**Being Bad at Being Good: Zuko’s Transformation and Residual Practical Identities**

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Partway through Book Three of *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, as Zuko seeks to leave behind the dominant ideals of the Fire Nation and join Team Avatar, he finds himself doing things that betray those aspirations. After accidentally burning Toph, he cries in frustration, “Why am I so bad at being good?” (“The Western Air Temple”) When we meet Zuko in Book One, his purpose is clear. He single-mindedly pursues the Avatar as a way to restore his “honor” and regain his place in his family and nation. Over time and under his uncle Iroh’s influence, however, Zuko starts experiencing inner turmoil about who he has become and about his growing dissatisfaction with current ideals of the Fire Nation. But even his eventual resolution to change is only the beginning of a journey marked by backsliding. Why does he have such difficulty in changing?

**Aspiration, Transformation, and Practical Identity**

Zuko’s plight illuminates the process of aspiration, including common challenges to the aspirant. As contemporary philosopher Agnes Callard understands it, aspiration typically involves a “deep change in how one sees and feels and thinks.”[[1]](#footnote-1) And this deep change is often intertwined with a change in what contemporary philosopher Christine Korsgaard calls *practical identity*, a “description under which you value yourself, . . . under which you find your life to be worth living and your actions to be worth undertaking.”[[2]](#footnote-2) But as Zuko shows, practical identities are complex, sometimes unwieldy, and changes in explicit self-conceptions can take work, time, and perhaps some luck to bring about the deep change one aspires to. Even after he explicitly disavows his past actions, Zuko finds himself reverting to past behaviors, doing things that (on some level) he wishes he would not. These actions frustrate him— “Why am I so bad at being good?”— but they are not mere lapses in judgment. They come naturally and express an identity that Zuko had long embraced and cultivated but is now trying to leave behind.

The arc of Zuko’s transformation illustrates the interplay between two dimensions of practical identity. On the one hand, as Korsgaard’s account emphasizes, our explicit self-conceptions and values matter. They guide our actions and shape how we see the world. But Zuko’s struggles suggest that such self-conceptions and aspirations are only part of the story. According to the philosopher Martin Heidegger’s (1889-1976) notion of being-in-the-world, our practical identity depends more on our existential engagement with the world than on our explicit self-conceptions.[[3]](#footnote-3) And these different dimensions of practical identity do not always align. As Heidegger scholar William Blattner writes, “Some of the most challenging conflicts in our lives arise when who we are existentially engaged in being stands in tension with who we think of ourselves as being.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Zuko is frustrated because, despite consciously trying to change, his being-in-the-world conflicts with his Korsgaardian practical identity. His world is still shaped (residually) by an identity he wants to shed.

The way Zuko’s world and actions continue to be shaped by an identity he is trying to leave behind highlights a key difficulty of transformation. Zuko’s desire to prove his worth to his father and his rage have so thoroughly permeated his being-in-the-world that they are second nature. They shape his orientation toward the world and fuel his firebending. For better and worse, his spontaneous actions do not always fall in step with his conscious commitments. The same skills and dispositions Zuko previously cultivated as central to his identity now lead to unwanted actions and keep him from aspired-to actions. To become good in the way he wants, Zuko must not only cultivate the dispositions that will allow his aspired-to identity to become part and parcel of his being-in-the-world, but he must clear out or modify the residual influence of his past identity and related dispositions and values.

