextualize to show the philosophical significance and cultural relevance of the series.

CHARACTER CHART

Character	Brief Description	Philosophical significance
Aang	The “Avatar,” and master of all elements. It is his duty to defeat the Firelord and restore peace and balance to the world.	He is the titular and one of the main characters of the show. He embarks on significant existential journeys.
Zuko	One of the initial villains, later turned heroes of the show. A Firebender and Fire Nation prince. Son of Ozai, nephew of Iroh, and brother of Azula	He is also a main character of the show. Originally a villain, he becomes a more complex character, or an anti-hero, embarking on his own existential journey and redefines traditional meanings of good versus evil.
Sokka	A member of the southern water tribe. The leader of “Team Avatar” and brother of Katara. Does not have any bending abilities but is skilled with leadership and battle intelligence.	Comic relief and main character of the show. Exemplifies ways in which the show provides social commentary on feminism as well as exemplifying Aristotelian friendship.
Katara	A member of the southern water tribe. Part of “Team Avatar” and younger sister of Sokka. The only waterbender of the southern water tribe.	One of the main moral compasses of the show who is harboring her own deep resentment which she learns to let go of. Represents how loss can turn negative or positive.
Toph	From a prestigious and wealthy Earth Kingdom family. One of the strongest Earthbenders in the show. Also, a member of “Team Avatar.”	The only disabled, and blind member of the team. She represents the show’s way of positive representation of disabled people in the media.
Iroh	Older brother of Ozai and first in line for the Fire Nation throne. Father of Lu Ten and uncle to Zuko. A member of the “White Lotus.” Also revered as the “Dragon of the West” due to his previous life as a military general and a powerful Firebender.	Another moral compass of the show. Also, Zuko’s mentor and father-figure. A key player in Zuko’s redemption arc.
Ozai	The usurper of the Fire Nation throne and later the “Phoenix King.” Father of Zuko and Azula and younger son of Azulon and grandson of previous	The source of Zuko’s desire to achieve honor. He desperately wants the love and honor of his father to be restored.

	Firelord Sozin. A powerful Firebender.	
Azula	Daughter of Ozai and briefly the Firelord. A powerful Firebender.	Zuko's foil. Representative of how despite growing up under the same conditions and in the same household, how different Azula's character ends up in contrast to Zuko's.
Ty Lee	Childhood friend of Azula, Zuko, and Mai. A non-bender but has the ability to temporarily take away others' bending powers through her manipulation of chi (acupuncture?).	Morally ambiguous character. A huge part of Azula's destruction.
Mai	Childhood friend of Azula and Ty Lee and later love interest of Zuko. A non-bender, but a skillful fighter and knife/blade thrower.	Zuko's love interest and later part of Azula's destruction.
Roku	The avatar before Aang. Originally from the Fire Nation. Maternal great-grandfather of Zuko and Azula. A childhood friend of previous Firelord Sozin.	Provides guidance to Aang. A mentor-like figure to Aang.
Sozin	The paternal great grandfather of Zuko and Azula. The leader of the Fire Nation's expansion/colonization movement. Powerful Firebender.	Roku's foil. The perpetrator/instigator of the Fire Nation's imperial streak.

CHAPTER ONE

On Friendship

In this chapter, I start with a brief discussion of the three types of friendship that Aristotle addresses in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. I then use this framework to analyze the different friendships displayed in *Avatar*. In the second part of this chapter, I examine the main friendship of “Team Avatar” and how their friendship initially exhibits friendships of utility and pleasure, while progressing to complete friendships through the events of the show. In the third section, I use Aristotle’s framework to analyze the “White Lotus” members, who are the various masters and elders in the show, to depict friendships of virtue. Following the third section, I analyze the least virtuous friendship of the “Charlie’s Devils,” or of Azula, Mai, and Ty Lee. Finally, I assess what we gain through our own appreciation of the show and its depiction of friendship by using this Aristotelian framework.

Context on Aristotle

Aristotle’s theory of friendships provides the greater foundation for his moral philosophy theory concerning *Eudaimonia*, or human flourishing. The ancient Greek concept of this word relates to a more significant meaning than the term “friendship” in the traditional English sense. It “covers not just the (more or less) intimate relationships between persons not bound together by near family ties, to which the words used in the modern languages to translate it are ordinarily restricted, but all sorts of family relationships (especially those of parents to children, children to parents, siblings to one

another, and the marriage relationship itself)” (Cooper 620). The term can also have a more mechanical and everyday usage relating to friendships that one acquires through social clubs or business relationships (Cooper 620). Friendships are also considered equivalent to virtue or containing an attribute of virtue. A virtuous person can achieve *Eudaimonia* only with the addition of a few virtuous friendships. The individual’s degree of virtuousness is not a sufficient clause for *Eudaimonia*. All three friendships I examine from the show can be analyzed using this framework since they fall under each category of Aristotle’s friendships—pleasure, utility, and virtue.

The pleasurable type of friendship typically occurs when people are deriving pleasure from the relationship. Aristotle states, “we love witty people not for what they are, but for the pleasure they give us” (*Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156a12-13). There is also a temporary aspect to this type of friendship. “A friend is loved in that he provides pleasure and when he no longer provides pleasure, the friendship is dissolved” (Fortenbaugh 53). Therefore, as this type of friendship only lasts as long as both parties are providing pleasure to one another, it is not a complete friendship as it is always dependent upon both parties giving something to the other in exchange for something in return. An example of this type of friendship can be seen in my father’s racquetball club. They meet every weekday and Sunday, playing racquetball at the gym. While they do make some small talk before and after each session, much of their friendship is derived from the pleasure they receive from playing a sport together. This type of friendship is not necessarily a “bad” friendship as it “has a resemblance to the friendship of morally good men, for good men are pleasant to each other” (Fortenbaugh 54). However, it is incomplete as the entire foundation of their friendship is based on a sport they play

together, and if one of the members moves to a different city, then the friendship would be dissolved.

The next type of friendship is that of utility. In a similar way to the pleasurable friendship, this type of friendship typically occurs when each person is gaining use from the relationship. Aristotle states, “So we see that when the useful is the basis of affection, men love because of the good they get out of it, and when pleasure is the basis, men love for the pleasure they get out of it” (*Nic. Ethics*, 1156a14-15). In both types of friendships each person is essentially “getting” something out of the friendship whether pleasure or utility. According to Aristotle, these two friendships are “incidental since the object of affection is not loved for being the kind of person he is, but for providing some good or pleasure” (*Nic. Ethics*, 1156a17-19). Even if the parties involved in the relationship are wishing each other well, it is still not a complete friendship as they typically wish each other well for the sake of themselves. Aristotle states, “if one wishes for someone what is good because he is useful to oneself, one would not wish this for his sake not for one’s own, while *euvoia* is for the sake not of the well-wisher himself but for that of the person to whom one wishes well” (Cooper 632). These types of friendships can be seen in college. They can be seen in the formation of study groups that serve the purpose of helping each person prepare well for the course and help understand the material better. In my philosophy courses, the material we are engaging with can sometimes be challenging, so it is beneficial to discuss the texts with these individuals. Sometimes they may have understood the text better or understood what the professor had taught better. In either case, this friendship, like the friendship of pleasure, is not a necessarily “bad” friendship or a friendship of vice; rather, it is another incomplete friendship, as it

typically dissolves once the class is over. Furthermore, due to the fact that “what is considered utility can change over time and hence one cannot count on someone remaining “useful,” such friendships are prone to disappointment and dissolution. Whilst they can be quickly activated, they can just as quickly fall apart” (Healy 444). Therefore, while this kind of friendship is also not *necessarily* vicious, it is still considered incomplete.

The last type of friendship, the virtuous, is what Aristotle contends to be the best and most complete form of friendship. This type of friendship occurs when each person has the same level of virtue and is their friend’s genuine well-wishers. Aristotle states, “[f]or these friends wish alike for one another’s good because they are good men, and they are good *per se*, (that is, their goodness is something intrinsic, not incidental)” (*Nic. Ethics*, 1156b6-9). These types of friends truly care about one another’s well-being and are committed to the friendship, as each person is sincere, and the relationship was not formed purely incidentally. Aristotle attributes this form of friendship to be the highest and best because of this goodness interchanged between the people in the friendship and its permanence in how it was formed. They also share a love for some higher principle—i.e., commitment to the good or philosophical life, contemplation, et cetera. Aristotle states, “we conclude, therefore, that to be friends, men must have good will for one another, must each wish for the good of the other on the basis of one of the three motives mentioned [wishing for the good of the friend for the friend’s sake; reciprocating the good will; and being aware of the good will]” (*Nic. Ethics* 1156a3-5). Aristotle further states, “those who wish for their friends’ good for their friends’ sake are friends in the truest sense, since their attitude is determined by what their friends are and not by

incidental considerations. Hence their friendships last as long as they are good, and (that means it will last for a long time, since) goodness or virtue is a thing that lasts” (*Nic. Ethics* 1156b10-12). An example of this friendship would be the friendship that I have with my childhood friend. We have been friends since we were seven years old and even though the friendship was originally built on pleasure, it evolved into a friendship of virtue as we matured. It qualifies as a friendship of virtue as we wish each other well for the sake of the other. Additionally, we have been separated geographically for all four years of my college career since we attend different schools in different cities. However, despite this distance and only being able to meet once or twice a year in person, our friendship has persisted past the geographic barriers and implies the permanent nature of the friendship. Also, as we are both practicing Hindus, we share a love for this higher religious/spiritual institution that helps guide our everyday lives, which we both actively try to help each other in strengthening.

Team Avatar’s Types of Friendships

Team Avatar depicts the different stages of the protagonist’s friendships, initially as an incomplete friendship before progressing to a complete friendship throughout the show. In this segment, I discuss Sokka’s relationship with the rest of team Avatar to analyze the progression of their friendships. Initially, Sokka’s friendships with the others are that of pleasure and utility. This is because he was often portrayed in Book I and II as the comic relief character, providing the main jokes and punchlines throughout the episodes. Not only was Sokka a source of entertainment for viewers, but also the characters themselves. He also was useful to the other characters in how he creates the plans and strategy for their various battles and travels. Book III is when we start to see

the completeness and virtuousness of their friendship. In Book III, Sokka finally finds himself a master. Unlike the rest of the characters of team Avatar, Sokka was not naturally gifted with bending abilities, which is why he was typically the physically weakest member of the team. However, throughout the show, he continuously proves himself a worthy member of the team due to his wits and intellect. The episode titled “Sokka’s Master” showcases Sokka’s role and value in the team while also highlighting a rarely seen side to Sokka: his ability to pick up sword fighting (“Sokka’s Master”). The episode starts with a comet hitting the earth and landing in the Fire Nation city where the team resided. While the others rush to help, since Sokka does not have any natural bending ability, he is rendered useless and becomes “just the Lemur sitter” since he is merely tasked with watching their animal companion, Momo (“Sokka’s Master” 22:16). This paints Sokka as seemingly “useless” to his friends, as he is not able to help the others fight the fire caused by the meteoroid. Later in the episode, however, when Sokka finds a master swordsman, he spends the whole day practicing and training with the swordsman, leaving his friends behind. During this time of separation, Sokka’s purpose in the friendship is defined: he both provides comic relief (inciting a pleasurable friendship) and utility with his ability to craft plans and seek activities for the team to partake in (inciting the useful type of friendship). In this way, Sokka’s relationship with the other team members satisfies two different types of friendships as categorized by Aristotle—pleasurable and useful. Although Sokka is categorized by these two incomplete friendships, his caring relationship with the others can also be classified as the most virtuous type of friendship.

Throughout the show (and especially in “Sokka’s Master”), team Avatar truly does care about Sokka and his well-being. In this episode, Sokka is spending the whole day with his sword master leaving his friends to feel empty and bored without him. If his purpose were solely to entertain them or to help create strategy and plans for them, then they would not have agreed to waste a day’s worth of travel to allow Sokka to learn the art of the sword. Near the end of the episode, his friends help him as his true identity is revealed as an enemy of the Fire Nation and his master challenges him to a duel. Rather than helping him fight his master, they help him most unexpectedly by allowing him to fight his master alone. While at first, this sounds counterintuitive, they did it so that Sokka could win his own battle and gain confidence as a worthy opponent. This can be tied to Aristotle’s concept of *Eudaimonia*. *Eudaimonia*, or happiness, is defined as “living well” and “doing well” (*Nic. Ethics*, 1095a18-19). In the context of this episode, Sokka would derive the highest form of achievement or happiness by being able to defeat his master and prove his self-worth. In this case, his friends actively participate in his acquisition of *Eudaimonia*, and therefore, exhibit the most virtuous form of friendship, because they do not expect anything in return. If anything, they would only be harming themselves by delaying their travels and risking being ousted in the Fire Nation.

