**Compassion and Moral Responsibility in *Avatar: The Last Airbender:***

**“I Was Never Angry. I Was Afraid that You Had Lost Your Way.”**

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A lot of very bad things happen in *ATLA*. Katara and Sokka’s mother dies in a Fire Nation raid. Zuko is physically and emotionally abused by his father. Jet commits acts of terrorism. Hama kidnaps and tortures civilians for revenge. The Fire Nation’s war on the Earth Kingdom causes devastation; they even have labor camps. The Air Nomads are wiped out in a genocide. Aang discovers the skeleton of his guardian and mentor, Monk Gyatso. In stopping the Fire Nation and helping Aang restore balance to the world, Team Avatar must confront all these very bad things. Clearly, one major concern of the show is how we should best hold people *morally responsible* for the bad things they do to each other.

Consider an example that raises an ethical puzzle. Appa gets abducted in “The Desert,” and Team Avatar later encounters the sandbending thieves in the desert. When Aang hears that they muzzled Appa, he becomes enraged. Entering the Avatar state, he demands to know where Appa is and starts destroying the sandbenders’ skiffs. When the sandbenders try to apologize and make amends Aang only gets more destructive. In the end, Katara must calm him down, and he starts crying.

This is gut-wrenching stuff. On the one hand, Aang seems right in angrily blaming the sandbenders for abducting and muzzling Appa; someone deserves to get yelled at for hurting Appa! On the other hand, Aang does not accept an apology and his anger nearly gets the better of him. Aang is the Avatar, after all, and in his Avatar state, he is incredibly dangerous. Here, then, is an ethical puzzle: it seems both good and appropriate to get mad at people who do bad things. But anger can be toxic, self-destructive, and get out of control. What gives?

**Anger, Blame, and Responsibility**

Many contemporary philosophers believe that there is an important connection between holding someone responsible and being angry at them. The British philosopher P.F. Strawson (1919-2006) argued that to blame someone—to hold them responsible for a wrongdoing—is just to feel and express certain kinds of moral anger towards them.[[1]](#endnote-1) If you do a bad thing to my friend, I might *resent* you for it and tell you off. This is an intuitively compelling account of what blame consists in, and many contemporary philosophers agree. On this kind of view, Aang is just holding the thieves responsible for hurting Appa when he gets angry at them.

This intuitively compelling idea is bolstered by the connection between responsibility and moral desert. We might think that the thieves *deserve* to have some bad things happen to them. A natural outcome of being the recipient of someone’s moral anger is the pain of feeling guilty. Maybe we think some people deserve that bad feeling—like the people who abducted Appa—and so being worthy of blame is just to be worthy of the pain of guilt.[[2]](#endnote-2) Relatedly, we might think that the pain of guilt is the normal pathway by which we show moral understanding. Feeling guilty about something is a sign that you think it was wrong. Beyond this, we might think that anger and blame are an especially important way to stand up for ourselves in the face of injustice, as feminist and anti-racist philosophers have pointed out.[[3]](#endnote-3) So, in these ways, it seems like anger can be good. It helps us confront injustice and hold wrongdoers responsible.

On the other hand, there is surprising agreement among a diverse range of philosophers who argue that anger is very bad.[[4]](#endnote-4) Classical Buddhist thought suggests that anger is one of the poisons in our nature, something that gives rise to pain and suffering (and a false sense of what the world is really like).[[5]](#endnote-5) The Stoic philosophers thought something similar. The Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca (4BCE-65CE), for instance, says that anger is “hideous and wild … greedy for revenge … awkward at perceiving what is true and just.” Anger is just “the desire to repay suffering.”[[6]](#endnote-6) How could the desire to make someone else suffer ever be good?

Beyond this, we tend to think highly of people who let go of angry blame. As contemporary philosopher Glen Pettigrove has pointed out, many of our moral heroes—“Socrates, Buddha, Jesus, Abraham Lincoln, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and the Dalai Lama”—exemplify *meekness*, a virtue historically characterized by responding to ill-treatment in a calm and kindly fashion.[[7]](#endnote-7) We often admire those who *don’t* get angry when they are wronged, but instead respond with compassion, the awareness that other persons suffer and a desire to alleviate that suffering.