**Family, Shame, and Honor (Book One)**

In “The Boy in the Iceberg” we meet Zuko as a dishonored prince living in exile. Fueled by rage, insecurity, and a need to prove his worth to his father (Fire Lord Ozai), he seeks the Avatar in order to restore his “honor” and reestablish his place in his family and the Fire Nation. Zuko believes that capturing the Avatar will change his father’s estimation of him as a failure and disgrace to the Fire Nation.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The scar Zuko carries from his father’s attack during their one-sided duel serves as a reminder that Zuko’s upbringing and family dynamic are, to put it gently, complicated. With a caring but eventually absent mother, a competitive dynamic with a violent and volatile sister, and a father who sees him as inadequate and inferior to his sister and who ultimately attacks him, Zuko grew up trying and failing to live up to his father’s expectations. But striving to live up to those expectations came to define Zuko’s self-conception: “I’ve always had to struggle and fight and that’s made me strong. It’s made me who I am” (“The Siege of the North, Part two”). It’s unlikely that Zuko has read Christine Korsgaard’s *Sources of Normativity*, but the way he connects his self-conception (“I’ve always had to struggle and fight”) to his identity (“made me who I am”) might make you wonder. Zuko identifies as a fighter who overcomes obstacles, no matter what, and this self-understanding shapes how he seeks the Avatar.

However, even when this self-understanding dominates Zuko’s outlook, there are limits to what he will do to capture the Avatar. In “The Storm” he initially ignores Iroh’s advice and decides to head into a dangerous storm, even if it puts himself and his crew at risk. When Zuko says, “The safety of the crew doesn’t matter. Finding the Avatar is more important than any individual’s safety,” he sounds a lot like his father who was ready to sacrifice military recruits. In the end, however, Zuko moves the ship to safety despite seeing the Avatar fly away. This could seem like a small change in plan, a minor setback to Zuko’s pursuit, but choosing to preserve the lives of others distinguishes him from his father and sister and lays the groundwork for more significant future change.

At the end of Book One, admiral Zhao tells Zuko, “You should have chosen to accept your failure, your disgrace” (“The Siege of the North, Part 2”). But given his self-conception as a fighter who overcomes struggle, Zuko is uninterested in resignedly accepting his perceived failure and disgrace. His path forward, however, is less clear, partly because conflict is brewing between different dimensions of his identity. On the one hand, Zuko sees and explicitly values himself as a fighter whose strength came through struggle, and his current struggle is to prove his strength to his father by capturing the Avatar. We will call this his reflective (Korsgaardian) practical identity. But on the other hand, Zuko sees the world in ways that conflict with that explicitly embraced self-conception. In Heidegger’s phenomenological account, the self-understandings that attune us to the world are best indicated by how we see and engage with the world, by our being-in-the-world. Although explicit self-conceptions typically shape our existential engagement (our being-in-the-world), Zuko shows how they can come apart. Since capturing the Avatar is his explicit and nearly all-consuming goal, moving the ship to safety shows a (small) tension between his explicit self-conception and his being-in-the-world. While he says the crew’s safety doesn’t matter when compared to capturing the Avatar, his actions suggest he sees things differently.

**“It’s time for you to decide”—Inheriting, Finding, and Choosing Destiny (Book Two)**

In “The Avatar State” Zuko reflects on his situation: “Three years ago I was banished. I lost it all. I want it back. I want the Avatar. I want my honor, my throne. I want my father not to think I’m worthless.” From Zuko’s perspective, his father’s approval is still largely paramount. Those explicit desires form his explicit self-understanding and significantly affect his being-in-the-world, so he is deeply affected when Azula condescendingly calls him a failure and an embarrassment to their father, and declares him an official enemy to the Fire Nation.

At this point, any cracks in Zuko’s allegiance to his father are small. He sees the world through the lens of an honor which depends on capturing the Avatar: “There is no honor for me without the Avatar” (“Avatar Day”). When Iroh cautions that capturing the Avatar may not resolve his situation, Zuko replies, “Then there is no hope.” As Zuko sees it, capturing the Avatar is the only way to restore his honor and (re)gain his father’s love. Soon after this exchange, he leaves Iroh and goes his own way.

But Zuko’s own way is a work in progress, a working out of (apparently) conflicting values and ways of being. In flashbacks (“Zuko Alone”), we learn that Azula called Iroh weak when he returned from the war after his son was killed. We also see Zuko’s kind mother tell a younger Zuko, “Never forget who you are.” We don’t know exactly what his mother has in mind, but we’ve already seen Zuko care about others in ways that his father and sister do not.[[6]](#footnote-6) We again see Zuko care when he helps an Earth Kingdom family get their son back after he had been taken by soldiers. When he saves the boy and reveals that he is a Fire Nation prince, however, the family turns on him, and he again sets out on his own.