Another instance of the show’s depiction of a virtuous friendship can be seen through the friendship between King Boomi and Aang. King Boomi was Aang’s childhood friend and, later, King of Omashu. The virtuousness of both Aang and of their friendship can be seen in Book II when the team revisits Omashu to ask King Boomi to be Aang’s earthbending master. On arriving they realize that Omashu had been overtaken by the Fire Nation. Sokka and Katara suggest not entering because of the apparent danger

the overtaken city presents to the team, but Aang says, “This isn’t about finding a[n] [earthbending] teacher. This is about finding a friend” (“Return to Omashu” 22:28). King Boomi’s whereabouts were unknown at this point. Therefore, in wanting to ensure his friend’s safety, Aang prioritizes finding King Boomi rather than his own safety. This displays the virtuous friendship between Aang and King Boomi, as well as Aang’s own virtue.

While the friendships all start out as friendships of utility, they eventually include friendships of pleasure, and evolve into a complete and virtuous friendship. It is important how the show depicts the character’s arc and growth while also showing the growth of friendships and their evolution into complete friendships.

The White Lotus Members

This “old man avengers” friendship is more complex than the previous team Avatar friendship. This friendship develops off-screen, and their friendship’s culmination can be seen toward the end of the show in the third Book. During Book III, Aang and the whole team realizes that Firelord Ozai’s plan for Sozin’s comet was to end the entire earth Kingdom civilization in a similar way to his grandfather Firelord Sozin’s annihilation of the air nomad race. Because of the immediacy of the Firelord’s violent threat, Aang and Zuko continue their training when Aang mysteriously disappears. Zuko leads the rest of the team to the Earth Kingdom to find June—the “weird bounty hunter with the giant mole” who is the “Boba Fett” character who previously aided Zuko in tracking down Aang back when he was still a villain. (“Sozin’s Comet” 1:08:32). After determining that Aang cannot be traceable, Zuko decides to track down his uncle, who will be their next best chance at facing Firelord Ozai. At their campsite, they come face-

to-face with all the members of the White Lotus, who turn out to be all their previous masters and friends they encountered through their journeys during all three books. When asked how they knew each other, since they were all from different nations, King Boomi from the Earth Kingdom (Omasu) stated, “All old people know each other, don’t you know that?” Master Piandao responds, “we’re all part of the same ancient secret society—a group that transcends the divisions of the four nations [the order of the White Lotus]” (“Sozin’s Comet” 1:00:54). This introduction to the White Lotus alludes to a virtuous friendship as defined by Aristotle. Initially, their friendship appears as mechanical as they united once they heard the call to fight and decided that they would be stronger together. However, the fact that this secret society preceded the war and transcends the four nations implies a more virtuous relationship between the members. They form together not necessarily because they seek to gain something from the relationship but because they are virtuous and have goodwill towards one another. This is another clear example of a complete friendship as it entails the members of this society all being virtuous themselves, wishing good will for the other, being reciprocal of this goodwill, and being aware of this good will. In this way, they exemplify a virtuous friendship.

Charlie’s Devils

“Charlie’s Devils,” which are Azula, Mai, and Ty Lee, exhibit a perfect example of the most vicious friendship and, ultimately, the extreme flaws of a mechanical friendship. These three characters display both virtue and vice—but the fact that even one of them acts in vice depicts Aristotle’s belief that they can never have a virtuous

friendship as it requires virtue from all parties. According to Aristotle, “[B]ad people, on the other hand, do not have the element of constancy, for they do not remain similar even to themselves. But they do become friends for a short time, when they find joy in one another’s wickedness” (*Nic. Ethics*, 1159b7-9). This quote perfectly sums up Mai and Ty Lee’s friendship with Azula. While it is not evident that Mai and Ty Lee necessarily derive pleasure from Azula’s wickedness, they certainly benefit from her willingness to use force to execute their plans.

Book II is when we are first introduced to Mai and Ty Lee, as well as the formation of the trio. At the beginning of this book, Fire Nation’s princess Azula is advised to leave her royal procession of guards to capture her uncle and brother. She then decides that she needs a “small elite team,” which then consists of her childhood friends Mai and Ty Lee (“Return to Omashu” 20:11). We first meet Mai who, along with her family, lives in the Fire Nation overtaken colony of Omashu with her family in charge of the entire city. She feels that living there is “boring” as “nothing ever happens” (“Return to Omashu”). Escaping from her mundane life and the prospect of seeing her childhood crush Zuko again becomes the prime motivation for her to join Azula. Therefore, she joins the alliance purely for her own reasons invoking the relationship between her and Azula as being purely a mechanical and pleasurable one, in the sense of her getting to go on adventures and receiving some sort of entertainment.

Ty Lee’s introduction into the group was created based on a more manipulative and reluctant nature. Azula first approaches Ty Lee at a circus camp where she works. However, the situation quickly escalates when Azula purposefully sabotages one of Ty Lee’s shows, which results in her reluctantly joining Azula. During this specific scene

after the performance, Azula visits Ty Lee and pleasantly tells her that “the universe has given me strong hints that it’s time for a career change. I want to join you on your mission” (“Return to Omashu” 9:48). This scene can be interpreted in a few different ways: one, we could take this at face value that the sabotaged event discouraged Ty Lee and she believed that the circus was no longer for her. Or it could be that Ty Lee recognized the threat that Azula posed and decided that pleasing her (albeit temporarily), would be the best way to avoid her wrath. This second theory can be further backed up in Book III when Mai and Ty Lee betray Azula to help Zuko and the other war prisoners escape. During this specific scene, Mai says to Azula, “I guess you [Azula] don’t know people as well as you think you do. You miscalculated. I love Zuko more than I fear you” (The Boiling Rock 2:27). This clearly angers Azula, pointing out that Mai and Azula’s relationship was derived purely from Mai’s fear of Azula, which she later overcomes. There is an apparent lack of virtue in this relationship, followed by the end of Azula and Ty Lee’s friendship. After Mai confesses that she no longer will cooperate with Azula, Azula prepares to attack her but is stopped by Ty Lee. While Ty Lee does not explicitly say anything to Azula at this point, when Azula has them captured by the guards, she is seen glaring at Azula. This scene can be then interpreted as Ty Lee, seeing Mai’s betrayal as an opening for her to finally leave Azula and switch sides. At the beginning, Ty Lee “may have played along with Azula when she knew she didn’t have any choice, but as soon as the winds started changing Ty Lee jumped to the right side and took her opportunity” (Stewart). Therefore, Mai and Ty Lee’s friendship with Azula showcases the negative side of mechanical friendships in how they were formed by their collective fear of Azula. Once that fear subsided, their friendship and alliance ended. This implies

the temporary aspect to these less virtuous friendships. An argument could also be made that Mai and Ty Lee may have agreed with Azula at one point in time because they are all from the Fire Nation. Since they grew up in a similar environment learning the supremacy of the Fire Nation, they may have shared the vision of the Fire Nation's dominance. Aristotle states, "Friendship is present to the extent that men share something in common, for that is also the extent to which they share a view of what is just" (*Nic. Ethics*, 1159b29-31). This could be another possible explanation to the dissolution of the trio's friendship. Because of the shift in their values and of their perceptions (or perceived perceptions) of justice had changed, their friendship did not stand against the test of time. With Mai seeking justice on Zuko's behalf and Ty Lee seeking justice for her destroyed carnival career, this could have resulted in the eventual betrayal.

Azula exhibits characteristics of the "worst man" according to Aristotle. She does not have the ability to participate in or create lasting virtuous friendships. Aristotle states, "Now, the worst man is he who practices wickedness toward himself as well as his friends, but the best man is not one who practices virtue toward himself, but who practices it toward others, for that is a hard thing to achieve" (*Nic. Ethics*, 1130a6-8). Azula, as clearly indicated earlier, has not acted virtuously toward her "friends"; instead, she used them as a means to further her own political and social agendas, indicating there was never a substance to their friendship. Mai and Ty Lee, on the other hand, may have had some virtue in their individual friendship. The scene that I described earlier when Mai and Ty Lee betray Azula, can be interpreted in different ways. It could be that an instance of Ty Lee's virtue and her willingness to give up safety with Azula, to help her friends (Mai and Zuko), or it could be that Ty Lee may be more cunning than how she

initially appears. This could be an instance of her pushing her own agenda by siding with Mai because she knew that since Zuko and the war prisoners were free, Azula and the Fire Nation would not stand a chance. Therefore, it could have been another instance of Ty Lee's calculative behavior of weighing her options and choosing to go with the "stronger friend" or the side that benefits her the most at the time. In either scenario, the outcome remains the same: the friendships between Azula, Mai and Ty Lee were not built on virtue, and therefore did not last. The friendship between Mai and Ty Lee, despite having some potential of containing virtue, ultimately is still an incomplete friendship of utility. Ty Lee helped Mai, not necessarily out of good will (there is not enough proof from the show that she did this out of pure good will or without any good will), but rather, she saw an opportunity to escape from Azula and seized it. While a mechanical friendship is less virtuous than the most virtuous type of friendship, it still has some merit and has the potential to be more virtuous than the friendships between Azula and Mai and Azula and Ty Lee.

Conclusion

The show's innovative way of showcasing these three different relationships (one the journey to becoming a complete friendship, two a fully realized complete friendship, and the last the least virtuous friendship) is especially significant because it shows how different levels of virtue in relationships can function. Through Sokka, it shows how mechanical and pleasurable friendships can be virtuous, but it also displays a more negative mechanical and non-virtuous relationship through Azula, Mai, and Ty Lee's

relationship. Lastly, it shows the most virtuous friendship through the White Lotus society.

CHAPTER TWO

The Dragons of the East and the Pencils of the West

In this chapter, I discuss the different eastern philosophies and influences on *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and how the show embedded various elements of these philosophies. I also compare the western influence of the show to the eastern elements in order to make the argument of how morally comprehensive the show is in both harnessing and teaching different worldly philosophies.

The East

One of the show's premises, and its namesake, is the concept of the "Avatar" which can be seen in various eastern religions and philosophies. In Sanskrit, "Avatar" translates to "that which crosses over and thus, a 'descent' from heaven" (Britannica). This concept exists in Hinduism in which it refers to "the ten appearances of Vishnu [the incarnation of a deity in human form to counteract some particular evil in the world]: Matsya (fish), Kurma (tortoise), Varaha (boar), Narasimha (half man, half lion), Vamana (dwarf), Parashurama (Rama with the axe), Rama (hero of the Ramayana epic), Krishna (the divine cowherd), Buddha, and Kalkin (the incarnation yet to come)" (Britannica). The show broadly uses this concept as one of the premises of the show. From the context of the show, not to be confused with the sequel show which introduces a different story of the beginnings, the Avatar has always existed with the sole purpose of ridding the

world of evil threats. In a similar way, the idea of the Avatar was derived from the different incarnations of the Hindu God Vishnu, who appears in each *Yuga*, or a stage of the world. However, this concept can also relate to the Buddhist concept of reincarnation. According to Buddhism, reincarnation is defined as “no eternal ‘soul,’ ‘spirit’ or ‘self’ but only a ‘stream of consciousness’ that links life with life. The actual process of change from one life to the next is called *punarbhava* (Sanskrit) or *punabbhava* (Pāli), literally ‘becoming again,’ or more briefly *bhava*, ‘becoming’” (Nagaraj et al.). Through the process of reincarnation, people are born again with the same mind but a different body that persists through time. In the show, the Avatar is acknowledged as the only being that has the ability to reincarnate. While it has hinted that a possible “animal companion of the Avatar” reincarnates, there is not much evidence to back this up. Since the Avatar is the only person to go through the cycle of birth and death, it varies from the tenets of Hinduism. It also differs from Buddhism because there is no concept of *Nirvana*—or an end to the reincarnation cycle, as the Avatar has always existed in history and will continue to always exist to maintain and restore peace and balance to the world. This shows that the concept of the Avatar relates more to the Taoist concept of transcendence.

There are many fundamental concepts in the show that relate to Taoism. Transcendence, for one, is a defining characteristic of the show and the Avatar. Transcendence pertains to “attaining the Dao [the way or path] by becoming one with it...Transcendence has been a destiny, a reward for good deeds or for perspicacity, as well as a stroke of luck” (Kohn 109). Essentially, the goal of life for a person’s soul is to become one with the universe. Additionally, “the mind is made one with true spirit, with the functions of the Tao; the adept survives in eternity as a spirit being” (Kohn 629). In

this way, the mind and soul make up a transcendent being that exists past the barriers of time. Furthermore, “immortality or transcendence in Taoism is thus a transcendent state in paradise and a psychological state on earth” (Kohn 628). Therefore, “in all cases immortality means an eternity, an everlasting life of the individual mind and body as they were meant originally; replicas of the universe, parts of primordial energy, spirit, and the Tao” (Kohn 638). Immortality and transcendence relate to the concept of the Avatar as in the show as there has always been an Avatar throughout the history of the four nations, and there will always continue to be an Avatar. However, the show does introduce the idea that the Avatar cycle could break. Avatar Roku, the previous Avatar before Aang, explains that if Aang is killed in the Avatar State, the cycle will be broken. What makes this concept separate from other eastern and southern Asian religions (like Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism) is that breaking this reincarnation cycle is actually a terrible thing in the world of *Avatar*. In Hinduism and Buddhism, it is not only a good thing, but also a goal of sorts. To end the cycle of “suffering,” or the endless cycle of birth and death, is a main *telos* of these traditions. Conversely, the show postulates that when the Avatar is killed in the Avatar state, then the cycle will break and there will never be another Avatar again. This implies the mortality of the Avatar. They are not eternally immortal beings. While the concept itself is transcendent (and somewhat immortal in the sense that there will always be an Avatar), there is also a mortal aspect to it—since the cycle can be broken.