Most of us can recognize this tension in our thinking about moral responsibility and its connection with anger. We cannot hope to address every aspect of this tension here. But *ATLA* has a lot to say about this puzzling tension regarding how we think about angry blame and responsibility. Below, we’ll see that the show highlights strategies for holding one another responsible *without* the bad effects of anger. These strategies often involve forgiveness and compassion. Although the strategies *ATLA* highlights do not solve the tension in our thinking about anger, they do help alleviate it by offering us examples of how to respond to wrongdoing without angry blame.

**Katara and The Uses and Misuses of Angry Blame**

Katara is an especially important character in *ATLA* when considering anger and responsibility. She has a lot of fiery blame to go around, and this is often portrayed as a good thing. For instance in “The Waterbending Master,” she uses her anger to confront the sexism of Master Pakku, who refused to train women waterbenders: “someone has to slap some sense into that guy!” Here, we see that angry blame has a point—it can be used to change the actions of other people, maybe by making them feel guilty and realize that they have done wrong. Consider Pakku’s guilt upon becoming aware that Katara is the granddaughter of his once-fiancée Kanna. But Katara often encounters others who harbor destructive anger, and her story arc illustrates a way we might avoid letting our anger become destructive.

Recall Seneca’s worry that anger is greedy for revenge, that it is just the desire to repay suffering. Why would that be the case? As contemporary philosopher Martha Nussbaum points out, a focus on a past wrong generates a desire to retaliate and diminish the wrongdoer.[[8]](#endnote-8) And it is easy to see how this desire can get out of hand. Consider Katara’s brief infatuation with Jet, the Earth Kingdom partisan and budding terrorist whom she ultimately rebuffs. Jet’s anger at the Fire Nation is so intense that he is willing to murder innocent Earth Kingdom citizens, blaming them for collaborating with the enemy. They need to be “punished” (“Jet”). Or consider Katara’s encounter with the bloodbending Hama (“The Puppetmaster”). Hama was kidnapped and imprisoned by the Fire Nation in their genocidal attempt to wipe out all waterbenders. To escape, Hama learns to waterbend the blood in other living creatures. She kidnaps and imprisons Fire Nation civilians to pay back what the Fire Nation did to her.

Katara knows that Jet and Hama are wrong to seek revenge on innocent civilians. Nonetheless, in “The Southern Raiders” Katara is offered the chance to go on a “field trip with Zuko” to find Yon Rha, the man who killed her mother and she starts desiring revenge.

When Zuko joins Team Avatar, he seeks Katara’s forgiveness and acceptance by offering to help her find the man who killed her mother, Kya. Zuko suggests that finding the murderer is about justice, but Aang recognizes that Katara’s motivation is revenge. Katara agrees and suggests that’s what Yon Rha deserves. Aang says that Katara sounds like Jet. He quotes the monks: “revenge is like a two-headed rat viper. While you watch your enemy go down, you’re being poisoned yourself”—something that Buddhists and Stoics would heartily agree with. Aang eventually relents and agrees to let Zuko and Katara borrow Appa—working through this is something Katara needs to do herself—but he implores her to let her anger out, and then let it go. He hopes Katara can find compassion and forgiveness. She does, but not in in the way that Aang expects.

Katara bloodbends her way to finding Yon Rha. And she looks like she’s going to kill him. She turns rain into ice spikes, pointing them at Yon Rha and stopping right before they pierce him. He begs for mercy and even *acknowledges* that Katara deserves revenge, offering Katara *his own mother’s life* out of a twisted sense of “fairness.” But Katara can’t bring herself to kill the mother, or Yon Rha. Although she can’t forgive, she forgoes revenge. Yon Rha isn’t worth it.

Katara seems to have stayed angry. Yet her anger no longer generates a desire for revenge. Puzzlingly, Katara is willing to forgive Zuko after her encounter with Yon Rha. Why? Contemporary philosopher Lucy Allais has argued that forgiveness is like “wiping the slate clean” by refusing to take a person’s bad actions as evidence about their character.[[9]](#endnote-9) Holding someone responsible (and ceasing to blame them when you forgive them) is sometimes a matter of *who they are* and not simply about what they have done. Zuko’s formerly villainous actions are not representative of his present character. He already feels guilty and has resolved to change. In comparing him with Yon Rha, Katara “wipes the slate clean” and forgives Zuko.