Soon after, Zuko reunites with Iroh and starts to actively change, albeit intermittently. Iroh believes “people can change their lives if they want.” He adds, “I believe in second chances” (“The Serpent’s Pass”). Having changed his own life, Iroh wants to help Zuko change his. During this time, Zuko goes on a date with Jin, a girl from Ba Sing Se. Because things go well, she is surprised when he rejects her. When she asks what is wrong, he replies, “It’s complicated.” Zuko could be describing himself as he works through his complicated self and his orientation toward the world (“Tales of Ba Sing Se”).

While in Ba Sing Se, Zuko finds a flyer that Aang had made in order to find Appa, rekindling his desire to find the Avatar. Iroh encourages him to let the Avatar go, but Zuko says, “I want my destiny.” Iroh replies, “What that means is up to you,” pushing Zuko to take responsibility for his destiny and to not passively inherit the expectations of others (“Lake Laogai”.) When Zuko later finds Appa, Iroh urges him to move on.

“I know my own destiny, Uncle.”

“Is it your own destiny, or is it a destiny someone else has tried to force on you… It’s time for you to look inward and begin asking yourself the big questions. Who are you? And what do *you* want?” (“Lake Laogai”)

Although Zuko says chasing the Avatar is his destiny, he also feels constrained by it. Of course, we can voluntarily set constraints on our ourselves in unproblematic ways. To be someone’s lover or friend, for example, is to commit to act in certain ways and not in others. In the end, Zuko lets Appa go. But soon after, he says that he doesn’t feel right, things go blurry, and he collapses (“The Earth King”). While Zuko is feverish and delirious, Iroh describes the sickness, “Your critical decision . . . was in such conflict with your image of yourself that you are now at war within your own mind and body . . . You are going through a metamorphosis, my nephew. It will not be a pleasant experience. But when you come out of it, you will be the beautiful prince you were always meant to be” (“The Earth King”). Like Zuko’s mother’s plea to not forget who he is, Iroh’s description of the metamorphosis suggests Zuko was already more (at least potentially) than his father’s expectations for him. And releasing Appa helped him realize that potential.

Zuko emerges from the fever a changed person, but the fragile transformation, including his confidence that he can make his own path, is soon tested. Azula lays a trap to capture Iroh, and Zuko is imprisoned after challenging Azula. While held captive with Katara, he describes his scar as the mark of a banished prince. He will never be free of the mark, he says, but he now realizes that he is free to determine his destiny (“The Crossroads of Destiny”). The awareness of his freedom doesn’t resolve the internal conflict, however, as we see when he must choose between siding with Iroh or Azula (and the possibility of regaining his position in the royal family).

Azula: “You can still redeem yourself.”

Iroh: “The kind of redemption she offers is not for you.”

Azula: “At the end of this day, you will have your honor back. You will have father’s love. You will have everything you want.”

Iroh: “Zuko, I’m begging you. Look into your heart and see what it is you truly want.” (“The Crossroads of Destiny”)

The challenge Zuko faces is that his heart (or practical identity) is not univocal. As much as his mother and Iroh talk about not forgetting who he is, seeing what he truly wants, and becoming who he is meant to be, Zuko’s practical identity is fractured, unsettled.

Book Two ends with Zuko’s fragile transformation taking a step back. Unable to resist Azula’s offer of “everything you want,” he sides with her and attacks Aang. Zuko has changed—he sees himself differently and his allegiance to his father and the current iteration of the Fire Nation has weakened—but he still sees the world as affording ways to show he is not weak and to (re)gain his father’s approval. His being-in-the-world is still shaped by rage and the desire to prove himself to his father. Iroh was right that letting Appa go was at odds with Zuko’s explicit self-image, but the transformation Iroh predicted is far from complete. Becoming aware of his true desires is (at best) only part of the change he seeks. To become the “beautiful prince” he was meant to be, he must align his existential engagement with “what he truly wants.” His aspired-to desires must become part and parcel of his being-in-the-world.