One of the most significant themes of the show is redemption and redeeming one’s honor. This can be seen in Fire Nation Prince Zuko’s quest for his honor. This character’s premise is his journey of obtaining honor and finding out what it truly means

to be honorable. This entire concept of honor as an individual journey is something that can be seen in many ancient Chinese philosophies and texts. More specifically, this concept relates the closest to Confucianism and Confucian honor. Confucius taught “that one should love others and to honor one” parents (New World Encyclopedia). This contributes to the establishment of a civilized society and, ultimately, world peace. Confucius’ ethical teachings influenced the leading circles of China and became widespread through Asia, creating a strong sense of honor as a guiding moral principle” (New World Encyclopedia). Furthermore, “Honor has been defined as the evaluation of a person’s trustworthiness and social status based on an individual’s statements and actions. Honor is that which defines a person’s character whether or not the person reflects honesty, respect, integrity, or fairness. Accordingly, a person’s value and stature are based on the harmony of their actions, code of honor, and that of the society at large” (New World Encyclopedia). Additionally, filial piety is an important pillar in Confucianism, which “shapes Chinese people’s mindset and lifestyle. It emphasizes the affection and duty of the children in parent-child relationships. Children are obliged to obey, support, and honor their parents. Filial piety is both a recognized virtue and a cultural norm” (Qin 134-140). In other words, filial piety and obeying one’s parents are highly valued virtues in Confucianism in obtaining honor. This type of Confucian honor is something that is certainly alluded to in the show in explaining Zuko’s background and his motivations in hunting down the Avatar.

In Book I, Uncle Iroh explains Zuko’s past and his mission to find the Avatar. Zuko offends the Lieutenant of the ship’s crew by stating that they should not alter their course for the storm, because “[t]he safety of the crew doesn’t matter. Finding the Avatar

is far more important than any individual's safety" ("The Storm" 20:47). The Lieutenant and Zuko eventually get into an argument with the former questioning the latter about respect. The Lieutenant, tired of Zuko's disregard for the crew and their safety, lashes out at him, and states, "The way you talk to everyone around here, from your hard-working crew to your esteemed uncle, shows you know nothing about respect. You don't care about anyone but yourself. Then again, what should I expect from a spoiled prince?" ("The Storm" 18:52) Zuko responds by launching into a physical fight, which gets broken up by Uncle Iroh. Iroh eventually finds the Lieutenant and the rest of the crew who are all on the precipice of staging a coup. Iroh then explains Zuko's back story and the reasons behind his actions and motivations. When Zuko was younger and still living in the Fire Nation's palace, they attended a war meeting with all the Fire Nation generals, along with his uncle, and father ("The Storm"). Despite receiving the warning from his uncle that he should not speak at the meeting, he ends up making an outburst in response to one of the generals of the Fire Nation's plans ("The Storm"). The plan was to use the 41st division, constructed entirely of young, ill-prepared recruits, as a distraction to take out the Earth Kingdom Battalion from the rear ("The Storm"). Zuko, in contention with the plan to sacrifice many young soldiers, interrupts the plan and states, "You can't sacrifice an entire division like that. Those soldiers love and defend our nation. How can you betray them?" ("The Storm" 12:37). Despite Zuko being right, "it was not his place to speak out. And there were dire consequences" ("The Storm" 12:25). Uncle Iroh continues, "After Zuko's outburst in the meeting, the Firelord became very angry with him. He said that Prince Zuko's challenge of the General was an act of complete disrespect. And there was only one way to resolve this. Ag Nee Kai, a fire duel. Zuko looked upon the old General

he had insulted and declared that he was not afraid, But Zuko misunderstood. When he turned to face his opponent, he was surprised to see it was not the general. Zuko has spoken out against the general's plan, but by doing so in the Firelord's war room, it was the Firelord whom he had disrespected. Zuko would have to duel his own father" ("The Storm" 10:36). And so, Zuko faces his father, but due to his young age and his reluctance to strike against his own father, he stands down from the fight and begs for mercy, obtaining a scarred eye and dishonor in return. ("The Storm"). His father reprimands him and says, "you will learn respect, and suffering will be your teacher" ("The Storm" 6:27). In this context, Ozai is referencing Confucian honor and respect. Furthermore, looking deeper into the ancient Confucian perspective, duels are a normative form of repentance of honor. "When a person lost his honor, there was only one way to save his dignity: death. Seppuku (commonly called "harakiri") was the most honorable death in such a situation" (New World Encyclopedia). As Zuko was questioning the honor of the General's plan and implying that he would be betraying the young soldiers, he consequently dishonored the General and soon dishonored himself by refusing to fight his father. In this way, the creators based much of Zuko's early journey for his honor, on Confucian principles of obeying one's parents and obtaining Confucian honor.

This concept of honor could also be related to the Hindu concept of *Dharma*. According to the *Bhagavad Gita*, "We have an intimate relationship with the Lord, and because we are all qualitatively one—the Santana-dharma, or sky, the Santana Supreme Personality, and the Santana living occupation, or Santana-dharma, which is the eternal occupation of the living entity. We are temporarily engaged in different activities, but all of these activities can be purified when we give up all these temporary activities and take

up the activities which are prescribed by the Supreme Lord. That is called our pure life” (Bhagavad Gita 18). Furthermore, “Sanatana-dharma refers, as stated previously, to the eternal occupation of the living entity” (Bhagavad Gita 18). This entire process of obtaining a pure life can be seen through Zuko’s entire character arc within the series. At first, he took up ‘temporary activities,’ or pursuing the capture of the Avatar so that he could regain his father’s trust and family honor. However, he finally realizes his “Santana-dharma” when he decides to find the Avatar to teach him Firebending and help aid team Avatar in their fight against the Fire Nation. This is significant because the show depicts this higher-level understanding of *dharma* and incorporates it into an important plot and character development. In the show, Zuko struggles to understand his true purpose (his *dharma* in life), and the depiction of his mental struggle represents our own struggles in finding our true purposes in life. In these faith-based traditions, it can be alluded to following God’s will, but the show depicts it as a deeper and philosophical method of understanding oneself.

The show introduces the concept of *Chakras* to explain the Avatar State and the lore surrounding how to enter the state successfully. This concept is influenced by the Vedic principle of Chakras. Chakras are defined as “psychic centers of transformation that enable one to move toward an enlightened state of being.” *Chakra* is a Sanskrit word that means “a wheel, a disc, or any arrangement in circular form or organization.” The ancient sources depict each of the seven major chakras as a lotus blossom, a circular form surrounded by petals. Chakra also indicates movement. Chakras introduce movement because they transform psychophysical energy into spiritual energy” (Johari). This concept is directly referenced in Book II of the show. During this episode, Aang receives

a note from Guru Pathik saying that he can teach Aang to control the Avatar state. Aang and Appa travel to the Eastern Air temple to meet him. There at the temple, Guru Pathik tells Aang that to gain control of the Avatar state, he must first “gain balance within himself before he can bring balance to the world” (“The Guru/The Crossroads of Destiny” 41:56). Pathik continues, “In order to master the Avatar state, you must open all the Chakras. The water flows through this creek much like the energy flows through your body. As you see, there are several pools where the water swirls around before flowing on. These pools are like our Chakras. So, Chakras are like spiraling pools of energy in our bodies. If nothing else were around, this creek would flow pure and clear. However, life is messy, and things tend to fall in the creek. And then the creek can’t flow. But if we open the paths between the pools, the energy flows! There are seven chakras that go up the body. Each pool of energy has a purpose and can be blocked by a specific kind of emotional muck” (“The Guru/The Crossroads of Destiny” 38:38). While there are notable differences between the actual purpose of the seven Chakras and their functions from the Vedic traditional scripture, the show derives much of their lore regarding the Avatar state from this concept.

Furthermore, the show’s concept of “bending” is loosely based on different styles of Kung Fu. In an interview with Imagine Games Network (IGN), *Avatar*’s creators Bryan Konietzko and Michael Dante DiMartino explain how they created “bending” and the parts of East Asian culture that inspired them. Bryan states, “We knew we wanted the “magic” in our show to be different from the typical wand-wielding spell-casting fare. For us, it had to be natural and physical, with a source and rules and limitations—and most importantly it had to be a skill rather than just a power, something that a practitioner

had to learn and strive for. We wanted the elemental “bending” to be based on authentic Chinese traditional martial arts, believing this would lend a beauty and resonance to the animation and the fictitious disciplines. Once we had that idea, I started looking for a Kung Fu teacher/martial arts consultant. My search led me to Sifu Kisu, and I began training with him right away. He has been a valuable part of the project since” (Vasconcellos). Mike continues, “After we discussed the concept of the show with Sifu Kisu, he suggested that each of the different Nations could have a different style of Kung Fu. So, the circular movements of Ba Gua became Waterbending; the powerful Hung Gar style was perfect for earthbending; and the fast, aggressive style of Northern Shaolin was the inspiration for Firebending” (Vasconcellos). Therefore, the showrunners used different forms of Kung Fu in order to conceptualize the different nations’ bending—further adding to the eastern influences of the show.

The West

First, I will discuss the Presocratic philosophers. The Presocratics were ancient Greek philosophers who lived during the 5th and 6th centuries BCE: “They were recognized in antiquity as the first philosophers and scientists of the Western tradition” (Curd). The reason that I am analyzing this set of philosophers is because of how closely their “natural philosophy” relates to much of the philosophy of the show. Many of the unique premises of the show, including the concept of “bending” and their incorporation of nature into their explanation of matter and the science of the show, can be seen through this natural philosophy.

The first Presocratic philosopher whose philosophy can be referenced in the show is Thales. According to Plato, “[t]hey say that once when Thales was gazing upwards while doing astronomy, he fell into a well, and that a witty and charming Thracian serving-girl made fun of him for being eager to know the things in the heavens by failing to notice what was just behind him and right by his feet” (Plato, *Theaetetus* 174a). Aristotle, on the other hand, held Thales to a higher degree. Aristotle states, “The story goes that when they were reproaching him for his poverty, supposing that philosophy is useless, he learned from his astronomy that the olive crop would be large. Then, while it was still winter, he obtained little money and made deposits on all the olive presses both in Miletus and in Chios, and since no one bid against him, he rented them cheaply. When the time came, suddenly many requested the presses all at once, and he rented them out on whatever terms he wished, and so he made a great deal of money. In this way he proved that philosophers can easily be wealthy if they wish, but this is not what they are interested in” (*Politics* 1.11 1259a9-18). Furthermore, Aristotle believed Thales to be “the first person to investigate the basic principles, the question of the originating substances of matter and, therefore, as the founder of the school of natural philosophy. Thales was interested in almost everything, investigating almost all areas of knowledge, philosophy, history, science, mathematics, engineering, geography, and politics” (O’Grady). Therefore, there was a mixed reception of Thales during ancient times. Despite this, I believe that his philosophy closely relates to the elemental philosophy of the show, which is why I shall now analyze his philosophy.

Regarding Thales, Aristotle states, “Of those who first pursued philosophy, the majority believed that the only principles of all things are principles in the form of matter.

For that of which all existing things are composed and that from which they originally come to be and that into which they finally perish – the substance persisting but changing in its attributes—this they state is the element and principle of the things that are. For there must be one or more natures from which the rest come to be, while it is preserved. However, they do not all agree about how many or what kinds of such principles there are, but Thales, the founder of this kind of philosophy, stated it to be water. (This is why he declared that the earth rests on water.) He may have gotten this idea from seeing that the nourishment of all things is moist, and that even the hot itself comes to be from this and lives on this (the principle of all things is that from which they come to be) – getting this idea from this consideration and also because the seeds of all things have a moist nature; and water is the principle of the nature of moist things” (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1.3 983b6-27). This all relates to one of the main premises of the show: the different nations. Additionally, despite the nations being separated both geographically and by bending abilities (Earth Kingdom – Earthbenders, Air Temples – Airbenders, Fire Nation – Firebenders, and Water Tribes – Waterbenders (although not all persons are benders in this show)), they are still connected through the Avatar. While one of the Avatar’s explicit roles is to be the bridge between the spirit world and the material world, he or she also acts as the bridge/peacemaker among the different nations. In this way, Thales believes that all matter was made up of water. The four elements of the show are similarly connected. Each comes from the other, and they combine to create the Avatar. In Book II, Uncle Iroh describes this concept, while trying to explain how to redirect lightning to Zuko. Iroh, rather than using traditional Firebending techniques to redirect lightning, relies on Waterbending techniques to perform this action, which had never

been done before. This innovative way of Firebending emphasizes the interconnectedness of the four elements and their roles in nature. Iroh states, “it is the combination of the four elements in one person that makes the Avatar so powerful. But it can make you more powerful too. You see, the technique I am about to teach you is one I learned by studying the Waterbenders” (“Bitter Work” 9:56). Iroh further states that “Waterbenders deal with the flow of energy. A Waterbender lets their defense become their offense, turning their opponent’s energy against them. I learned a way to do this with lightning” (“Bitter Work” 6:35). So Iroh teaches Zuko how to redirect lightning through using Waterbending techniques. This interconnectedness of the elements is reflected in Thales’ natural philosophy and it is interesting to see how the show incorporates this idea.