On the other hand, Yon Rha is presently cruel and pathetic. He even wanted to sacrifice his own mother to save himself because he finds her burdensome! Yon Rha appears incorrigible, and so Katara’s blame is not worth it. Interestingly, then, the show suggests that the purpose of blame sometimes outstrips blameworthiness. Yon Rha deserves blame, but for Katara, *expressing* this blame is moot. Thus, even if she cannot forgive, she does not need revenge.

So, *ATLA* suggests that angry blame can have its uses, but that we must learn how to let it go when it is no longer fitting or productive.

**Iroh and Compassionate Responses to Wrongdoing**

Next, let’s think about Uncle Iroh. He is no stranger to anger and strong negative emotions. In “The Siege of the North, Part 2,” he angrily confronts Admiral Zhao who seeks to kill the moon spirit: “Whatever you do to that spirit, I will unleash on you tenfold. Let it go, now!” He is upset and exasperated with Zuko in “Lake Laogai” when he discovers that his nephew is the “Blue Spirit” trying to abscond with Appa from Lake Laogai: “You never think things through!” But Iroh often chooses not to respond to wrongdoers with anger. In fact, he often seems to forgo blame entirely in responding to wrongdoing.

After being betrayed by Zuko at the end of Book 2, Iroh does some curious things. At first, he refuses to speak to Zuko while he is imprisoned, rather than show any outward anger. He later helps Zuko discover that his maternal grandfather was the previous Avatar, Avatar Roku. Finally, after escaping prison and reuniting with Zuko, he immediately forgives Zuko, or rather, he lets Zuko know he never blamed him at all—at least not in the sense of angry blame. He offers this tearbending remark: “I was never angry; I was afraid that you had lost your way.” As Yap and Emerick argue in chapter 19, Iroh consistently holds Zuko responsible for his wrongdoing, while giving Zuko space and support to become better.

Some contemporary philosophers have moved away from an anger-centric (or more generally emotional) way of understanding holding someone responsible. The contemporary philosopher T.M. Scanlon, for instance, thinks that to blame someone is to adopt whatever attitude is appropriate towards another person when they have impaired their relationship with you, perhaps by holding less-than-good attitudes towards you.[[10]](#endnote-10) I can’t think of a clearer example of manifesting a relationship-impairing attitude than betraying a loving parental figure so that they end up in prison as a traitor! Since Zuko has hurt his relationship with Iroh, perhaps Iroh’s refusal to speak with Zuko is just an appropriate recognition of the damaged relationship.

But *ATLA* sometimes goes beyond this relational way of thinking about blame and responsibility. Recall that, according to Pettigrove, many of our moral heroes exemplify *meekness*, the character trait of not responding to ill-treatment with anger. Iroh has many virtues, and meekness is certainly one of them. Consider his encounter with Tycho, the would-be mugger in Ba Sing Se during “City of Walls and Secrets.” Instead of being angry, he comments that the mugger has a weak stance, and corrects it! He asks *why* the mugger is doing this, and eventually, we get a hilarious jump cut to Iroh and Tycho sipping tea, with the former encouraging the latter to pursue his dreams of becoming a masseur.

On a relationship-based way of thinking about blame, we might say that everyone has a basic moral relationship with everyone else, including strangers. And if someone tries to mug you, it does seem like that person has attitudes that impair even that basic relationship. Iroh, however, does *not* respond to Tycho as if any relationship between them—even the basic moral relationship we have with strangers—has been damaged at all. Iroh responds to his aggressor by seeking understanding. And, with understanding in hand, he responds with compassion. Notice that Iroh is not engaging with the wrongdoing itself, but is instead concerned with the motivations behind the wrongdoing, the suffering that might drive someone to act wrongly towards others, for instance, poverty and fear of failing at a dream career. Instead of addressing the wrong, Iroh addresses the root causes behind it by responding with compassion.