**Being Bad at Being Good—Rethinking Honor and Destiny (Book Three)**

When Zuko returns home, he (re)gains his place in the Fire Nation, his “honor,” and his father’s approval (“The Awakening”). He has everything he always wanted, has satisfied the desires that had guided him to that point, “but it’s not at all what I thought it would be” (“The Headband”). Later, he admits “I should be happy now, but I’m not” (“The Beach”). As happiness eludes him, he experiences moral vertigo: “I’m confused. I’m not sure I know the difference between right and wrong anymore.” He says “anymore,” but he might be giving himself too much credit, or perhaps he has confused confidence with knowledge.[[7]](#footnote-7) Although Zuko was previously confident in his path, his actions suggest less-than-ideal moral knowledge

His distress grows when he attends a meeting of the war council and acts as the perfect prince (the son his father wanted) but feels that he isn’t himself (“Nightmares and Daydreams”). Soon after, in front of a picture of his mother, he commits to set things right (“Day of the Black Sun, Part 1: The Invasion”). He confronts his father, tells him that he will not take orders from him anymore, and rejects the version of the Fire Nation his father has cultivated (“Day of the Black Sun, Part 2: The Eclipse”).

The Fire Nation Zuko knows was shaped by his great-grandfather Sozin’s war conquests. But when Zuko learns that Avatar Roku was also his great-grandfather, it allows him to rethink firebending and imagine a Fire Nation compatible with peace and kindness. Thisultimately helps him break with Ozai’s version. As Iroh predicted (“The Avatar and the Fire Lord”), the struggle between his great-grandfathers helps Zuko understand his inner struggle, the eventual resolution of which lays the groundwork for a different Fire Nation.

When Zuko offers to teach Aang to firebend, he describes himself as a changed person: “I’ve changed. And I, uh, I’m good now” (“The Western Air Temple”). He understands why Team Avatar wouldn’t trust him because he has done some awful things. But, he says, “*I’m not that person anymore*.” The group rejects his offer, though Toph expresses some sympathy: “Considering his messed-up family and how he was raised, he could have turned out a lot worse.”

When Toph later goes to visit Zuko, she startles him and he accidentally burns her feet. He cries out, “Why am I so bad at being good?” He is understandably frustrated with himself for injuring Toph immediately after claiming that he was good and wasn’t “that person anymore.” Toph’s description of the incident is insightful. Asked if Zuko attacked her, she says, “Well, he did and he didn’t. It was sort of an accident.” It makes sense to say that Zuko attacked her—attacking an intruder fits Zuko’s life to that point. But attacking a desired ally also conflicts with his new self-image, with who he wants to be. Zuko wants a deep change, a change in his being-in-the-world. However, this deep change of aspiration is difficult. Even if conscious aspirations about who we want to be (typically) figure into our being-in-the-world, such aspirations do not change our being-in-the-world as thoroughly or as quickly as we’d like. We can find ourselves, like Zuko, seeing and inhabiting the world in ways that stem from residual practical identities we are trying to shed.

The way Zuko says, “I’m good now” and “I’m not that person anymore,” suggests that he thought that by standing up to his father and changing his explicit commitments, he had already achieved the desired change. He learns the hard way that who we are, including how good and bad we are, involves not only our conscious self-conceptions (and aspirations) but also our being-in-the-world more broadly. By rejecting his father and committing to join the Avatar, Zuko changes his reflective practical identity. But to be good at being good, to not be “that person anymore,” Zuko must also change his practical perception, his bodily skills and dispositions—more generally, his being-in-the-world.

Zuko soon gets a chance at redemption when the assassin he had hired finds the temple and attacks Team Avatar. When Zuko tries to call off the hit, the assassin is undeterred, and Zuko is injured while trying to stop him. His actions change Team Avatar’s opinion, and they accept him into their group.