The next Presocratic philosopher whom I will be analyzing is Anaximander. His view is that the “things that are, perish into the things from which they come to be, according to necessity, for they pay penalty and retribution to each other for their injustice in accordance with the ordering of time” can be tied to the process of the cycle of the Avatar (*Commentary on Aristotle’s Physics* 24.13-21). They deliver retribution when the world necessitates their involvement. There is a time when the Avatars do what they need to do: save the world. Whenever the world is launched into chaos or the world is off-balance, the Avatar appears and restores balance.

Additionally, according to Anaximander, “This there is an original (and originating) indefinite stuff, from which all the heavens and the worlds in them come to be. This claim probably means that the original state of the universe was an indefinitely large mass of stuff that was also indefinite in its character. This stuff then gave rise through its own inherent power to the ingredients that themselves constitute the world as

we perceive it.” Ultimately, Anaximander believed that the world was made up of *arkhe* which transcends the concept of the four elements as it comes from *apeiron* which is the ageless and eternal material from the heavens and the earth itself (Curd). This relates to the show, as each of the elements are interconnected and were derived from a similarly transcendent source.

Anaximander also believed that “humans evolved from other animals” (Evans). He observed that “unlike animals, humans don’t become self-sufficient for many years and must be cared for by older humans until adolescence. Thus, if humans had first appeared as humans, they would have immediately died out, as there was no one around to care for them” (Evans). This concept relates to how Benders initially get their powers: Earthbenders learn from badgermoles, Firebenders from dragons, Airbenders from sky bison, and waterbenders from the moon spirit. While Anaximander was also alluding to the evolution of species, a similar concept can be seen in the show. While the show doesn’t hint that humans directly evolved from these animals, it does imply that humans received their bending lessons and skills, and perhaps power from these specific animals.

The next western philosopher that I will be discussing is Plato. The Order of the White Lotus is no different from Plato’s philosophy school. They all seemingly practice Plato’s theory of the forms, as they strive to practice the good, true, and beautiful. The good, true, and beautiful were all of the best, and therefore the highest, virtues that a person could strive for, according to Plato. His “philosophical system revolved around his concern for the good, the true, and the beautiful. Within his system, ‘the good’ was the ultimate reality. As such, ‘the good’ represents the ideal form which all other ideals emerge” (Poe 55). In the Book III episode titled “Sozin’s Comet,” we are shown their

camp or Thinkery. While this camp is not explicitly a Thinkery in the ancient Greek sense, it is similar since these elders (representing philosophers) live together while trying to strive for the good. As explained in my previous chapter, they are part of an ancient society that transcends the four nations. Jong-Jong, Aang's previous firebending master, continues by saying, "the White Lotus [have] always been philosophy and beauty and truth, but about a month ago, a call went out that we were needed for something important" ("Sozin's Comet" 1:00:41). The show makes a direct reference to Plato's theory of the forms by explicitly referring to them in this dialogue and by introducing the idea of these respective masters practicing philosophy. Also, the Socratic idea of heroism—sacrificing one's life for the sake of justice—can be seen in the show. In the *Crito*, Socrates turns down Crito's offer to save him through bribing the officers, to obey Athenian law which he saw as just. This relates to one of the Fire Sages' decision to betray the other Fire Sages (and subsequently betraying the Fire Nation) to aid the Avatar. During Book I, the team visits a Fire Nation temple in hopes of Aang spiritually connecting with Avatar Roku. However, over the last one hundred years, the Fire Sages who take care of the temple had lost hope that a new Avatar would follow Roku and had shifted their loyalties to the Fire Nation. Despite this, one Sage betrays the rest of the Sages in order to help team Avatar. The Sage states that it had always been the duty of the Fire Sages to help the Avatar regardless of circumstances. Therefore, by sacrificing his life and livelihood to act in a way that he believed to be just, this particular Fire Sage inhibited Socratic heroism.

The next philosopher that I will be analyzing is Aristotle. The show incorporates Aristotle's idea of finding the balance between different virtues and vices. The Air

Nomads represent temperance and prudence in how they promote peace and abstain from killing humans and from eating animals. The Earth Kingdom represents courage by facing things head-on like a rock. The Fire Nation represents ambition, and the Water Tribes represent adaptability in how the Southern Water Tribe was able to reconstruct themselves after the Fire Nation raids. The virtues are slightly different than the classic Aristotelian virtues, but they are similar. Each nation has its own way of life, and therefore, its own virtue. Aang's job as the Avatar is to master all elements, and thus all of these virtues. This is closely related to how each person, in order to live their best life, must live in accordance with Aristotelian virtues. In the world of *Avatar*, *Eudaimonia* is achieved through restoring peace and balance to the world by the Avatar's mastery of all four elements. Each person in each nation who learns their respective bending and adheres to their respective nation's virtues could represent perfect citizenry—*Eudaimonia*. The villains in the show appeared to be using their bending viciously to commit terrible actions. They were not practicing their bending using the virtues of their nation, which is what led to much of the violence and conflicts in the show. For example, Jet, who was one of the “freedom fighters” who, while trying to avenge his parents' deaths at the hands of Fire Nation soldiers, did not care if innocent Fire Nation colonists were killed in the process. This is an instance in which there are “bad” characters (not all of whom are obvious villains) who promote these bad actions, and therefore who “bend” the elements by various vices (excess or deficient qualities as expressed by Aristotle). The show also clearly lays out each nation's virtues. Iroh states that “lightning is a pure expression of Firebending—without aggression. It is not fueled by rage or emotion the way other Firebending is. To perform the technique requires peace of mind. There is

energy all around us. The energy is both Yin and Yang—a positive energy and a negative energy. Only a select few Firebenders can separate these energies. This creates an imbalance. The energy wants to restore balance. And at the moment the positive and negative energy come crashing back together, you provide release and guidance, creating lightning

Fire is the element of power. The people of the Fire Nation have desire and will and the energy and drive to achieve what they want. Earth is the element of substance. The people of the Earth Kingdom are diverse and strong. They are persistent and enduring. Air is the element of freedom. The Air Nomads detached themselves from worldly concerns and found peace and freedom. Water is the element of change. The people of the Water Tribes are capable of adapting to many things. They have a deep sense of community and love that holds them together through anything. It is important to draw wisdom from many different places. If we take it from only one place, it becomes rigid and stale. Understanding others – the other elements and the other nations—will help you become whole. It is the combination of the four elements in one person that makes the Avatar so powerful” (“Bitter Work” 17:30). It is these virtues that each nation’s benders must use in order to utilize their power to the fullest and most virtuous extent. It follows that the Avatar since he or she must master all of the four elements, must master all of each nation’s virtues—and thus each virtuous way to bend the elements.

The next philosopher that I will be discussing is Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s concept of *Dasein* from *Being and Time* is the main part of his philosophy which I will be focusing on. *Dasein* is defined as “an entity for which, in its Being, that Being is an issue...of understanding as self-projective Being towards its own most potentiality-for-

Being” (Heidegger 246). *Dasein* is essentially, “the inherently social being who already operates with a pre-theoretical grasp of the a priori structures that make possible particular modes of Being” (Wheeler). Therefore, *Dasein* is the Being itself. Heidegger argues it is important for individuals to understand themselves in relation to *Dasein* which is also their Being itself, as well as their Being-in-the-world. Through this understanding, people can start the process of “becoming a self” to begin to live an authentic life. This concept can be seen in Zuko and Aang in which we can see their process of ‘becoming a self’ through the events of the show. I will be expanding on their existential journeys in more detail in the following chapter.

Conclusion

Overall, one of the series’ most distinct features and strengths is how it carefully and respectfully embeds eastern and western philosophies and religions into its plot and worldbuilding. Typically, “the religions, societal values, and philosophies of the Western and Eastern world are often seen as opposites. The Western world places values on being a true individual, standing out in a crowd, and working hard to make your life mean something. The Eastern world values communities made up of many individuals who are really the same, working together to bring honor to their groups” (Mayne). Interestingly, this show strives to prove just the opposite—that the eastern and western philosophies are not necessarily complete opposites and can actually work well together. This is representative of the world on a larger scale: how the world is a blend of these different cultures and philosophical traditions without one being more “supreme” to the others. Each philosophical tradition has its own value, and it is amazing how the show depicts

the significance of each. In this way, the show introduces a more interdisciplinary approach to teaching people about philosophy and ethics.

CHAPTER THREE

On Moral Formation

In this chapter, I discuss the moral formations of a few critical characters of the show to analyze how each character's moral justifications form and how they change throughout the show. To analyze each of these characters' moral formations, I use Aristotle and Machiavelli as a framework to constitute my analysis while also drawing from Heidegger.

The first philosopher that I discuss is Aristotle. I chose Aristotle because his virtue ethics philosophy ties in exceptionally well with the show. Aristotle, as previously mentioned, discusses *Eudaimonia* and the way to achieve happiness and good citizenry. This is through acting in virtue and abstaining from acting in vice. *Eudaimonia* is defined as the "activity of the soul along with virtue, while the virtues are defined as various habits of choice, lying in a mean relative to us, and determined by reason" (Simpson 507). Aristotle believes that "moral virtue is formed by habit, *ethos*, and its name, *ethike*, is therefore derived, by a slight variation, from *ethos*. This shows, too, that none of the moral virtues implanted in us by nature, for nothing which exists by nature can be changed by habit" (*Nic. Ethics* 1103a 16-19). Therefore, virtue does not necessarily exist at birth; instead, it is acquired through habituation.

Aristotle provides the example of a rock's nature of adhering to the laws of gravity can never be changed by a person (or another actor) throwing it in the air or trying to throw it upwards. The rock will always adhere to gravity. Henceforth, "the

virtues are implanted in us neither by nature nor contrary to nature: we are by nature equipped with the ability to receive them, and habit brings this ability to completion and fulfillment” (*Nic. Ethics* 1103a23-25). It is through habitation that people can acquire virtue. Furthermore, according to Aristotle, “an action counts as virtuous when one holds oneself in a stable equilibrium of the soul, to choose the action knowingly and for its own sake. This stability of the soul is what constitutes character. Achieving good character is a process of clearing away the obstacles that stand in the way of the full efficacy of the soul” (Sachs). Hence, “the virtuous person sees truly and judges rightly since beautiful things appear as they truly are only to a person of good character. It is only in the middle ground between habits of acting and principles of action that the soul can allow right desire and right reason to make their appearance, as the direct and natural response of a free human being to the sight of the beautiful” (Sachs). The concept of the soul’s equilibrium relates to how many of the characters representing ‘anti-heroes’ struggle to break their habits of acting in vice. In Zuko’s case, this pertains to finally acquiring the habit of acting in virtue. Zuko becomes happier through his change in perspective and his contentment with his decisions. His virtue is evident through the friendships that he makes with the other virtuous characters. This is an example of *Eudaimonia*—because he starts pursuing the Good and acts in virtue. Aristotle states, “the good and noble things in life are won by those who act rightly. The life of men active in this sense is also pleasant in itself. For the sensation of pleasure belongs to the soul, and each man derives pleasure from what he is said to love: a lover of horses from horses...and a lover of virtue in general from virtuous acts” (*Nic. Ethics* 1099a5-10). Based on this reasoning, Zuko, whose early life actions I analyze in this chapter, can be deemed virtuous.

The next philosopher that I use as part of the framework to analyze certain characters from the show is Machiavelli. In chapter eighteen of *The Prince*, Machiavelli discusses how Princes ought to maintain their peoples' faith. He states, "Every one admits how praiseworthy it is in a prince to keep faith, and to live with integrity and not with craft. Nevertheless, our experience has been that those princes who have done great things have held good faith of little account and have known how to circumvent the intellect of men by craft, and in the end, have overcome those who have relied on their word. You must know there are two ways of contesting, the one by the law and the other by force; the first method is proper to men, the second to beasts, but because the first is frequently not sufficient, it is necessary to have recourse to the second. Therefore, it is necessary for a prince to understand how to avail himself of the beast and the man" (Machiavelli 141). Essentially, the end, which is the Prince ruling in peace without fear of the threat of "beasts" or of the "people" can justify using force and other less honorable means. Therefore, Machiavelli is more concerned with "the salvation of his fatherland than with the salvation of his soul" (Strauss 10). The prince must prioritize the state's peace and prosperity over the goodness of his soul. This type of motivation behind actions and the actions themselves can best aid my analysis of Azula, Firelord Ozai, and former Firelord Sozin.

