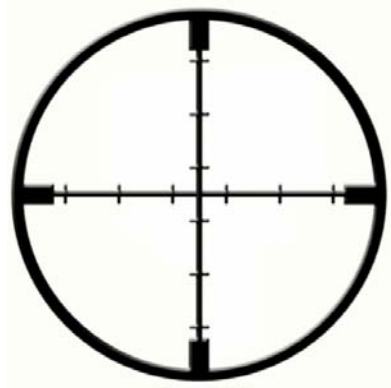


VIEW TO A 'SKILL



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To pretend, I actually do the thing: I have
therefore only pretended to pretend.

Jacques Derrida

John Bannon's *View To A 'Skill*

Bannon said, "Is that a full deck? Go ahead and shuffle it."

My deck—a full 52, no Jokers—and I shuffled it. I had been shuffling it all evening as we sat in the back of the magic shop. It wasn't the worst lecture I'd seen, but already I was having trouble remembering anything the young man did, or said. But now, Bannon and I were at our favorite bar, at our favorite table, talking about our favorite subject, card tricks.

Well, sort of. Bannon wanted to show me a card game. Bannon was not just a card trickster; he was also an avid card player. While I was shuffling, he jotted something down on a couple of pieces of paper and set them aside.

"When I was little and my psychic abilities were just developing, I used to play this game with my Mom. I didn't always win, but I usually could tell who was going to win. Really drove her nuts." Bannon said.

"Hand me about half the deck," he continued. "Here's how you play. First, pick a color, red or black." I said "red."

"You can change your mind, if you like. Really, I want you to be sure you had a free choice of color." I said I'd stick with red.

"Okay, I get the black cards." He gave his half-deck a quick overhand shuffle. "Now, we each turn over the top card of our packet. If both cards are red, you get them. If both are black, I get them. If one is red and the

other is black, nobody gets them and we discard them. Whoever gets the most cards of their color wins. Got it?"

It seemed simple. I nodded, yes. We began to play. I didn't know where Bannon was going with this. The game was very simple and, it seemed, very fair. I knew the cards had been shuffled. There seemed no way to determine the outcome.



The game went quickly enough; it seemed that in most rounds no one won. After, a number of rounds, Bannon ran out of cards. "Just give me some of whatever cards you have left," he said, "I don't care which ones." I handed him four of my remaining eight and we played the last four rounds.

"That's how it's played. How did you do?" Bannon picked up the cards he won and counted them; I did the same. "I have fourteen cards," he announced. "How many do you have?" I told him I only had twelve.

"Twelve. Then, I guess I win. By two cards. You know, what really used to drive my Mom nuts was not only could I tell who would win—but I could tell by how much." Bannon gestured to the slips of paper he had set aside. "Read the first one," he said.

I read the paper aloud: "JB will win—by two."

Now, Bannon fools me a lot, but I just didn't get this one. I shuffled, I chose my own color, the play was fair enough, yet Bannon nailed the outcome exactly.

"Do you want to play again?" he asked. You bet I did. "Sure," I said. He waved at the cards. "Shuffle 'em up."

We played again. I shuffled. Again, he gave me a free choice of color—I kept the red cards. I gave him half the cards. As we began, he reminded me that I could shuffle my packet at any time. This time, I ran out of cards first. Bannon had six cards left. He let me pick which three I wanted. We played the last three rounds. It all seemed so *fair*.

"How did you do?" Bannon asked. I counted my cards. "Fourteen," I said.

"How did I do?" He gestured toward his pile. I counted them, as well. "You have fourteen, too."

"Nobody won? How strange." Then, he looked at the last slip of paper.

I grabbed it, then just stared at it. "We tie—nobody wins."

He smiled. So did I.



"So? Are you going to tell me?" As I've said before, Bannon was not particularly good at keeping his own secrets.

Bannon said, "Stewart James's 'Miraskill' is a great self-working, mathematical trick. The problem is that ordinarily you need to palm cards into or out of the deck. Or do some other maneuver to upset the balance of colors. Hardly self-working."