You might think that Iroh is *forgiving* Tycho for mugging him, but this is a mistake. Forgiving is also a way of addressing the wrong. Commonsensically, we tend to think that there is a strong connection between compassion and understanding, and between understanding and forgiveness. You know the adage: to understand is to forgive. The idea here seems to be that a deeper understanding of why someone performs a wrong action tends to mitigate our anger towards them.[[11]](#endnote-11) Consider how someone partway through watching *ATLA* for the first time would respond to the spoiler that Iroh gets mugged in Ba Sing Se: they would probably be upset at the mugger! But in context, Tycho is endearing. We forgive him, but not because Tycho apologizes or makes amends. Rather, Tycho becomes endearing because Iroh’s first response is to perceive the wider context in which Tycho is not a threat. As contemporary philosopher Pamela Heironymi has suggested, in some important sense, to forgive someone is to recognize that they are no longer a threat to you.[[12]](#endnote-12) What is so compelling about Iroh’s interaction with Tycho is that he—literally and figuratively—disarms the threat before any further wrongdoing occurs. *ATLA* suggests, then, that sometimes the best way to respond to a wrongdoer is not to blame them at all.

**Zuko, Self-Blame, and Self-Compassion**

Zuko is a very angry character, but let’s just just focus on one compelling detail: much of his anger is *self-directed*. After he betrays Iroh and “defeats” Aang at the end of Book 2, Zuko visits Ember Island with Azula, Mai, and Ty Lee (“The Beach”). There, Zuko admits that “for so long now I thought if my dad accepted me, I'd be happy. I'm back home now. My dad talks to me. Ha! He even thinks I'm a hero. Everything should be perfect, right? I should be happy now, but I'm not! I'm angrier than ever and I don't know why!” After repeated prompts from the others about *who* or *what* he is angry about, Zuko finally snaps: “I’m angry at myself!”

Why is he angry at himself? Zuko says he doesn’t know right from wrong anymore, but it is apparent that he feels guilty for betraying Iroh. He angrily blames himself for the wrong that he has done. And it seems like he is right to do so. That was a terrible thing to do! Many of us experience self-blame, which goes beyond just feeling guilty, but instead is characterized by actively expressing self-anger. It is possible that self-blame can be good in the same way that angry blame can be good: it might get us to really see that we’ve done wrong and motivate us to do better.

But there is something suspicious about blaming yourself, since you are both the person expressing and receiving anger. Imagine that Sokka teases Toph, and that Toph teases Sokka right back. Now imagine that Sokka gets upset at Toph for teasing him. It seems unfair for Sokka to get mad since he just teased Toph himself! In this scenario, Sokka is being a *hypocritical* blamer. He isn’t entitled to be upset. As contemporary philosopher R. Jay Wallace might put it, Sokka is making an unfair exception for himself.[[13]](#endnote-13) Notice that when Zuko blames himself, he is *also* being hypocritical. He blames someone (himself) for the bad things he himself has done!

Maybe Zuko’s self-blame could be appropriate because his character changes over time; a redeemed Zuko, who would never do those bad things, could get mad at the past Zuko who did.[[14]](#endnote-14) But is Zuko’s self-blame the catalyst for his change in character? The show seems to suggest otherwise. Indeed, the show seems to suggest that his self-blame is *counterproductive* to this end. Zuko’s inner moral conflict makes him physically sick in “The Earth King.”

Zuko’s successful redemption begins with the recognition of his own suffering. When he finally confronts his father Ozai in “The Day of the Black Sun Part 2: The Eclipse,” he begins by acknowledging how *he himself was hurt*. He tells his father that it was “cruel” and “wrong” to challenge a 13-year-old to an Agni Kai. He notes the “incredible lie” told to everyone in the Fire Nation, that they were the greatest civilization on earth and that the war was their way of sharing greatness with the world. The lie was harmful to Zuko, and everybody else in the Fire nation.

In recognizing how he has been hurt, Zuko seems to be exercising self-compassion. As contemporary philosopher Simon Keller and psychologist Felicia A. Hupert define it, self-compassion involves the judgment that you are in a bad condition, that it would be better if it could be alleviated, and that you can feel concern for yourself as if from an outside perspective as one-among-many.[[15]](#endnote-15) Unlike self-blame, self-compassion is anti-hypocritical because you are extending to yourself the same grace you should extend to others.