I chose Machiavelli as one of the moral frameworks of analysis for some of the show's characters because it helps strengthen my argument on the complexity of human nature. It also helps explain the motivations behind some "evil" characters of the show, which also implies the characters' complex nature and human beings. I also thought that

Machiavelli's philosophy provides an interesting contrast to Aristotle's virtue ethics which will be important to analyze in the context of the show.

Zuko

Zuko grew up in the Fire Nation during Firelord Sozin's era of fear. He was always compared to his more talented (sinister, and younger sister; thus, he is constantly trying to prove his worth. Another important aspect of his childhood is his mother's disappearance. Growing up, Zuko was the closest with his Mother as she was completely different from the rest of his family. She always loved both Zuko and Azula equally and treated them fairly. However, she disappears, leaving Zuko emotionally scarred as he feels responsible for her disappearance. His mother's absence from his young life proves to be significant as it leads to a lack of direction and guidance in his adult life until his adventures with his uncle. To illustrate how Zuko's early childhood was shaped, I explain one of the earliest instances in which his character's morality is explored. I'll then take this instance juxtaposed with his other actions that demonstrate his compassion and ability to empathize. Next, I will delve into the circumstances surrounding his mother's disappearance to show its impact on his boyhood.

During Book II, Zuko goes on his first adventure alone without his uncle. In this episode, the viewers get to see glimpses into his morality and his ethics, which are not influenced by any external sources—being either the Fire Nation (negative influences) or his uncle (positive influences). At the beginning of the episode, as he travels alone without any money, he feels hungry and briefly considers robbing a man cooking on a campfire. However, he immediately forgoes the urge to steal once he sees that the man

was cooking for his pregnant wife. While this action was small, it indicates that Zuko isn't necessarily the two-dimensional greedy villain portrayed in the first season; instead, it is a much more complex character with a sense of moral purpose and duty, a concept of right and wrong.

Later on, in the episode, Zuko protects some of the earth kingdom children from trouble with the local earth kingdom soldiers. One of the children, Lee, grateful for the help, takes Zuko to his family's farm to offer him food. Lee's family, impressed by his bravery in helping Lee, offers him residence and nutrition to help repair their roof. Lee and Zuko become close with Lee seeing him as an older brother figure, and with Lee reminding Zuko of himself as a child. However, when news reaches the farm that the Fire Nation had captured Lee's older brother's (Sengsu) battalion, Lee's father departs to try and bring him back home. Lee asks Zuko to stay when his father leaves, but Zuko resolves to leave. However, he leaves Lee with his dagger that was gifted to him by his Uncle during his siege on Ba Sing Se. The inscription on the dagger reads, "never give up without a fight" ("Zuko Alone" 15:38). Giving the dagger to Lee was Zuko's comforting Lee, thus indicating Zuko's compassion and fondness for the boy. This compassion can also be seen when Azula and Zuko discuss their cousin Lu Ten's passing. After Uncle Iroh loses his son Lu Ten, who is second in line to the Fire Nation throne during the 600-day Siege of Ba Sing Se, he quits his siege and returns to the Fire Nation. Azula calls his return as a sign of him being a "quitter and a loser" ("Zuko Alone" 11:31). When Zuko questions her judgment of Iroh's actions, she responds, "oh yes, he is [a quitter and loser]! He found out his son died, and he just fell apart. A real general would stay and burn Ba Sing Se to the ground. Not lose the battle and come home crying" ("Zuko

Alone” 11:32). Zuko responds, “How do you know what he should do? He’s probably just sad that his only kid is gone” (“Zuko Alone” 11:16). This scene quite clearly shows the distinction between Zuko and Azula. While Zuko can empathize with uncle Iroh, Azula only sees Iroh’s grieving as weak and cowardly. She believes winning the battle to be essential and cannot understand how her Uncle doesn’t feel the same. This scene is indicative of Azula’s lack of empathy and Zuko’s compassion.

Zuko’s compassion is exemplified later in the episode when Lee gets in trouble with the Earth nation thugs, and Zuko risks blowing his cover to save him. Despite knowing the risk of the consequences of revealing his true nationality and bending status, he still firebends against the soldiers to protect Lee and his family.

During his stay at their farm, we see flashbacks from Zuko’s past while his mother was still present.

The first flashback shows Zuko and his mother feeding turtle-ducks in their pond. When Zuko tries to imitate his sister’s method of feeding the turtle-ducks, one of the ducks gets submerged by the large piece, and the mother duck angrily bites Zuko’s leg. He angrily exclaims, “[S]tupid turtle-duck! Why’d she do that?” His mother responds, “Zuko. That’s what moms are like. If you mess with their babies, they’re gonna bite you back” (“Zuko Alone” 17:45). This conversation almost directly alludes to Ursa’s (Zuko’s mother) disappearance, which occurs shortly after. After Iroh returns home from Ba Sing Se, Ozai requests an audience with Firelord Azulon (Zuko’s grandfather). During this meeting, Zuko, jealous of Azula’s ability to earn praise from her father, attempts to demonstrate his firebending moves, which pale compared to his sister. However, despite his failed attempt, his mother comforts him and says, “[N]o [you did not fail], I loved

watching you. That's who you are Zuko, someone who keeps fighting even though it's hard" ("Zuko Alone" 9:22).

Eventually, Azulon dismisses everyone else from the meeting and requests Ozai to speak to him directly. However, Zuko and Azula spy on their meeting. Ozai asks Azulon to revoke Iroh's birthright and put his family in the line of succession as he reasons that Iroh's bloodline had ended and that he is not in the right mind to lead the Fire Nation after the loss of his son. Azulon, angered by his request, states, "You dare suggest I betray Iroh, my firstborn. Directly after the demise of his only beloved son! I think Iroh has suffered enough. But you! Your punishment has scarcely begun" ("Zuko Alone" 8:27). Zuko runs off, and despite the show not revealing the rest of the conversation, it implies through Azula, who later torments Zuko, that Ozai's punishment is Zuko's death. However, Ursa, who overhears Azula and Zuko, takes it upon herself to protect her son. Although the show leaves this part a mystery (which is later revealed in the canon comic series), it is implied that she had killed Azulon and disappeared to keep Zuko safe and alive. Although it is not directly said that she killed Azulon, she was undoubtedly involved. Since his mother was the person, he was the closest to and cared the most for, this event of her disappearance completely shattered Zuko, and thus he became colder and more ruthless. As his mother was his main moral guide, he turned into Book I's persistently evil character. However, through his uncle's guidance, who replaces his mother as his moral guide, we can begin to see the change that he exhibits as the show continues.

Now that I thoroughly discussed the background and context of Zuko's moral character both at the beginning of the series and his potential for goodness through his

qualities of compassion and empathy, I move onto analyzing the moral changes he goes through during Books II and III. I then discuss the significance of this change and how this contrasts with Azula's character.

During Book II, Zuko realizes the Avatar is in Ba Sing Se, the same city as him, so he becomes motivated to pursue him again. However, both he and his uncle have found peace and commercial success working as tea makers at this point in the show. Despite his standoffish attitude, he had not pursued the Avatar for many episodes; rather, his primary focus of this book was evading capture by his sister. At the reminder of his initial goal, his interest in the avatar rejuvenates. Zuko mentions Aang's bison, Appa's lost poster, which leads him to know Aang's whereabouts ("Lake Laogai"). Iroh responds, "We have a chance for a new life here. If you start stirring up trouble, we could lose all the good things that are happening for us ("Lake Laogai" 17:29). Zuko replies, "Good things that are happening for you. Have you ever thought that I want more from life than a nice apartment and a job serving tea" ("Lake Laogai" 17:22)? Iroh responds, "There is nothing wrong with a life of peace and prosperity. I suggest you think about what it is that you want from your life, and why" ("Lake Laogai" 17:14). Zuko responds, "I want my destiny," and Iroh replies, "what that means is up to you" ("Lake Laogai" 17:10). This dialogue was one of the most defining conversations in Zuko's life that led him down the path to his self-discovery and understanding of who he is and his true motivations. This scene marks the beginning of his transformation and shifts to the good. In particular, this scene relates to Heidegger's concept of *dasein* in how Uncle Iroh specifically asks Zuko to question himself and start the process of becoming a self. Zuko's journey to shifting to the good side is also representative of his becoming a self.

Another considerable part of Zuko's transformation and development of his character came when he decided to rescue and release Appa rather than using him as a means of capturing Aang. During Zuko's rescue of Appa, his uncle asks him, "Is it your own destiny? Or is it a destiny that someone else has tried to force on you? I beg you, Prince Zuko! It is time for you to look inward and begin asking yourself the big questions: Who are you, and what do YOU want" ("Lake Laogai" 5:31). Unable to answer these questions, Zuko follows his uncle's advice and leaves the bison. However, after this occurs, Zuko falls extremely ill as he committed an action that contradicted his very core. His returning Appa and intentionally helping Aang without the intention of capture (different from when he had helped Aang in Book I twice—with the full intention of capturing him) completely changed his character and left him directionless. This scene was the most tumultuous time of Zuko's life as his inner self began to battle itself, trying to reshape new ideas of right and wrong and trying to reshape his self-identity. Aristotle's habituation concept can explain Zuko's struggle with battling his inner emotions and his previous conceptions of his dasein. As described previously, virtues are acquired either at birth or through habituation. Even after having had instilled the perception of Fire Nation's way of colonization was morally correct, Zuko— can break that habit and finally understand the world more holistically after traveling through different towns and meeting people who the Fire Nation had also scarred. He begins his journey of becoming an authentic and true self, not influenced by others—but figuring out his place in the world.

Now I analyze the final part of Zuko's moral formation: his last steps to confront his past and starting the process of self-becoming. After the events of his moral

metamorphosis, as previously discussed, Zuko momentarily turns to the good. However, this resolve was temporary as it was soon crushed by his sister's arrival and the opportunity to live his previous dream of restoring his honor and his father's love. This shift was temporary because he was still acting on the advice/guidance of his uncle rather than making the decision to become good solely for himself. Aristotle's concept of habituation can explain Zuko's return to evil. Zuko was conditioned to adhere to his father's will and obtaining the love of his father was his ultimate goal in life--to restore his honor. Following the will of his father was his main guiding moral principle, which had been his habit. However, his uncle introduced new ideas of morality, which put him at odds with himself. Therefore, his initial actions in virtue in Ba Sing Se were temporary as he acted on behalf of what his uncle thought was right and not *necessarily* what he fully believed to be correct. Therefore, Zuko not exhibiting the freedom to make his own choice results in his actions' temporariness.

Finally, at the end of the series, Zuko exhibits the good qualities that Aristotle believes a virtuous person must have. He makes a decision for himself for the first time in his life (before he was either influenced by his uncle or by his father), which is in pursuit of the good. His ability to make this decision exhibits true freedom, as expressed by Heidegger.

Azula

Throughout the show, Azula is seen as ruthless and malicious and is willing to use any means (including family) to obtain power. Her way of making decisions relates perfectly to Machiavelli's idea of the most virtuous Prince willing to use any means to

maintain control over the state. One of her distinct character flaws is that she cannot handle someone being better than her. A flashback reveals that Ty Lee was better at doing cartwheels than Azula; thus, she pushes her onto the ground out of jealousy. Furthermore, Azula must be the center of someone's universe and prioritized. Her actions could stem from deeper-rooted issues with her mother, which I briefly explained during Zuko's analysis and which I expand on later. Azula's Machiavellian virtue can be seen through her 'forced' recruitment of Ty Lee. Additionally, in Book II, she intentionally puts Mai and Zuko in an uncomfortable and dangerous situation because she noticed that Mai had a crush on Zuko. This scene could be interpreted as another attempt at tormenting and embarrassing Zuko. It could be her way of punishing Mai for getting distracted by Zuko and thus not prioritizing her. In either case, this was a precise instance of her neglecting her friends' needs and desires and putting her feelings above theirs. This pattern can relate to Aristotle's concept of *habituation* and *human nature* as it seems that according to her nature, she was always a vicious person. Still, as these habits had hardened over time—it eventually culminated in her downfall. Her downfall begins when Mai and Ty Lee betray her. When this happens, she loses control over everyone and everything. As previously analyzed in the first chapter of my thesis, Mai crosses Azula due to her love for Zuko and Ty Lee. Based on my interpretation of her actions, she did so because she finally found an opportunity to return to the good side.

