

PREACHERS PLAYING CARDS

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It is not uncommon, in the common room here at the Dominican House of Studies, to find a group of brothers engaged in a game of cards. Some brothers like to play games that are popular in the regions from which they hail: “Setback” from New England, “Pfeffer” from Minnesota, and “Euchre” from Ohio. Others turn their wits to that most cerebral of games, Bridge. To us, of course, card-playing seems a perfectly innocent form of communal recreation, but during the late Middle Ages it was often seen as a morally suspect activity, so much so that in some areas it was forbidden among all Christians, never mind friars or monks. Lawmakers throughout Europe cited the tendency toward gambling away one’s wealth as reason enough for banning playing cards from their domains. In 1377, shortly after the game arrived in Europe from the Arabian Peninsula, the city of Florence outlawed it among the working classes. Yet, in that same year, a Dominican friar named John of Rheinfelden—living in Freiburg, Germany—composed a treatise extolling the value of card-playing, not only as a leisure activity that refreshed the mind and body, but also as a tool for teaching about morality and order in the created world.

IN DEFENSE OF CARD GAMES

Rheinfelden’s *Tractatus de moribus et disciplina humanae conversationis* (“Treatise on Morals and the Teaching of Human Behavior”) defends the game of cards by showing its proper purpose. “It is of advantage,” the friar wrote, “to noblemen and other persons of leisure that they may do no ill, especially if they practice it courteously and without money.” Casting the concerns of the Florentines and others aside, John considered how

the game of cards expresses a higher truth: “While I, brother John, the least in the Order of Preachers, a German by birth, was sitting at table, and the present state of the world revolved in my mind one way and another, the game of cards suddenly occurred to me, and I began to think how it might be closely likened to the state of the world.” Thus, while other popular preachers of the era, such as Bernadine of Siena and John of Capistrano, railed against the dangers of card-playing, John of Rheinfelden applied the fruits of his contemplation to show the goodness of the game—how it can lead the mind to the divine order and, ultimately, to God.

At the start of his treatise, John sets out his goal: “I propose to do three things: first, to describe the game of cards in itself, as to the matter and mode of playing it; second, to moralize the game, or teach noblemen the rule of life; and third, to instruct the people themselves, or inform them of the way of laboring virtuously.” John saw the cards’ different suits—of which there were most commonly four—as symbolic of the state of the world. While later commenters would try to identify the four suits with the four classical elements that were thought to constitute the material universe (air, water, earth, and fire), John noted that some of the suits stood for good and others for evil; and he linked each suit to a kingdom of the world.

MORE THAN A MERE PLAYING DECK

Of course, numerous game-types can be played with a modern deck of cards, but the chief game of the Middle Ages was a trick-taking game, in which each player laid down one card at a time, and the highest card played would win, capturing all the others. Players would then count the value of the cards captured at the end of each hand to determine the winner. The suit signs were shields—this was before the Italian system of swords, cups, coins, and batons, or the French system of spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs—and the highest card of the suit that was led would win each

trick. Thus, the first suit played would determine the “kingdom” in which the trick would be contested. Of course, modern-day players of Bridge are familiar with bidding for a trump suit that beats all others, but in Rheinfelden’s time there were no trumps. It was not until a few decades later after his death that Italian card-makers introduced an extra suit of twenty-one ordered cards called *trionfi* (or “trumps”) which outranked the four earthly suits. (Decorated with Christian and neo-Platonic allegorical images, these are still used today in parts of continental Europe.) The highest of these trumps expanded the deck’s representation of the world to include the spiritual, celestial realm, depicting the eschatological battle in its progressive stages: the devil and his attacks, the signs in the sky, up to God’s final victory at the Last Judgment. The highest trump of all, called the World, showed the new Heaven and new Earth; thus, the order of cards pointed toward mankind’s ultimate destiny.

According to John, the cards also illustrated the order within society. Examining each suit, he found that the highest card depicted a king (who ruled the kingdom that the suit represented), followed by two marshals, one of whom held the suit sign high, the other low. Such cards were common at the time, and are still used in Switzerland; yet John mentions that, in some regions, a system prevailed that is more familiar to us today, in which the marshals were replaced by queens and servants—or “knaves,” in the original sense of the word. Below the court cards were numeral cards, ranging from one to ten. Continuing with the allegory of medieval society, John identified each numeral card with a certain profession, from the village idiot (the ace) to the court official (the ten). Thus, from the lowly pauper all the way up to the king, every person, every role in the medieval world, had a place in the game of cards.

The suits took on added significance during game play. A king outside his kingdom, for example, would rank lower than the local barber; likewise, a four of spades, when led, would beat a king of hearts. Interestingly, in many games invented after the French

Revolution, including most American games, the ace became the highest card (or at least alternately high and low); this symbolized the rise of the common man in modern democratic society—yet it left the deck unsatisfyingly disordered. A still different system prevailed in pre-Revolutionary France, where the spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs came to represent the ranks of the nobility, the clergy, the merchant class, and the laboring class, respectively. Finally, the Italian trionfi deck included, among its lower trumps, ranks that superseded even kings—such as the Holy Roman Emperor, and even the Pope. The deck of cards thus depicted, as Brother John explained, a hierarchical and ordered society, in which everyone had a part to play.

