

Don Quixote as Morality Play: Lessons for Warfighter Identity and Ethos

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Abstract

Professional Military Education (PME) has long been anchored in the canonical insights of Clausewitz and Sun Tzu, foundational thinkers whose frameworks continue to inform an understanding of strategy and operational engagement. While PME curricula focus upon strategy, operations, and the professional formation of military leaders, today's operational environment is increasingly characterized by pervasive technologies, algorithmically driven decision architectures, and rapidly shifting sociocultural dynamics. These realities place new demands on PME institutions charged not merely with imparting knowledge, but with shaping character and identity. Thus, PME must expand its intellectual aperture to integrate these emerging dimensions if it is to prepare leaders for the complex, multidomain competitions that now define contemporary conflict. The question is no longer solely how wars are fought, but who the warfighter becomes in the act and process of warfighting. We contend that Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* offers a profound and unconventional lens for PME pedagogy and leader development, particularly when regarded as a meditation on identity, virtue, and the tension between ideals and lived realities. Approached as a formative text rather than a literary curiosity, the novel invites sustained reflection on how leaders reconcile aspirational principles with the practical demands of experience. Quixote's unwavering commitment to a chivalric code, even amid absurdity, illuminates the enduring struggle to preserve moral integrity and a coherent sense of virtue in a world that challenges both. His journey invites reflection on the existential dimensions of military life: the interplay of honor, duty, and humanity within environments increasingly mediated by technology and ambiguity. We propose a conceptual pedagogical framework that situates Cervantes alongside Clausewitz and Sun Tzu within PME. Rather than asserting demonstrated educational outcomes, we posit that *Don Quixote* provides a literary and philosophical lens through which military professionals can examine warfighter identity, virtue, moral imagination, and practical judgment. Such an approach reinforces mili-

tary education's core mission of inculcating a sense of professional "becoming", forming leaders capable of navigating complexity with ethical clarity, and sustaining a warrior ethos as a lived identity rather than abstraction. In this way, the study of *Don Quixote* becomes an instrument for philosophical inquiry and practical wisdom, fortifying those who serve to act with virtue and vision amid the shifting realities of modern conflict.

Keywords

Professional Military Education (PME), *Don Quixote*, Warfighter Identity, Warrior Ethos, Virtue Ethics

"We will revive the warrior ethos and restore trust in our military."
—United States Secretary of War, Pete Hegseth (June 2025)¹

1. Introduction

Professional Military Education (PME) has long relied upon the intellectual pillars of classical martial thought, including but not limited to Clausewitz's dialectical conception of war as an extension of politics by other means, and Sun Tzu's strategic orientation toward balance, deception, and the moral authority of the commander. These are foundational, affording tactical relevance and strategic value that are arguably durable, providing intellectual architecture that shapes operational decision-making, and erudition that equips military leaders to navigate the challenges of warfare.

Yet, as we enter an era of ever more complex, ambiguous, and technologically-saturated operational environments, it becomes clear that these classical models, while necessary, may benefit from a somewhat more complementary perspective to the education of the military professional, to enable a more balanced stance upon what are the shifting grounds of the contemporary cultural milieu. If PME is to remain relevant and anticipatory, it must expand beyond strategy and doctrine and embrace the philosophical, psychological, and moral terrains that shape the warfighter's life world, inclusive of garrison, battlefield, and the social ecology. To that end, we opine that Cervantes and more pointedly, *Don Quixote* can serve as an essential interlocutor in the ongoing, but nonetheless pressing dialogue about the nature, identity, and moral grounding of the 21st-century warrior.