I was not exactly sure what he was talking about. I was remotely familiar with Miraskill, but did not remember the conditions being as fair as what I had just witnessed:

- o My deck, which was complete;
- o I shuffled;
- o the predictions specified who would win *by name* not color; and
- o I chose my color—*after* the predictions were made.

There was only one solution. "So," I said, "it was my deck and it was complete. When I handed you half the deck, you must have palmed off some cards and held them out, right?"

"No," Bannon replied. "You saw what happened. This method makes Miraskill completely self-working. Let's talk about it."

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"The basic Miraskill principle," Bannon explained, "is that from a complete, shuffled deck, if you take cards two at a time, you will turn up the same number of red pairs as black pairs. So, if you went all the way through the deck, putting the red pairs in one pile and the black pairs in another (and the unmatched pairs in a third "discard" pile), when you were done, there would be the same number of red cards in the red pile as there are black cards in the black pile."

"No way!"

"Way. Now let's make a trick out of it. I made two significant changes from the traditional Miraskill. The first was procedural." Bannon picked up the deck and shuffled it. He pushed over the top two cards and turned them face up.



"The usual way is to take the cards from the top, two at a time. The trick works, and will fool the heck out of you, but the procedure is a little odd. I haven't seen or read a presentation that adequately deals with

the odd protocol. Taking two at a time has always seemed to me to be plainly method-driven."



He handed me half the deck. "So, I changed the protocol: Instead of turning the cards over in pairs, I use a "game" protocol reminiscent of a card game called "War," except that colors are used instead of values. Each player takes half of the cards and turns them over one at a time. The game mechanics really work well here. You are actually dealing with the cards in pairs, but it doesn't seem like it because each player is only dealing with one card at a time."

He shuffled his half of the deck, so I shuffled mine. Apparently, the actual order of the cards made no difference at all. We could shuffle our respective cards at any time without affecting the trick.

"The second change was more substantive. But first, there are the predictions." Bannon said as he reached for the slips of paper. "I write both beforehand. The first says I will win by two; the second announces a tie.

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You have some flexibility with these predictions, but I think these are the best ones to use."

I asked him, "I noticed you made these predictions before the colors are selected. How can that work?"

He smiled, "That's just one of the advantages of this method. You'll see. But now, go ahead and choose a color—red or black? This is a free choice." This time, I chose the black cards. "Okay, let's play through," he said.

We quickly played another game. When Bannon ran out of cards, I still had four left. Having done this before, I handed him two of the cards. I still didn't get the freedom that was allowed; it really felt like the cards were completely random. "It really doesn't matter who gets which cards, does it?" I asked. We finished the last two rounds.

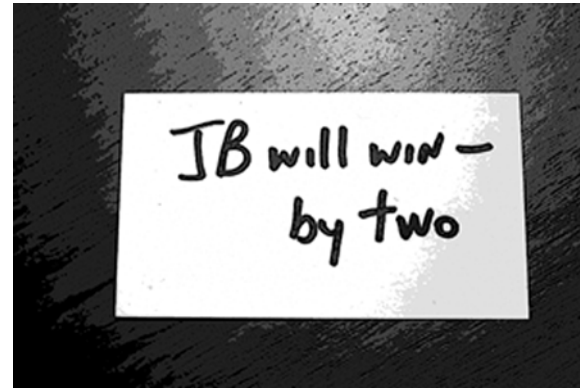
"Doesn't matter at all. Now look where we are. Because of the Miraskill principle, we both have the *same* number of cards. I don't know how many, but I know they are the same. The audience doesn't know this. And, there's no way in a million years that your audience would suspect that the number of cards is *always* the same . . ."

Suddenly, I saw what he was doing. Clever bastard.

". . . which sets you up perfectly for a very effective *miscall*. Basically, you just *lie* about it."

Bannon picked up his cards, began to spread/count them, and continued.

"In order to determine who won the game, you need to count your cards. So I pick up the packet of cards that I have 'won.' Then, I ask my spectator 'how well she did.' I have a little head start on my spectator, because I already picked up my pile. So, I quickly count my cards and add two to the total. As soon as I am done, I announce the total plus two as the number of cards I have won. This, of course, will be two more than my spectator has. Which, of course, makes the prediction come true."