When re-introducing himself, Zuko says,

“I’ve been through a lot in the past few years. And it’s been hard. But I’m realizing that I had to go through all those things to learn the truth. I thought I had lost my honor and that somehow my father could return it to me. But I know now that no one can give you your honor. It’s something you earn for yourself by choosing to do what’s right. All I want now is to play my part in ending this war, and I know my destiny is to help you restore balance to the world.”

The two dimensions of Zuko’s practical identity are again aligning, now in a morally better place. However, joining the Avatar creates an unexpected problem. When he starts to teach Aang firebending, Zuko has trouble firebending himself (“The Firebending Masters”). He soon realizes that his firebending is weaker because, in joining Aang, he has lost his rage that had previously fueled it. Sensing that the current Fire Nation has distorted the original way of firebending, Zuko wants to become a different firebender, one whose bending has different motivations and is not fueled by rage. When he visits the Sun Warriors with Aang, his perspective on firebending changes. This new perspective provides the energy and direction necessary for his firebending to return, now no longer subject to his rage’s volatility.

**Becoming Good at Being Good**

Through much of Books Two and Three, Zuko is negotiating the relationship between an evolving self-conception and a changing, but recalcitrant being-in-the-world. He starts with a conscious self-conception of a banished prince single-mindedly focused on capturing the Avatar in order to gain his father’s acceptance and restore his “honor.” Now he has teamed with the Avatar to overthrow his father and restore the honor of the Fire Nation. Changing his conscious practical identity was no small feat, but Zuko wants a deeper transformation. He wants to change his existential engagement, his being-in-the-world. That change involves overcoming some residual aspects of his prior way of being. But despite the obstacles they create, his earlier self-understanding and his being-in-the-world as a fighter who makes his own way also make possible the distinctive path he eventually takes.

Toward the end of this transition, he reflects on his confusion after gaining his father’s acceptance: “I realized I’d lost myself getting there. I’d forgotten who I was” (“The Ember Island Players”). Zuko’s journey to this point culminates when he sacrifices himself to save Katara from Azula’s potentially fatal attack. Zuko is becoming good at being good: not just thinking of himself as changed or better but seeing the world differently and responding accordingly. If Zuko’s mother and Iroh are right, this was largely a matter of improved self-understanding, of Zuko remembering who he is. But improved self-understanding and better moral ideals are only part of the story. His transformation highlights common, if complicated, aspects of personal change. When we aspire, we commonly find ourselves being “bad at being good,” desiring things we wish we didn’t and doing things we wish we wouldn’t. Zuko poignantly reminds us that becoming who we want to become—becoming good at being good—is often a struggle, during which we think of ourselves as we want to become and persist through setbacks, including the times when we find ourselves being bad at being good, guided by the very identities we want to leave behind.

1. Agnes Callard, *Aspiration: The Agency of Becoming* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Christine Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 101. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Collins, 1962). In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty gives similar priority to our engaged bodily being-in-the-world. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (New York: Routledge, 2013). In *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), Steven Crowell develops a Heideggerian account of practical identity, which he thinks better accounts for the nature of practical identity than Korsgaard’s account. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. William Blattner, *Heidegger’s* Being and Time (London: Continuum, 2006), 89. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. We first hear Ozai’s estimation of Zuko through Zhao (“The Southern Air Temple”), so maybe we should take it with a grain of salt. But it seems consistent with Ozai’s character. He calls Zuko’s refusal to duel with him “shameful” (“The Storm”), and he tells Azula that Zuko is a failure (“The Siege of the North, Part Two”). See also “The Waterbending Scroll.” [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Significantly, Zuko’s father and sister call him weak when he expresses concern for others. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Zuko himself later recognizes as much when, after more fully changing, he says, “I’m good now. I mean, I thought I was good before but now I realize that I was bad.” (“The Western Air Temple”). But before that realization, perhaps in a last-ditch effort to hold together or avoid facing his deteriorating moral framework, Zuko hires a hitman to kill Aang (“The Headband”). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)