We adopt a specific perspective of constructed identity (viz. Samet's) to frame our analysis. From this vantage point, warfighter identity emerges not as a fixed attribute but as something socially constructed and narratively sustained within the profession of arms. Our argument thus situates itself within a growing body of scholarship in the military humanities, civil-military relations, and professional

¹U.S. Department of Defense (2025). "Secretary Hegseth's Message to the Force." Defense.gov. <https://www.war.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/4040940/secretary-hegseths-message-to-the-force/>

ethics that treats warfighter identity as socially constructed, narratively sustained, and morally contested. Research shows that scholars (Heward et al., 2024) have increasingly argued that professional formation cannot be reduced to technical competence or doctrinal understanding. For example, Elizabeth Samet's (Samet, 2007) work in professional military education has shown how sustained literary engagement functions as a pedagogical mechanism for cultivating moral imagination and reflective judgment in officers facing ambiguity and institutional strain. Eliot Cohen's (Cohen, 2023) writings examine the transformation and reconstruction of warrior identity in modern democratic societies and describe how cultural skepticism, technological mediation, and civil-military tensions all pressure the coherence of the warrior ethos. Studies in military sociology (Riner & Carnes, 2024) and professional ethics emphasize performativity, narrative coherence, and institutional storytelling as mechanisms that can sustain ethical purpose or precipitate moral fragmentation (Molendijk, 2023).

Our address of *Don Quixote* positions Cervantes within this analytic tradition. Don Quixote is offered as a substantive contribution to social-scientific inquiry into how warriors internalize ideals, negotiate dissonance between self-concept and external reality, and sustain moral agency amid structural, technological, and cultural change. We frame this literary inquiry as an evidence-based pedagogical tool for professional formation and identity, and in so doing seek to offer a theoretically grounded framework that educators may employ to stimulate ethical reflection and discussion within PME.

In his novel, *Don Quixote*, Miguel de Cervantes tells of the journeys of the eponymous character Don Quixote, an errant knight, who is of the belief that the windmills that dot the countryside are in fact enemies; giants to be pursued and vanquished (de Cervantes, 2005). Cervantes explores the concept of identity, revealing how it is shaped by external forces such as culture, society, technology, and ideology, and offers a tale of tension between individual identity and broader society and its expectations. The journey of Quixote becomes a meditation on how identity is negotiated, constructed, and defined at the crossroads of personal experience, values, and the influences of the world. Cervantes invites the reader to share in the complex interplay of how one's self-concept engages with critical worldly awareness, and in this way, the novel may be seen as a precursor to contemporary debates about the malleability of identity under sociocultural and technological influence, and, we opine, as object lesson and morality play about the value and vulnerability of virtue as constituent to the ethos of the modern warfighter.

As examples including post-9/11 counterinsurgency campaigns, the expansion of remote and drone-enabled warfare, and the emergence of cyber and information operations over the past half century have revealed, the modern warfighter is situated both within the demands of confronting bellicose threats, and within contested domains of social identity, meaning, and professional self-conception. The warrior ethos, traditionally grounded in honor, duty, courage, and self-sacrifice, is increasingly strained by the exigencies of asymmetrical warfare, and technologies that modify cognition, ambiguate responsibility, and blur distinctions

between action and actor, cause and consequence. In this environment, the enduring question is not simply *how* to be a warfighter, but *who* the individual becomes in the role and process of warfighting. We believe that Cervantes' *Don Quixote*, often construed as a parable of delusion, could also be understood as a morality play that interrogates the construction of identity, the performance of duty, and the enduring conflict between internal virtue and external dissonance.

Clausewitz regards war as a "paradoxical trinity" of passion, chance, and reason (von Clausewitz, 1976). Sun Tzu asserts that moral influence (*dao*) is the foundation upon which victory rests (Tzu, 2017). But Cervantes provides something equally indispensable: the recognition that identity itself is an act of moral imagination and acknowledgment. The character of Quixote, in his errant yet unwavering commitment to a chivalric code, illustrates the profound challenge of preserving ethos in a world that questions it. Quixote radically refuses to capitulate virtue. It is this dissonance between the ideal and the real, principle and pragmatism that the modern warfighter must reconcile, particularly when empowered by technologies that risk reducing warfare to the mere performance of procedure that is divorced from ethical reflection or resolve.