Azula was pressured at a young age to be perfect by her father and sought his praise and approval, even at the expense of her brother or mother's plight. During Ozai's meeting with then Firelord Azulon, Ozai tests both Zuko and Azula's memorization skills by quizzing them on the Fire Nation's history. When Zuko falls short on answering one

of the questions, Azula takes over and gives a perfect answer. She also demonstrates new fire bending moves to show off her natural talent and skill to her grandfather. She becomes Ozai's favorite child as he can garner attention from his father through his daughter's talent. However, this constant strive for perfection seemingly takes a toll on Azula, and she is constantly forced to bear the consequences of Zuko's shortcomings. She must always follow her father's will to maintain her status of power in the Fire Nation.

In the Ember Island episode, it is the first time that we see Azula acting like a *real* teenager with *real* emotions rather than the passionate lust she has for power and eliminating the weak. She has no dating experience as much of her life consisted of pleasing her father and helping the Fire Nation grow, which explains her awkwardness in flirting and behavior around Fire Nation males. She also expresses feelings of jealousy. These emotions are important to note since jealousy is the main reason for her rise as an "evil" character and her ultimate downfall as a villain.

When Azula was younger, she was jealous of her brother since her mother always favored him. This may have been the viewpoint from her perspective since while they were younger (and growing up till their teenage years), Firelord Ozai had always favored Azula due to her need for power and brutality, ideal Firelord traits. As Zuko had constantly been shoved to the side in favor of his sister, his mother usually protected him and sided with him. Consequently, Azula never saw her mother as caring for her; thus, her jealousy towards her brother and feelings of neglect from her mother turned into a deep hatred for her brother and mother. Now onto the Ember Island episode.

In this episode, Azula is seen being jealous of Ty Lee's attention from guys. She makes a cruel remark which ends in her friend crying. Azula comforts her and admits her jealousy, which is surprising given her nature of hiding her jealous emotions, thus turning into hatred. This scene was the only instance of positive development humanistic trait that we will ever see from Azula. Due to her suppressed jealousy and the fact that she was never able to meet her mother again to forgo her anger, she still craves power and attention, which leads her to insanity toward the end of the show. While it is unfortunate that her character never received a redemption arc like Zuko, it represents the real world. Although humans are neither inherently good nor evil, they choose to be either or to do either. In Azula's case, as it is for many "evil" people in the world, they ultimately determine the path and never can stray away from it. There are people like Zuko who exist and who make the switch from evil to good, good to evil, vice versa; however, I like that they included both Zuko and Azula to represent different aspects of human nature and different pathways we choose in life. Azula's character also is indicative of Aristotle and Machiavelli's virtue ethics. Her character's actions relate to Machiavelli as she prioritized the Fire Nation's stability over the rest of the nations' prosperity and peace. Similarly, she was able to resort to whichever means would best achieve her desired outcome. Her character's arc relates to Aristotle in the way that he defines incontinent people. Aristotle states, "now, the worst man is he who practices wickedness toward himself as well as his friends, but the best man is not one who practices virtue toward himself, but who practices it toward others, for that is a hard thing to achieve" (*Nic. Ethics* 1130a5-9). Therefore, Azula's vicious actions can be categorized as "worst man"

as she not only was harming other people, but she was ultimately harming herself in her pursuit for power.

When Azula finally talks about their mother, she claims that her mother only ever saw her as a monster. Azula also believes herself to be a monster. This scene indicates two crucial ideas. Her mother may have been fearing that Azula would become a monster and power-hungry tyrant based on the signs she showed as a child. As a child, she manifested no remorse or empathy for anyone, including her own family. This can be seen when she hoped that her father would usurp the throne from her uncle after her grandfather died. She wanted power so much that she didn't care who was affected. Her mother, realizing this when she was younger, should have tried to appeal to Azula and should have taken care of her lovingly, but she was too scared of what the outcome could be. Thus, to a certain extent, it is Ursa's fault for only siding with Zuko and trying to avoid guiding Azula. Secondly, this is the first time she becomes vulnerable as a character and seems to possess real human emotion. In how this relates to virtue ethics philosophy, perhaps she could have acted out of Aristotelian virtue; however, because she did not see it as the most effective way of usurping power, she acted with Machiavellian virtue.

While she does seem to hate her brother at the beginning of the series, her ambition for power overrules that, which ends up with her turning him to the dark side and making "peace" with him. This scene may be another example of her Machiavellian nature of justifying the ends with the means, in this case, relating to how she was able to suppress any ill feelings toward her brother for the prospect of him helping to take over the world.

Despite growing up in the same household, it is interesting to see the drastically different paths that Zuko and Azula go on. Their philosophical analysis displays human nature's complexities, thus further proving this show's philosophical significance.

Aang

Aang has many roles to play/balance in the show. His 'monk' upbringing/heritage, Avatar duties, contradict the former, his own *Dasein*—or his true Being. The monks taught him at a young age not to kill. However, he experiences a major moral dilemma in the last book when he realizes that he must kill the Firelord. Up until this point in the story, as we were able to see Aang's progress towards mastering all four elements, he could never confront his inner battle with both conquering the 'avatar state' and killing the Firelord. In this chapter, I first explain his internal moral conflict, being the battle within himself to master the avatar state. Then I present his central ethical dilemma of the show: how to reconcile killing the Firelord with his monk lifestyle and personal moral principles. Finally, I will explain how he confronts his Being and thus begins the process of 'self-becoming.'

During Book I, Aang is able to have a private conversation with Roku. Roku, appearing as a transcendent being, rather than a 'Jedi force ghost,' helps guide Aang in helping introduce him to his Avatar duties, thus aiding in his purpose in life. This scene brings about one of Aang's most significant roles: being the 'hero' and saving the world. Roku states, "100 years ago, Firelord Sozin used that comet to begin the war. He and his firebending army harnessed its incredible power and dealt a deadly first strike against the other nations. The comet made them stronger than you could even imagine. Sozin's

comet will return by the end of this summer, and Firelord Ozai will use its power to finish the war once and for all. If he succeeds, even Avatar won't be able to restore balance to the world." ("Winter Solstice: Part 2: Avatar Roku" 4:41). While the Fire Nation threat was always there throughout Book I, this specific scene further solidifies the imminent threat of the Firelord. This lays out Aang's mission and purpose as the Avatar, which he later comes into conflict with within Book III.

During the first two books of the show, Aang was seen involuntarily invoking the Avatar State when in states of deep stress or anger. While he was in these states, he had no control or power over himself. He was also extremely weakened after each episode in which he forcibly went into the Avatar State. The first significant instance of Aang going into the Avatar state occurred after realizing what his one hundred-year-long disappearance meant for the air nomads. Because Aang had been frozen in the iceberg for such an extended period of time, the Fire Nation soldiers were able to invade the Air Temples—resulting in the mass genocide of the air nomad race. When he sees his mentor, Monk Gyatso's skeleton, he realizes the weight of his actions. His inability to control his emotions launches him involuntarily into the Avatar state. Katara and Sokka were able to calm him down, allowing Aang to return to normal. In this initial 'hulk' like fashion, whenever Aang is in the Avatar State, he has no control over himself or his actions. This more 'weaponized' version of himself is representative of Aang not being an authentic self. It is also representative of the lack of control that Aang has over himself regarding his inability to enter the Avatar state voluntarily.

When Aang meets with Guru Pathik, he teaches him how to enter the Avatar State, but Aang cannot reconcile his strong feelings for Katara with the clarity of mind

needed for entering the Avatar state. To open the different Chakras, which, as explained previously, are necessary for Aang to enter into the Avatar state meditatively, he has to reconcile his deepest fears. One of which being losing his friends—especially Katara. Guru Pathik instructs Aang to “Surrender your fears. Let your fears flow down the creek” (“The Guru/The Crossroads of Destiny” 37:49). While Aang can open these initial Chakras, he struggles with opening the last Chakra—the “thought Chakra” (“The Guru/The Crossroads of Destiny”). Guru Pathik describes this Chakra as “dealing with pure cosmic energy and is blocked by earthly attachment. Meditate on what attaches you to this world” (“The Guru/The Crossroads of Destiny” 28:46). Aang sees a vision of Katara and realizes that he must rid himself of his attachment or love towards Katara to master the Avatar state fully. However, when he attempts to do this, he sees a vision of Katara in danger back in Ba Sing Se, and so he gives up on controlling the Avatar state to go and help her. He enters his first moral dilemma without fully understanding how to protect his loved ones while entering the avatar state. In this way, Aang joining the Avatar state with complete control is synonymous with Heidegger’s concept of *beingness* and *dasein* as the former relates to the process of becoming a self. In this process, you can control your life and become an authentic self. Aang is trying to reconcile his duty to his friends and his duty as the Avatar comes into battle here, and he is finally starting the process of becoming a self.

The second and most crucial moral dilemma that Aang struggled with is how to kill the Firelord. The monks always taught Aang to live a life of peace and non-violence. They indeed would have prohibited murder, which brings Aang into his second moral dilemma—on how to bring peace to the world without killing the Firelord.

At the end of the series, he meets with the Lion turtles, and he finds a solution. This episode in which Aang faces his most crucial inner battle with himself (or with his past avatars—still himself) in trying to understand the best solution to defeating the Fire Nation is, therefore, trying to understand who he is as a self. All of the previous avatars give him similar advice; to kill, but his inner monk upbringing and moral values inhibit him from freely doing so. What is essential to notice is the contrast between him and the previous avatar Yang, an Airbender raised by the monks. She gives him the same advice as the other avatars. Eventually, the lion turtles teach him a way to defeat the Firelord—through ‘energy bending.’ As referred to by the show’s fans as it is not given a proper title, this term is essentially the spiritual way Aang connects to Ozai’s core being and removes his ability to bend. In this way, he reconciles his inner battles by finding an alternate nonviolent way of ending the war.

Throughout the show, Aang has to battle different parts of himself—his (Buddhist) monk background, his duties as the Avatar, and his feelings towards protecting his friends. During the show, all three of these dilemmas come into the battle with one another. Aang acquires a balance to all three—thus starting his process of becoming an authentic self.

Katara and Jet

Katara’s mother was taken from her at a young age which, in a similar way to Zuko, impacts her morality and life afterward. She becomes vengeful and angry. Her bloodlust for the Fire Nation soldiers who abducted and killed her mother comes to a peak during Book III, during her solo adventure with Zuko.

Jet, one of ‘freedom fighters’ and Earth Kingdom rebels who team Avatar comes across on their travels, and Katara have similar backgrounds regarding significant loss at the Fire Nation’s hands, leading to deep resentment of the Fire Nation. However, they differ in how both characters learn to identify the real villains in their anger. During Book I, Jet decides to take revenge against the Fire Nation, but in the process, he intentionally puts an entire village of Fire Nation civilians in danger. In this instance, in a Machiavellian way, he decided that the ends were worth the means—getting revenge, no matter the cost. However, Katara and Jet differ because Katara realized that this way of thinking was wrong and that destroying many innocent lives due to their nationality was wrong. Later, when Katara confronts the man that abducted her mother, she directs her anger towards him—despite how angry she was, she never took out her anger on the innocent Fire Nation colonists and instead waited until she could confront the man. Along with Zuko’s help (who accompanies her), she forgives the man and let’s go of her anger and processes her mother’s loss in a healthy manner. This arc represents an interesting contrast to Jet’s as she begins the process of becoming a self, once she lets go of her anger and begins to make more authentic decisions. Jet, unfortunately, does not receive this opportunity as he passes away off-screen during Book II.

Conclusion

The show depicts human nature’s complexity by portraying the in-depth moral formations of each of these characters. This chapter is one of the main reasons why I chose to write on *Avatar the Last Airbender*. While some philosophers/writers have touched on popular culture and philosophy—for example, the *Blackwell Philosophy and*

Pop Culture Series, I have not found any discussion on this show in particular. Therefore, I decided to write on this show to lead the way in displaying how Avatar the Last Airbender can be viewed philosophically.

CHAPTER FOUR

Why Everyone and Their Grandma Should Watch *Avatar*

In this last chapter, I add all the parts of my thesis together to construct why I think this show satisfies Socrates' "appropriate media" as discussed in Plato's *Republic*. Additionally, I explain how this show is an essential part of a child's development. In this chapter, I draw from Plato to discuss how the show shapes a child's moral character, establishing the purpose of the series and other media like this. I then argue the show's cultural significance and how people of all ages can obtain something from it through the various social commentary on contemporary topics that the show embeds.