The heart of Rheinfelden's treatise, however, concerned the use of card games as a means of instruction in morality, to order the human soul—something not often associated with game playing. As with chess, he notes, the variation of ranks of people represented in the game lends itself to being considered in a moral sense. One can learn arithmetic by keeping score in the games, and the randomness involved in shuffling and dealing shows us how we are not in control of all the circumstances of our lives. Furthermore, the strategic elements involved in the game can build up the virtue of prudence. This is particularly true in Bridge, in which each hand consists of two phases, one of evaluating the strength of one's hand (and one's partner's hand), and another of playing out the hand, with subtle communication between the partners in both stages.

MORAL INSTRUCTION

Consider this in relation to how St. Thomas Aquinas, in *Summa Theologiae IIaIIae*, QQ. 48–49, enumerates eight components of a prudential act, which he calls the integral parts of prudence. All of them come into play in Bridge, as seen in the points that each player must consider when bidding and playing out a hand.

Memory: What cards have been played, what suits did my partner and opponents bid, and how have I played this type of hand before? Understanding: How many tricks do my partner and I need in order to win (or defeat) the contract, and do we have any sure winners? Docility: Am I following a convention, established from a century of collective wisdom that provides a strategy for evaluating my hand and communicating it with my partner? Shrewdness: How would I need to play out my hand—which suits and cards in which order—to win? Reason: What do the bids, the opening lead, and the cards played so far, tell me about the contents of the other players' hands? Foresight: Will the high card I play turn out to win, or is it likely to be trumped; and would I have to take a finesse or slow play to make it a winner? Circumspection: What is the highest card remaining in each suit, how many trumps are left, and what is the best card to play right now? Caution: How will I still win the hand if some unforeseen chance event—like an unfavorable distribution among the opponents' cards—occurs?

One can also be instructed in morality by simply examining the cards themselves. The trionfi deck included several trumps devoted to the moral life, depicting the changes that can occur during life, such as love, a reversal of fortune, or the ever-popular Death. Interspersed with these were cards allegorically depicting the moral virtues: justice, fortitude, and temperance. There was no card for prudence, which is a virtue that moderates the intellect, rather than the appetites. Each virtue over-trumped, or triumphed over, some of these uncontrollable changes, so that temperance defeated death. Another card played a particular role in morality as well. The Fool, which may have artistically influenced the creation of our Joker, was not a trump, nor did it belong to any suit. It never captured any other cards, nor was it ever captured in a trick, except at the end of a hand. Because of this, an anonymous author from the sixteenth century commented: "This shows that all defects can be lost and left, except for folly: everyone keeps his

own as long as he lives.” The Fool was called tarocco, which later became the name of the deck.

Yet, even our standard deck can symbolize the life of virtue. The four suits can represent the faculties of the human soul that virtue regulates and which were held together in harmony in the grace of the primitive state of Adam and Eve, but lost through Original Sin. Spades, on account of their sharpness, stand for the intellect; hearts have long been a symbol of the will, whose act is to love; diamonds, as the objects of a difficult, contentious desire, represent the irascible passions such as hope, fear, and anger; and clubs mark the concupiscible passions, which draw us toward pleasures of various kinds. The ordering of the suits in Bridge therefore corresponds to the proper ordering of the soul’s powers; the major suits of spades and hearts are matched with the immaterial, rational faculties, while the minor suits of diamonds and clubs go with the sensible appetites. The intellect is the highest of all human powers, created to direct all others, and it matches the highest suit, which is sometimes synonymous with trumps, as in the game of Spades. These four powers are perfected by the four cardinal virtues, formulated by Plato and enumerated in Wisdom 8:7. Thus the spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs point, respectively, toward prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. This is the same order in which St. Thomas treats the virtues in the *Summa*.

The cards within each suit also point us toward examples of how to live these virtues: the king is Jesus Christ, King of the universe, who by his capital grace bestows on the Church the infused cardinal virtues, one for each suit, along with the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit; the queen is Mary, Queen of Heaven, who by her own fullness of grace lived all virtues to the fullest; and the jack can stand for any saint in the heavenly court, who practiced virtue in this life and attained the crown of righteousness in the next. The numbered (or “spot”) cards represent this life; we grow in the

cardinal and theological virtues on a scale of one to ten, as it were, and thus we approach, by God's grace, the same heavenly court.



HOFMEISTER KARTENSPIEL

As in John of Rheinfelden's time, so also in our own day the practice of card-playing affords the opportunity, not only of reflecting upon the order of the universe, the structure of society, and the faculties of the human soul, but also of growing in virtue. Rather than fall into the vice of excessive gambling or, even worse, fortune-telling (as some nineteenth-century occultists did when using an Italian tarocco deck—known by its French name, tarot), one can order the activity of playing cards toward more proper ends, such as the rest of the soul, the acquisition of prudence, and the contemplation of divine order. Our human nature is weak and fallen, but the practice of virtue, developed in part through games and other forms of recreation, helps us to make the best of our condition. As Robert Louis Stevenson once said, "Life does not consist in getting a good hand, but in learning to play a bad hand well."

Humbert Kilanowski entered the Order of Preachers in 2010. He earned a doctorate in Mathematics from The Ohio State University in Columbus, having previously studied at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. His study of probability has helped him become an avid Bridge player.