I just shook my head, marveling at the simplicity of the thing.

"It is critical that you announce your number first," he continued. "Due to the Miraskill principle, no one could possibly guess that the number of cards will be the same or that there is any basis by which you could know the number of cards in your spectator's packet. So if you announce *first*, there is no apparent basis or

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reason to believe that you might be lying in order to make the prediction come true."

I could see how Bannon's miscall would work perfectly. The first prediction has an added advantage; no one will be quite sure what is coming. Even if your spectators remembered the prediction, they wouldn't know exactly what was being predicted. All of the dirty work is done before you call attention to the prediction.

Bannon gathered up the cards and continued, "While I hint at the beginning that I've predicted who was going to win, I save for the end that I could tell by how much. I want the audience's attention to be on *who* will win, *not* the actual number of cards."

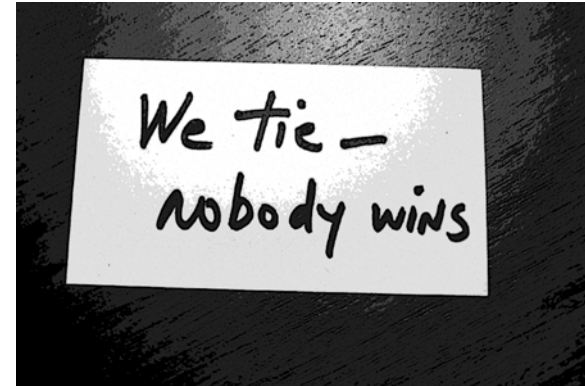
He began shuffling the deck. "Now, you can repeat the trick. And, since the second prediction is a 'tie,' you do not need to do anything. The Miraskill principle does it all for you. This is great because there will be more scrutiny in the second round."

"I remember now, in the second round you made me do all of the counting." I pointed out.

Bannon replied, "Exactly, and I also had you count your cards first, and then count mine."

I picked up Bannon's second prediction and remembered how I reacted when I was the spectator. "I like ending with a 'tie,'" I said. "The tie is really unexpected—almost like the game didn't work. So, I really wasn't sure whether the prediction would work. I didn't expect that you'd actually predict a tie."

"Yeah, I like that part a lot. Of course, that's right from the original Miraskill, but it does complement the miscall perfectly."



"By way of full disclosure," Bannon said, "I need to point out there is a very small risk that the trick may not work."

"Why is that?" I asked.

"While you are guaranteed that the number of red pairs will be the same as black pairs. You are *not* guaranteed how many pairs will turn up. It is possible that no pairs will turn up and it's impossible to miscall zero as two. It's also possible that only one or two pairs of each will turn up. In these cases, it would be tricky to miscall two cards as four; four cards as six would be only a little less tricky. With three pairs, I am reasonably comfortable misrepresenting six cards as eight."

"But how likely is that to happen?"

"If no unmatched pairs turn up, each color would get a total of thirteen pairs. So, the range of possibilities is from zero through thirteen. Of those, only three cases at the low end and the case at the high end are problematic (0, 1, 2, or 13 pairs) and the probability of either of these cases actually happening is very, very small."

Worth the risk, I decided.

"Ever think of adding a third phase?"

Bannon was quiet for a moment. "It's already a long routine. I am always looking for ways to speed it up—usually by talking less. Besides, I wouldn't be comfortable doing the miscall twice. And, a third phase would have to allow the same freedom of conditions. No, two's enough."

He looked at his watch. Time to go.



As we were walking in the brisk Chicago winter back to the car, I was still marveling over the Miraskill concept.

"I still don't get how it works," I said.

"I don't know how Stewart James ever arrived at the Miraskill principle," Bannon confessed. "But it's one of the most puzzling, counter-intuitive mathematical principles out there."

"Can you explain it?" I asked.

"Remember, starting with a complete, shuffled deck, James discovered that if you take the cards two at a time, the number of pairs of red cards would equal the number of pairs of black cards."