First, I draw from Plato's *Republic* to set up the context of my argument. In the *Republic*, Socrates constructs an ideal society. Within this perfect society, Socrates believes that only *specific* stories should create new generations of virtuous citizens. He states, "the beginning of any process is the most important, especially for anything young and tender. It's at that time that it is most malleable and takes on any pattern one wishes to impress on it" (*Republic* 377b). Socrates is arguing that people are the most impressionable when they are children. So, it is of utmost importance to ensure that they are adequately educated and are exposed to the appropriate things at that formative age. Additionally, "from early childhood, their education is designed to foster an appropriate *phusis* (374e), one endowed with the two normally antithetical qualities of gentleness and spirit" (Blondell and Blundell 17). In this way, there are certain qualities that Socrates wants to instill in the children of the republic to create new generations of ideal citizens

and classes. Socrates further comments that “indeed, if we want the guardians of our city to think that it’s shameful to be easily provoked into hating one another, we mustn’t allow *any* stories about gods warring, fighting, or plotting against one another, for they aren’t true...If we’re to persuade our people that no citizen has ever hated another and that it’s impious to do so, then that’s what should be told to children from the beginning by old men and women; and as these children grow older, poets should be compelled to tell them the same sort of thing...The young can’t distinguish what is allegorical from what isn’t, and the opinions they absorb at that age are hard to erase and apt to become unalterable. For these reasons, then, we should probably take the utmost care to ensure that the first stories they hear about virtue are the best ones for them to hear” (*Republic* 378c-e). Therefore, with the children’s exposure to stories expressing virtue in the most precise way, Socrates argues that there will be no room for error or separate interpretations due to poetry’s symbolic nature. Additionally, “Socrates declares (provisionally) that writers should not represent the unjust as happy or vice versa” (Blondell and Blundell 22). In this way, Socrates believes that there should be a precise portrayal of the lives of the unjust and the just to discourage unjust behavior and to encourage just behavior. This more holistic picture of the world is what he believes to be the best way to shape children into virtuous individuals. This concept relates to *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, as the show displays critical instances of unjust characters getting their ‘just desserts’ and of just people, or people on the path to becoming just, receiving the endings they deserve well. In this way, by showing the lack of one clear answer or solution to each problem, it equips viewers with the knowledge to face the world and hopes to do so. Another way that this show perfectly exhibits the type of appropriate

media which Socrates advocated for lies in the way it carefully illustrates important contemporary social topics.

Social Commentary Addressed in the Show

On the Environment

One of the contemporary social topics that the show brings up is environmental ethics. In Book I the team comes across a burned down forest. Aang is upset because he sees the carnage from the Fire Nation's destruction of the town and forest. Referring to the forest's destruction leaving no life anywhere, Aang says, "Why would anyone do this? How could I let this happen? It's the Avatar's job to protect nature, but I don't know how to do my job" ("Winter Solstice Part I: The Spirit World" 21:43). However, Katara reminds him that "these acorns are everywhere, Aang. That means the forest will grow back. Every one of these will be a tall oak tree someday, and all the birds and animals that lived here will come back" ("Winter Solstice Part I: The Spirit World" 19:57). This scene represents the amount of environmental damage that human beings have inflicted on the planet. It reconciles these damages with the promise of hope—that there is the potential for life to regrow or for nature to heal itself alongside human beings' help. Later, in the episode, Aang and his friends encounter a town destroyed by a mysterious spirit, Hei Bai. The group encounters the villagers desperate for their help in fighting/trying to reason with the spirit. The villagers explain that "for the last few days at sunset, a spirit monster comes and attacks our village. He is Hei Bai, the black and white spirit. We do not know [why he is attacking us]. But each of the last three nights, he has

abducted one of our own” (The Winter Solstice: Part 1: The Spirit World” 18:44). The villagers believe Aang to be the best person to solve their issue as he is the Avatar, and therefore the “great bridge between man and spirits” (The Winter Solstice: Part 1: The Spirit World” 17:52). Despite Aang’s initial hesitancy in trying to help the villagers due to his lack of knowledge of the spirit world, he tries to communicate with Hei Bai to no avail. However, this futile attempt leads to the abduction of Sokka, and Aang unconsciously enters the spirit world. While Aang goes on this spiritual journey, he realizes why the spirit is so angry—for the same reason that he was at the beginning of the episode, because of the burnt down forest. Aang confronts Hei Bai again and realizes Hei Bai’s identity: the spirit of the burned down forest. Aang states, “You’re the spirit of the forest! Now I understand. You’re upset and angry because your home was burned down. When I saw the forest had burned, I was sad and upset, but my friend gave me hope that the forest would grow back” (The Winter Solstice: Part 1: The Spirit World” 22:12). He then shows Hei Bai the acorn that Katara had shown him earlier. Hei Bai accepts the acorn, and the villagers (including Sokka) reunite with their families. This episode represents the extent of nature’s exploitation by humans and how many species are unable to survive due to their habitats’ destruction. This destruction results in “reduced population sizes, which increases the probability of extinction by demographic and/or environmental stochasticity” ([Fahrig 603](#)). Therefore, the show successfully brings awareness to this critical environmental issue of habitat fragmentation and loss.

On Refugees

Another issue that this show brings up is displaced peoples or refugees. The show displays the difficulties and flaws within the refugee system. During their travels in Book II, the Aang gang and Zuko run into many refugees who were displaced because of the war. Ba Sing Se, one of the Earth Kingdom capitals and where much of the plot in Book II takes place, is depicted as “a thriving city where refugees can escape the war” ([Tan 29](#)). While team Avatar is on their way to Ba Sing Se to inform the Earth King of an incoming solar eclipse and discuss military strategy, they come across some refugees. A pregnant woman and her husband were the same refugees that Zuko had run into in an earlier episode I referenced in a previous chapter of my thesis. It had previously been revealed that they had no safe shelter and only limited food supplies. In this episode, they try to get to Ba Sing Se before Ying, the pregnant wife, has her baby. Team Avatar, used to traveling on Appa through mapped out pathways as opposed to governmental public transportation, were planning on traveling through the “Serpent’s Pass” (“The Secret of the Fire Nation”). However, after the refugees tell them of the pass’s dangers, they decide to travel into Ba Sing Se through the ferry. This scene shows the broken refugee system and one of the crucial downfalls of war. Katara, in observation of the station, states, “I can’t believe how many lives have been uprooted by the Fire Nation” (“The Secret of the Fire Nation 43:18”). The scene illustrates many families and groups of people in different camps, all trying to survive by getting into the city. Ying’s husband states, “we’re all looking for a bit of life—safe behind the walls of Ba Sing Se” (“The Secret of the Fire Nation” 43:01). Zuko described the refugees’ living situation as “eating rotten food, sleeping in the dirt” (“The Secret of the Fire Nation” 42:46). As Zuko and Iroh were

coincidentally also on their way to seeking refuge in Ba Sing Se as they were branded enemies of the Fire Nation, they had to live the ‘refugee’ life. Later in the episode, Aang tried to obtain tickets to the ferry; however, because they do not have passports and could not prove Aang’s avatar status’s authenticity, they were denied. This scene implies the flaws in the refugee system in that in the real world, they cannot escape to other countries (via airplane or other official transportation) due to their lack of citizenry status. Because they are ‘displaced peoples,’ they cannot legally immigrate to other countries unless they apply as asylum seekers. Even then, it is difficult to emigrate. According to the Brookings Institute, “on average, 24 people per minute, per day worldwide were forced to flee their home in 2015. About 1 out of every 113 people worldwide were either asylum seekers, refugees, or internally displaced, and about half of the world’s refugee population was under the age of 18” (McKenna and Hoban). Furthermore, many of these refugees have minimal job opportunities forcing them to work in areas that make them vulnerable to exploitation. (McKenna and Hoban). This terrible refugee situation can be seen in the city of Ba Sing Se itself as all of the refugees are forced to live in the lower ring of the city where the living conditions are terrible, and the supplies are scarce. While they are safe from the war, they still are not treated as full citizens. Later in the episode, Toph procures tickets due to her prestigious family background—her passport containing the Bei Fong’s symbol of the boar. This scene starts a greater conversation on privilege and the severe difference in class gaps. Because she was from an affluent family, she was able to receive tickets to go to Ba Sing Se—but the other refugees who were not dealt the same hand were forced to suffer in limbo—not being able to enter the city. The conductor states, “If I gave away tickets willy nilly, there would be no more order. And you know

what that means, no more civilization” (“The Secret of the Fire Nation 38:39). This exchange implies that the bureaucrats of Ba Sing Se prioritized order over basic humanity. The thought that showing kindness or helping each other out as fellow humans would lead to loss of civilization. While the team gives up their tickets to help the pregnant woman and her husband and sister safely pass, many other families are stuck in the station, not receiving safe passage to Ba Sing Se because of their lack of passport or citizenry of a nation.

On the Disabled

The next problem that the show incorporates is the societal treatment of disabled people and how disabilities are viewed in the world. In the context of *Avatar*, disabilities are portrayed through Toph’s blindness and Teo’s paralysis of his lower body. The show demonstrates how these two disabled characters are still as strong (if not stronger in some scenes) than any of the able-bodied characters. Through both of these characters, we can see how people (both family and society) view disabilities and how they seek to overcome these societal restrictions. In Book II, when we are first introduced to Toph, the show portrays her life’s dichotomy. The show first presents her as a reigning earthbending champion competing in the ‘Earth Rumble 6’ tournament. During this episode, Aang was trying to find the ideal, most virtuous earthbending master who “listens to the earth” and who waits and listens (“The Blind Bandit” 19:19). After determining that Toph fits the bill for his earthbending master, Aang discovers where she lives and is surprised to see that she comes from a wealthy and overprotective family who has no idea of her strength. According to her father, “sadly because of her blindness, I

don't think she will ever become a true [earthbending] master" ("The Blind Bandit" 10:20). Her parents always believed her to be weak and helpless due to her blindness and did not even allow her to walk around their garden unsupervised. This is why Toph, every night, takes on the alias of the "Blind Bandit" and competes in earthbending tournaments secretly as a way of proving to herself and others of her strength as a person without eyesight ("The Blind Bandit"). In this way, through Toph's strength and natural ability to be the most powerful Earthbender in the world, the show displays the strength and power of blind people. It explains to the audience not to see blind people as lesser/more delicate than others. While some scenes in which her blindness inhibit her from performing certain actions, it ultimately aids in her ability to be a true earthbending master. For example, as she can "see with earthbending" she can feel the vibrations in the earth—allowing her to detect every action of every living creature. In this way, she can also become a human lie detector—in how she can see when the vibrations change—or when someone tells a lie. Unlike any other Earthbenders in the show's history, Toph also figures out how to bend metal. In an extraordinarily uplifting and powerful episode, when her father hires men to abduct Toph and to bring her back home (after she had run away to join Aang and to teach him earthbending), she out of pure desperation and sheer will (her power as well), bends the metal in the metallic cage/chariot that imprisons her. In this way, the show strives to break any misconceptions or preconceived notions about blind people by showing how their unique abilities allow them to achieve greatness, and their blindness is not a flaw.

The other character that the show includes in efforts to open up the discussion on the treatment/perception of disabled people is Teo. Teo is first introduced in Book I when

Aang and the gang go to the Northern Air Temple in hopes of finding more Airbenders. While Teo has paraplegia due to a flood that destroyed his home, he can still use a glider (crafted by his father) and travel in the air—which no one other than Airbenders has historically been able to do. This also represents the series' way of showing how people with disabilities are still strong, or in some cases even stronger, than non-disabled people.

On Censorship

The following social topic that I discuss is censorship and the emphasis on the value of information. This idea can be seen in the entire premise of the Earth Kingdom city of Ba Sing Se. In Ba Sing Se, the war with the Fire Nation is not spoken of at all. Team Avatar goes to Ba Sing Se in hopes of locating Appa (Aang's first animal companion; a sky bison) who had been stolen and to inform the Earth King of the new information regarding the war that they had discovered in the library in a desert. When team Avatar reaches Ba Sing Se, they are greeted by Joo Dee--their official Ba Sing Se guide. It is important to note that they did not request her guidance; instead, she appeared out of the blue—fully aware of all of their names and identities. While Sokka tries to get straight to the point of their mission to seek an audience with the Earth King to discuss the relevant, new information regarding the war with the Fire Nation, Joo Dee manages to delay their meeting indefinitely. She always tells them that, "You are in Ba Sing Se now, everyone is safe here" ("City of Walls and Secrets" 20:47). This scene alludes to the city's darker truth: that the government's spies are constantly spying on the people to prevent certain information from being discussed.

Later in the episode, as Sokka tries to get Joo Dee to acknowledge the war and the urgency of their meeting with the Earth King, she manages to steer the conversation away, if not wholly ignoring what Sokka says in a very robotic/brainwashed manner. It becomes evident to team Avatar that there are mysterious actors in the city that are not allowing them to talk about the war. This idea can be seen when they reach Ba Sing Se's university, and they try to discuss the war with one of the students. When they are not looking, Joo Dee shakes her head at the student, and the student stops discussing the war immediately. The team realizes that they will have to find answers on their own regarding Appa's whereabouts and a meeting with the King. However, they do not know that their efforts are in vain due to a secret society of agents called the Dai Li, controlled by Long Feng, the Grand Secretariat of Ba Sing Se. As it turns out, Long Feng is also the grand puppet master as he is the primary controller of both the Earth King and the city—as it is part of his job to keep any mention of the war from reaching the Earth King. The city was also famous for the secrecy of location and its unbreakable walls. This 'secret city' and the forbidden knowledge aspects of it was based on the Forbidden City and the censorship issues in present-day China. The government has “successfully regulated access to internet content at the national level through technical means. Although some researchers optimistically viewed the internet as a liberating force in China's democratic development, the Chinese government has been using network technologies to control online information and grafting its ideology to the Net. Digital technologies have become the government's tool to tamp down political threats” (Lee 25). While the show exports this concept of censorship to a more dangerous level, it still appears to be a commentary on China's internet censorship. As Ba Sing Se's city is mapped architecturally to

resemble China's ancient Forbidden city, it is also interesting to see how closely they resemble modern China.