Thus, we propose that PME might supplement Clausewitzian logic and Sun Tzu's strategic poetics with the moral contemplation and existential insights of Cervantes. PME should not solely focus on the mechanics of winning wars, but on cultivating the capacity to live rightly amid war's corrosive and dehumanizing forces, and the often-changing attitudes of society. Doing so should cultivate tacticians and strategists who are also moral agents, warfighters whose sense of self is grounded in classical virtue, tempered by critical awareness, and fortified to withstand the effects of moral ambiguity (Kümmel, 2018). In this way, the warrior ethos can transcend a simple set of values to become a lived identity, which is continuously constructed and performed in response to both institutional demands and personal convictions (Annett & Giordano, 2026).

In this respect, Quixote provides a profound archetype, exposing the essential tension between the pursuit of moral ideals and the often-Sisyphean realities of conflict (both upon the battlefield and in society). Reading *Don Quixote* challenges confrontation with urgent questions for the contemporary warfighter: What does it mean to embody valor when technology creates illusions of invulnerability? How is honor preserved when algorithmic systems dictate life-and-death decisions? What becomes of loyalty when the very identity of the soldier is interwoven with machines, data streams, and opposing societal views of the warfighter and warfighting?

PME should engage these questions, not as abstract philosophical musings, but as doctrinal and existential issues in the real-world experience of warfighters who are immersed in technologies that bridge the military environment (and its ethos) to the social homefront. We do not claim that Cervantes should displace Clausewitz or Sun Tzu. To the contrary, we believe it embellishes upon the lived reality of what it means to be a warfighter by providing a lens and voice to the more personally existential contrasts and conflicts the warrior may encounter: to remain human amidst technology, to act with moral clarity and conviction amongst

hostile others, and to maintain a coherent sense of self while remaining poised to endure fragmenting pressures of modern warfare within contemporary culture.

We offer that the warrior ethos, rooted in virtues and exercised amidst modern complexity, entails a somewhat “quixotic” insistence that moral responsibility, personal integrity, and human dignity are not liabilities in warfighting, but instead are the very grounding pillars of the warfighter’s identity and comportment. PME should commit to the conviction to teach this.

2. Exploring Quixote: Insights for the Modern Warfighter

We opine that in an age where technology increasingly shapes and mediates human experience, Cervantes’ exploration of the relatively fluid boundaries between self and society, and between ideals and reality, becomes ever more relevant. We can see this as more than a literary observation; rather, it is a reflection on how emerging technological systems influence perception, agency, and moral imagination. As technological mediation blurs distinctions between the constructed and the authentic, Cervantes’ insight into the instability—and performativity—of identity speaks with renewed urgency. Cervantes offers a reflection on the co-construction of identity, not as something fixed or isolated, but as a continuous negotiation between internal values and external forces that act upon the individual and the collective. Cervantes’ work invites reflection on who the individual is, and who the individual is striving to be, and how such identities can be molded by the dynamics of an ever-changing world in which the individual is embedded. We offer that perhaps both the novel and the character of Don Quixote can provide a meaningful exemplar of the tensions and conflicts facing the contemporary joint warfighter, and in so doing, afford an exploration of the unease that can arise between ideals, duties, and roles of the warrior whose military ethos is engaged within the intricacies of a technologically influenced socio-culture.

We opine that personal identity represents an ongoing process of formation shaped by larger narratives, historical context, and continual reconstruction. Drawing upon Paul Ricoeur’s account of narrative identity, we understand the self as constituted through the stories it inhabits and the traditions it interprets; identity emerges through acts of emplotment that weave experience into coherent meaning across time (Ricoeur, 1992). In this sense, identity unfolds in dynamic relation to cultural forms, moral frameworks, and lived experience. Within this framework, Don Quixote’s defense of chivalric literature is especially revealing. His argument that such works cultivate understanding and therefore warrant preservation reflects his commitment to the narrative tradition that gives structure to his moral imagination. His defense signals the formative power of story in shaping perception, judgment, and action. In Ricoeurian terms, Quixote’s selfhood is sustained through his participation in and reinterpretation of the chivalric narrative, demonstrating how identity is continuously enacted within the larger stories that orient one’s sense of purpose and virtue. At first glance, Quixote’s ethos and actions appear somewhat contradictory to contemporary theories of dynamic iden-

tity because he refuses to abandon his chivalric commitments despite overwhelmingly contrary evidence. Yet this apparent rigidity actually illuminates the social dimension of narrative identity. Quixote's identity is continually negotiated through interaction with Sancho Panza, innkeepers, priests, dukes, and strangers who alternately reinforce, manipulate, ridicule, or resist his self-understanding. His core commitments remain stable, but the social performance and interpretation of those commitments are continuously contested. Thus, Cervantes distinguishes between constancy of moral aspiration and the ongoing negotiation of identity within changing social environments.