It is important to note that Zuko is not excusing his wrongdoing in recognizing his own suffering. It is instead a means for him to understand and take ownership of the wrongs he has done. For instance, when he makes his appeal to join Team Avatar in “The Western Air Temple,” he again begins by acknowledging that he’s “been through a lot in the past few years, and it’s been hard.” But he notes that this hardship helped him realize the true nature of honor in choosing to do what’s right. He then apologizes to Toph for accidentally burning her feet, saying that “fire can be dangerous and wild. So, as a firebender, I need to be more careful and control my bending, so I don’t hurt people unintentionally.” Upon hearing this, Aang realizes that Zuko understands how easy it is to hurt the people we love and accepts Zuko as his firebending teacher. Zuko’s self-compassion, almost paradoxically, enhances his ability to hold himself responsible. Here, *ATLA* reminds us that being angry at ourselves sometimes prevents us from understanding our own suffering, which is often the root of our wrongdoing in the first place.

**Sometimes We Can Let Go**

Although we have focused on how *ATLA* models responsibility without anger, the show doesn’t say straight out that we should stop angrily blaming one another. Angry blame plays an important role in some of its most important positive moments—Katara confronting Pakku and Iroh defending the moon spirit, for instance. But *ATLA* highlights that we can choose not to be angry with wrongdoers. Our nurturing community—the people who raise us and shape our formative years—seems to have a kind of duty to safely usher us into moral adulthood and to help us cope with what is genuinely puzzling in our ethical lives. Media for children and young adults have an important role to play here, even for adults. In this role, *ATLA* succeeds in many ways. Even though there is a tension between what is good about blame and what is bad about anger, *ATLA* shows us some strategies that might help us live with this tension. It offers the lesson that, sometimes, we can let go of expressing anger and act with compassion towards ourselves and others.

1. P.F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in Michael McKenna and Paul Russell eds., F*ree Will and Reactive Attitudes: Perspectives on P.F. Strawson's "Freedom and Resentment,"* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 1962), 19-36. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Andreas Brekke Carlsson, “Blameworthiness as Deserved Guilt,” *The Journal of Ethics* 21 (2016), 89-115. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See for instance: Amia Srinivasan, “The Aptness of Anger,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 26 (2018), 123–144; Audre Lorde, “The Uses of Anger: Women Responding to Racism,” in *Sister Outsider*, (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1981), 124–33; Marilyn Frye, *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*, (Berkeley, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. This is a prominent theme in the work of philosophers who do not think anyone has free will—and so no one deserves blame or punishment. See for instance: Derk Pereboom, *Free Will, Agency, and Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Owen Flanagan, *The Geography of Morals: Varieties of Moral Possibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017). This book contains rich descriptions and explorations of this tradition of thought. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. From Seneca’s *De Ira*, as quoted in Flanagan, Ibid., pgs. 169-170. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Glen Pettigrove, “Meekness and ‘Moral’ Anger,” *Ethics* 122 (2012), 341–370. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Martha Nussbaum, *Anger and Forgiveness: Resentment, Generosity, and Justice*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016 ). See chapter 2. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Lucy Allais, “Wiping the Slate Clean: The Heart of Forgiveness,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 36 (2008), 33–68. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. T.M. Scanlon, *Moral Dimensions: Permissibility, Meaning, Blame* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See Glen Pettigrove. “Understanding, Excusing, Forgiving,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 74 (2007), 156–175. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Pamela Hieronymi, “Articulating an Uncompromising Forgiveness,” Philosophy and Phenomenological Research 62 (2001), 529-555. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. R. Jay Wallace, “Hypocrisy, Moral Address, and the Equal Standing of Persons,” *Philosophy & Public Affairs* *38* (2010), 307–34. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. For a very similar and more technical version of this idea, see: Kyle G. Fritz and Daniel J. Miller, “Two Problems of Self-Blame for Accounts of Moral Standing,” Ergo (forthcoming). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Simon Keller and Felicia A. Huppert, “The Virtue of Self-Compassion,” *Ethical Theory and Moral Practice* 24 (2021), 443-458. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)