Miguel de Cervantes’ luckless, enthusiastic, would-be knight errant Don Quixote has enchanted generations of readers with delusions of grandeur and knighthood. Despite entreaties from his stoic squire Sancho Panza, Don Quixote fights valiant battles with windmills and sheep, righteously delivers convicts from their punishment, and defends imaginary kingdoms from giant wineskins, all in the name of chivalry. The world in which he lives exists primarily in literature: he derives its characteristics and events from epic poetry and fables about knights errant which he has read. Despite this eccentricity, however, the question still remains whether Don Quixote’s world of sorcerers and damsels in distress is not just as real as the everyday world is to the rest of society. The answer is not as obvious as one might think. Plato pictured reality as an ideal which could not be approached by the material world. Therefore, since concrete objects were only imitations of this ideal, their identity depended upon the thoughts people projected onto them. The function of an object defines its identity, so identities are subjective. Nicolas Rescher agrees with Plato, but for different reasons: as he sees it, material objects have too many characteristics to manifest all at once, and so the reality of something is defined by someone’s experience of it. “The finitude of experience precludes any prospect of the exhaustive manifestation of the descriptive factors of any real thing,” Rescher explains, and thus Don Quixote’s experience defines his fantasy world as reality.\footnote{Rescher, Nicholas. Realism and Pragmatic Epistemology. Pittsburgh, PA: Pittsburgh Press, 2005. Page 3.} Plato’s and Rescher’s definition of reality, as dependent upon functionality, supports this view and indeed all of Don Quixote’s perceptual discrepancies.

Don Quixote elaborates this theory of functional reality perfectly when he explains to Sancho Panza his love for the lady Dulcinea del Toboso during their venture into the woods for his dramatic self-imposed exile. Sancho re-
members Dulcinea as a strong but plain peasant girl, and Don Quixote angrily reprimands him. “Not all poets . . . really have any such mistresses at all . . . It is enough for me to be convinced,” he affirms; “I depict her in my imagination as I wish her to be, both in beauty and in rank.” The point here is that love is a matter of perception: Don Quixote sees Dulcinea this way, and loves her this way, and so this way she shall be until he decides differently. What she is to Sancho does not matter, because Sancho does not love her. Similar logic

applies to Mambrino’s helmet: empirically speaking, the object is a chunk of metal pounded into a half of an empty sphere. To the barber, who needs a bowl in which to wash things, the object becomes a bowl. To Don Quixote, who needs to protect his head more than most people do, it is a helmet. This difference of opinion about a seemingly undisputed, empirical fact illustrates Rescher’s point about the various manifestations of objects’ identities. Sancho Panza’s affirmation is crucial here, because he changes his mind based on experience. When Don Quixote first acquires the helmet, Sancho exasperatedly insists that it is only a simple bowl. However, when the original owner comes to reclaim said bowl, Sancho claims that “my master won [the helmet] . . . and if it hadn’t been for this here basin helmet he’d have had a bad time of it” (418). Because he saw the object’s usefulness as a helmet, Sancho changes his idea of its identity. This follows Plato’s logic entirely, though he seems unaware of this.

The fact that Don Quixote has a different perception of reality than those around him does not necessarily make him mad or change his own identity in any way. Throughout the text, except where it pertains to things like castles and adventures and fantastical characters, he is a man of intelligence and good judgment, which both the narrator and Don Quixote’s fellow characters affirm. When he gives his thesis about the difference between a knight’s hardships and those of a scholar, the narrator remarks that “Don Quixote was developing his arguments in such an orderly and lucid way that for the time being none of them listening to him could believe that he was a madman” (355). Most readers would agree that Sancho, though simple and greedy, is at least sane, yet he falls into agreeing with Don Quixote about some of his delusions. Sancho is a simple peasant, Don Quixote is a brave and unfortunate man, and as Erich Auerbach says, “the fact that Sancho is playing a rogue’s game [encouraging his master] and that Don Quixote is enmeshed in his illusions does not raise either of them out of their everyday existence.”3 This tendency of Don Quixote to be genuine, eloquent, and oddly sensible endears him to readers who might otherwise distance themselves from a character so obviously abnormal.

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The limitations of Don Quixote’s madness are evident towards the end of the story, when three peasant girls approach on donkeys and, despite Sancho’s beautiful descriptions of their palfreys and jewels, Don Quixote sees nothing but three homely girls and smells nothing but “raw garlic that poisoned [his] very soul” (Cervantes 550). Here the roles apparent throughout the story have reversed: Sancho extols the beauty and nobility of the three women in eloquent, descriptive language, while Don Quixote, who has no immediate need to see what is not there, stares “with clouded vision and bulging eyes at the woman whom Sancho called queen and lady” (548). He appears bewildered by this discrepancy, but argues with Sancho nonetheless. “I am telling you, friend Sancho,” he says, “that it is as true that [the alleged palfreys] are asses, or maybe she-asses, as it is that I am Don Quixote and you are Sancho Panza; or at least this is how it seems to me” (547). Of course, having adopted a noble name when he decided to be a knight, the man is not really Don Quixote—however, to illustrate the point, his identity as a Don (a Spanish noble) is intrinsic to his fantasy about knighthood, while the identities of the three girls as noble-women is not.

Following Plato’s logic, Don Quixote appears as sane as any other character in this mountain of a novel. His illusions are a result of his need for extraordinary experiences to support his fantasy of being a knight. He is lucid, determined, and articulate, except where discussions or events pertain to his dreams knighthood and chivalry, and Plato and Rescher’s logic defends his perceptions as valid. Though he undeniably dreams of the impossible, Don Quixote’s otherwise dignified manner contrasts his ridiculous exploits and makes him an anomaly endeared to his readers, who can sympathize with his dreams of glorious bygone days.

ANALECTS OF THE CORE

Francis Bacon: The sense is like the sun, which reveals the face of the earth but seals and shuts up the face of heaven.