On Asian Representation in the Media

Another social topic and one of the show's substantial positive aspects is how it shapes Asian representation in the media. Prior to this show, there was hardly Asian American representation in the media. If there were, they were portrayed by white men (Breakfast at Tiffany's) in the most racist caricature version, or they would be sporting the 'Fu Manchu' stereotype. Fu Manchu, or "Yellow Peril," was the titular character of *The Mystery of Dr. Fu Manchu*. Even though it was not a well-known book in 1913 at the time of its publication, "over the decades that witnessed two world wars, the emerging Cold War, and rapid scientific and technological change, Rohmer's [the author of the book series] thirteen novels about a Chinese 'devil doctor' captivated massive readerships in England and America. The central, recurring conflict of these thrillers—Dr. Fu-Manchu's schemes for global domination—rewrote the master narrative of modern England, inverting the British Empire's racial and political hierarchies to imagine a dystopian civilization dominated by evil Orientals" (Seshagiri 162). This racist depiction of the Chinese crafted from the various world wars and other battles with China and other Asian countries alike only led to caricatured representations of Asians in media. Additionally, "Fu Manchu is represented as a sexual threat to white women and a political threat to western civilization as he attempts to rule the world. He tries to achieve his goals with evil machinations while his physical body is paradoxically de-sexualized and reduced to a breeder of superior genetic offspring" (Chan 4). This desexualization

and ultimately dehumanization of Asian men in contemporary media are what the show also strives to battle and destroy. *Avatar stands to destroy the demeaning racial stereotype* in the way that it respectfully embeds East Asian and South Asian culture and its strong depictions of Asian characters. As there are four different nations, the water, earth, fire, and air nations indicate the world's complex reality. While the show could have depicted the characters to look similar and depict one race, to simplify the show's concept, they instead purposefully depicted separate races and colors as an attempt to mirror reality. In this way, the show developed more complex stories and characters involving race and the plotline and villains' darker implications. The show also exclusively focuses its attention on the depiction of Asian cultural representation. Unlike any other show from this period or before, this show does its best to educate on the delicate nuances of Asian culture. In the second chapter of my thesis, the show carefully and respectfully pulls inspiration and philosophy from various East and South Asian religious traditions and philosophies. In an entirely revolutionary way, this show strays from the traditional western ideas of good and evil and brings a more complex and high-level understanding of human nature to its audiences.

On Feminism

The following social topic that the show addresses is feminism—the fight for gender equality. This show also does a great job in empowering women (and all peoples). At the beginning of the show, fan-favorite Sokka was initially portrayed as a sexist 14-year-old boy. While Katara was mending his pants, Sokka tells Aang to stop pestering her and not disturb girls while they sew. When Katara asks, “What does me being a girl have

to do with sewing?” He responds, “Simple. Girls are better at fixing pants than guys, and guys are better at hunting and fighting and stuff like that. It’s just the natural order of things” (“The Warriors of Kyoshi 20:36). Katara befittingly responds by throwing the unmended pants at Sokka while refusing to fix them due to his designation of male and female strengths. While it is clear that he is ignorant in more ways than one, especially in how he devalues Katara’s waterbending abilities, he matures, and his worldview expands through the events of the show. This chauvinistic and small-minded attitude represents the history of the oppression of women and sexism in society. However, the showrunners give him a redemption arc which can be seen later in Book I. During the episode in which team Avatar travels to Kyoshi island, they are overpowered and captured by the Kyoshi warriors. Sokka, expecting the warriors, naturally to be men, is surprised and ashamed when he discovers that they are women. He later tries to overcompensate because he was defeated by a ‘bunch of girls’ by making excuses and belittling their abilities to fight and beat him. However, he is shown his place when Sukki, the leader of the Kyoshi warriors, defeats him in a fair fight. This inspires Sokka, and we begin to see the true change in his character when he begs her to teach him the traditional ways of Kyoshi warrior fighting. He even puts on the traditional Kyoshi warrior outfit, consisting of heavy makeup and an armored dress. Sokka’s character and evolution regarding his view of women and their roles in society represent the show’s way of addressing traditional gender roles. While the woman can simply be designated the role of mending/sewing pants, and essentially only the homemaker duties while the man takes care of all the hunting and protective duties, the show, through its powerful female characters, strives to break these traditional roles. Moreover, the fact that there have been female avatars in the past also attests to the

feminist activism of the show. Avatar Kyoshi (one of the Avatar's female incarnations) was seen exhibiting more traditionally male character traits. She was noted as the "biggest of any avatar" and had exceptionally large feet and height. ("Avatar Day" 12:40). Interestingly, the 'villain' that she had defeated was Chin the Great, was much smaller in comparison, marking an interesting female-to-male dynamic. She was revered for her strength and incomparable sense of duty to protect her people. Her character and story are another way the show depicts strong women and aims to empower females. Another key aspect of the show's endeavor to promote feminism occurs when team Avatar travels to the Northern Water Tribe. All of the female Waterbenders of the Northern Water Tribe are only taught healing abilities, and only the men are taught to fight. Katara fights against this. This episode symbolizes the fight for feminism. Master Pakku initially refuses to teach Katara waterbending and is offended by the notion of Katara trying to learn Waterbending from him. However, after realizing how his outdated view of women affected his own life, Pakku concedes and teaches Katara waterbending alongside Aang. This happens when Katara declares that she will fight him, and if she wins, he will teach her, and if she loses, she will give up. However, when she loses, he happens upon her mother's necklace, which turns out to be the engagement necklace he had crafted for Kanna, Katara's grandmother. He had been in love with her, but she hadn't reciprocated his feelings. Katara states, "Gran-Gran (Kanna) wouldn't let your tribe's stupid customs run her life. That's why she left. It must have taken a lot of courage" ("The Waterbending Master 2:44). While the show depicts Sokka's developing views on men and women's roles, it is interesting how the show also represents Master Pakku's (an older character) change in outlook.

On Imperialism

The last political topic that I discuss is the show's depiction of imperialism and the negative impacts of oppression and genocide. As mentioned earlier, before the events of the show, due to Firelord Sozin's fear of the world and subsequent attempts in taking over the world, starting with the genocide of the air nomad race (to rid the world of the avatar), there are lasting impacts which can be seen through the events of the show. For instance, as stated in the title of the show, Aang is the last Airbender alive. While the refugees living in the Northern Air temple harness the air through their machinery, he is still the last living Airbender. Some episodes depict families separated and homes lost due to the Fire Nation's waging war and destruction on the world. The Fire Nation's empire and drive for colonization were based on Imperial Japan. During both world wars in the 20th century, Japan, much like the Fire Nation, invaded and destroyed many countries and cities. They asserted a cultural dominance over much of eastern Asia during this time and "assembled a colonial empire in Korea, Taiwan, and South Manchuria. Japan expanded its footprint in Asia through the creation of new forms of puppet-state colonialism" (Young 2). The Japanese government "contemplated a major invasion of Korea in 1873 and launched a military expedition to Taiwan the following year. Japan sent a gunboat to Korea in 1876—and forced the Joseon Kingdom to submit to an unequal treaty even while lobbying European diplomats unsuccessfully for the revision of their unequal treaties. Thus, Japan embarked on imperialism under the imperialist gun and offered an example of the synchronicity of colonization and colonialism as well as a state that was both subject and object of empire" (Young 3). The Japanese imperial

influence can be seen in how the Fire Nation constantly tries to conquer all four nations and similarly establish national supremacy. As explained in previous episodes, the legacy of conquering the world started during Avatar Roku's time. It persisted past Avatar Aang's time (seeing as Aang is technically 112 years old at the start of the show). This type of colonialism is representative of the culture of empires and their drive to colonize. The show also displays the lasting negative consequences of their drive to conquer. This can be seen in the deteriorative psyche of the Puppetmaster or of the elder Southern Water tribe Waterbender. We are first introduced to Hama while the Team avatar is undercover in a Fire Nation town currently suffering from a mysterious being who abducts random villagers at night. The children who seem suspicious of her find out that she is originally from the southern water tribe, much like Katara and Sokka themselves. Hama explains that the Fire Nation wiped out all of the waterbenders from the tribe back in her day ("The Puppetmaster"). She was the last waterbender left, and so she was "stolen" from her home ("The Puppetmaster"). Hama narrates, "It was over 60 years ago when the raids started. They [the Fire Nation soldiers] came again and again. Each time, rounding up more of our waterbenders and taking them captive. We did our best to hold them off, but our numbers dwindled as the raids continued. Finally, I, too, was captured. I was led away in chains. The last waterbender of the Southern water tribe. They put us in terrible prisons here in the Fire Nation. I was the only one who managed to escape" ("The Puppetmaster" 12:25). When questioned about how she escaped and her decision to stay in the Fire Nation, she seemingly is disturbed, so she does not answer or continue her story. However, the reason behind this was because Katara later finds out that she was the mysterious abductor of the Fire Nation villagers. Completely mentally fractured from her

imprisonment, the anger and resentment harbored deep inside her, resulting in her innovative way of waterbending—bloodbending. She figured out that as humans are made up of liquids, she found a way to use her waterbending abilities to bend the blood in human bodies, allowing her to escape, and allowed her to ‘abduct’ the villagers by using their bodies against them. Her entire character and situation reflect the captives and prisoners’ terrible mistreatment during wartime and Imperial Japan, and how this type of inhumane practice can create a new monster.

Conclusion

Growing up, my older sister and I would watch an episode of the show every night. We became hooked on the show when Book II was released, and we continued to watch the show as it aired. However, even after the show ended, we watched it every night, re-watching the entire show or watching select favorite episodes. Whenever we met someone new, rather than suffering through icebreakers or board games, we would always show people the first few episodes. It became a massive part of our lives as we would always refer to *Avatar* as the starting point of many of our lasting friendships and relationships, as we could relate to one another through our mutual love for the show. As a child, I enjoyed the show’s comedy and plot, and every episode carried itself as a separate entity. While the episodes relate to the main story in some capacity, each episode has its particular storyline and arc. In this way, it kept our attention, and there was not a single “filler” episode that was simply just a way to pass the time until we arrived at more plot-driven episodes. Each episode was necessary and significant. I found myself able to

relate to many of the characters—even as a child, despite understanding the show’s deeper contexts and lessons.

During my sophomore year in college, I decided to revisit the show after a few years. As I was older and had matured, I came to view the show as more than simply a children’s series. Instead, I began to see the show as containing more philosophical text characteristics, and I learned more from it. For instance, there are such rich themes of loss and friendship that I appreciated more as an adult. Despite having had friends and people who I liked, the friendships I had made were never deep or lasting. According to Aristotle, they were merely friendships of utility or pleasure. I had not known how to create complete friendships that included utility, pleasure, and virtue. The show displays the development of a complete friendship and documents the progress through each of the books. By watching the show and seeing how the friendships progress, I was able to see the application of the development of virtuous friendships from *Ethics*. In this way, I was able to apply what I had learned from my philosophy courses to the show, and it made these concepts more relatable. I took this knowledge and used it in my life in the friendships I had created following my show.

Avatar also provided me with valuable lessons on human nature. Through the multi-dimensional characters, I learned that there are not necessarily “good” or “evil” people in the world. People simply have different ideas of the Good and means to achieve it. This idea can be powerfully emphasized in the show. In contrast to other shows that display a more rudimentary conception of good and evil (perhaps drawing from a Western-Christian perspective), this show portrays a more complex and holistic picture of human nature—thus reality.

I interviewed several individuals who had grown up watching the show and also currently watch the show. Rebecca Blessing reflects, “I watched it [recently], and it was the first time that I watched it [the show] since being abroad on my own, and so I thought that it was interesting the way that they represented different [cultures]. Because it’s done like an anime, but it’s not exactly like an anime because it wasn’t originally in Japanese, so I thought that it was interesting because it was originally American-made and so the way that they represent Asian cultures” (Rebecca Blessing, age 20, Baylor student).

Anju Kannappan reflects, “I remember at first thinking that it [the show] was just a kid’s show—cartoon. Something to pass the time, I guess at that age [when I first started the show when I was around 15 or 16 years old] you’re kind of leaning more towards the very dramatic-teen shows. So, it was something different for me to watch, but I started loving it pretty quickly and loving the characters pretty quickly and eventually became very obsessed with it and told all my friends that they needed to watch it too” (Anju Kannappan, age 27, enrolled in a medical residency program).

Overall, there have been many positive reactions to the show as it encompasses complex philosophical themes. It continues to impact lives, and it stands the test of time—therefore, it qualifies as the appropriate media, according to Socrates, that all people should view and enjoy.

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