Bannon explained, "I think it's easier to see if we look at the pairs that don't match—the ones that have one red and one black card. Say we start with an equal number of reds and blacks and that number is an even number—in a full deck, there would be 26 of each. If we turn up an unmatched pair—one red and one black—there would now be an odd, but equal number of reds and blacks left in the deck. With me so far?"

"Yes, now the deck has 25 reds and 25 blacks."

"Exactly. What that means is that, however the cards are arranged, there will be at least *one more* unmatched pair."

"Why it that?" I asked, already losing my grip on this explanation.

"Matched pairs of red or black cards are always removed *two* at a time, so the respective number of red and black cards will stay odd until the next unmatched pair turns up. Because the number is odd, then there will *always* be one red card and one black card that cannot be removed in a matched pair, so there will *always* be at least one more unmatched pair."

"Uh huh."

"So, the important thing to realize is that there will always be an *even* number of unmatched pairs. Which

means the unmatched pairs will consist of an equal *and even* number of red and black cards."

"Uh huh"

"Since the unmatched pairs remove an equal and even number from the red cards and the black cards, the remaining red and black cards are *also* equal and even. Which means the number of red and black matched pairs will also be the same."

"Got it. Right."



So when I got home, I thought I'd read up a bit on this Miraskill. I pulled down my copies of *Stewart James In Print, The First Fifty Years* (published in 1989) and the massive two-volume opus, *The James File* (published in 2000). Allan Slaight and crew certainly made it easy by compiling these massive tomes of James's tricks and commentary. Sure enough, *SJIP, TFFY* had the original routine (published in *The Jinx* in 1936). In addition, at page 1883, *The James File* had an entire chapter called "Miraschool" with many variations, handlings and ideas. Bannon had also told me that, while his routine dated from the late-nineties, recently (2008) a version of Miraskill had been published that also incorporated a similar "War" card game protocol—an e-book called "Mirabill," by Bill Cushman and sold on-line by Outlaw Effects.

Perhaps it was the hour, or the gin, or the daunting amount of reading that was possible, having assembled all of my resources, I decided to go to bed.



A couple of days later, I got a call from Bannon. He said he had some more on the Miraskill routine, which he was calling "View To A 'Skill."

He said, "At the risk of destroying the obvious purity of the self-working version we were playing with the other night . . ."

(When Bannon says things like "destroying the obvious purity," I'm never quite sure how to take it.)

". . . there is another way you can effectively exploit the Miraskill principle with a borrowed deck. It's not self-working, but it's not difficult either."

"Really? How?"

"Everything is exactly the same as we discussed, except instead of a miscall, you openly count your cards out loud."

"How can you do . . ." Then, I got it. "False count right?"

"Exactly. Remember you know the packets are equal, but no one knows that you know. So you false count the packet as two more than you have. Again, no one should suspect that you are fixing the result."

"For example, with a Biddle-type count, it's child's play. Play the round. Then, with your right hand, pick

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up your packet in Biddle or end grip. Count the cards by using your left thumb to pull them off the packet into your left hand. Count aloud as you do this."



"After you have counted off two cards, get a left pinky break above the second card as the third card is pulled into your left hand. Count the fourth card, then as you pull the fifth card, steal the two cards above the break onto the bottom of the packet."

"Continue counting until you reach the end of the packet. The total will be two higher than however many you started with—which means two higher than your spectator has. And she hasn't even counted her cards yet."

"That's cool," I said. The Biddle count would be fairly easy for most and would fool all civilians. But some practitioners—like our good friend Dave Solomon—wouldn't be caught dead using a Biddle count. "But, Dave won't like it very much," I said.

"I know" Bannon replied. "But any of those Edward-Victor-eleven-card/bill-false counts could be used as well."

I had not learned any of the Victor-type counts mainly because I was never a fan of the "Eleven Card [Bill] Trick" subgenre. I thought about it for a couple of seconds. I still preferred the miscall.

"Good workable idea, but I think you're right," I told him.

"Right about what?"

"It destroys the obvious purity of the work."



Remix 1--July 13, 2008