When Quixote defends books of chivalry, stating that these do not deserve to be burned, because "they are books of understanding and therefore do not cause injury to anyone" (de Cervantes, 2005), Cervantes illustrates that Quixote's sense of self is based upon the ideals he has acquired from literature and extended into his identity as a knight. Indeed, the books that Quixote regards as sacred texts form an ideological foundation of his worldview and notions of honor, duty, and heroism. His defense of these books represents his full commitment to ideals-as-reality, which dictate how he views himself and interacts with the world.

While recent efforts in PME have focused on defining what the military professional *is* through values' statements, leadership competencies, and institutional norms, such efforts often underemphasize the ongoing process of what the professional is continually *becoming*. This emphasis on being rather than becoming tends to treat professional identity as a static condition rather than as an evolving process shaped by experience and reflection. Accordingly, without sustained dialectical engagement with texts that interrogate identity, virtue, and role, PME risks producing leaders who are able to articulate institutional ideals but are insufficiently prepared to navigate the identity tensions generated by contemporary military practice.

A significant event that elucidates Quixote's identity as confronted and challenged by external forces is his encounter with windmills. As he approaches the windmills, believing them to be giants, his commitment to ideals reflects the essentiality of his identity. It presents a moment where Quixote's identity is performative; through his actions, he constitutes a view of the world in negotiation with his sense of identity: a knight errant who acts in accordance with those values and ideals that define the role. While we do not advocate warfighters constructing reality according to personal fancy, we affirm that engagement with one's life world as both reflective of and accountable to one's professional identity is essential to the warrior ethos. The ethos is realized through disciplined alignment between identity, moral commitment, and action within the operational and institutional contexts that define the profession of arms.

To be sure, Quixote's identity is an expression of the sense of self as defined by the role he has assumed and enacted. His actions toward the windmills are not so much irrational as an adherence to ideals. This apparent discrepancy of ideal versus reality depicts an essential theme: the concomitant vulnerability and integrity

of identity, particularly when such identity is enshrined in a role that is viewed to be noble, idealized, and protective. For the contemporary military professional, this relationship is foundational. Honor, duty, courage, and moral responsibility acquire operational force through the integration of virtue, disciplined situational awareness, contextual understanding, and informed decision-making amid complexity, ambiguity, and technological mediation. In this way, the warrior ethos is realized through the continual alignment of moral conviction and practical wisdom.

3. Implications for Warfighter Identity

In this context, we ask what it means to craft warfighter identity and ethos in an environment that is so shaped by external forces? How do cultural, social, and technological influences manifest characteristics of identity, and can there be an identity that is both realistically aware and responsive to such forces, and yet independent and immune (or at least inured) to their negatively valent influences? Just as Quixote envisions and embodies himself as a knight errant pitted against the giants of the world, the contemporary joint warfighter can be influenced by social ideals and cultural narratives, some of which may be at odds with the collective culture that represents their lived experience within the military. More simply stated, one could perhaps argue that military identity is today, in its traditional form, as rigid as Quixote's idea of a "knight". Indubitably, the performance of identity can be readily altered and manipulated by external forces that direct individuals, and craft and sustain identities that are either in accordance with, reactive to, or in discord with the realities they may encounter. This raises an important question about the stability of the warfighter's identity and the durability of their ethos.

Cervantes invites consideration of identity as a complex performative construction in constant juxtaposition with external sociocultural and technological forces. This performativity is an act of self-expression; a self-conscious investment in and interpretation of the world based upon ideals that are internalized. Quixote's identification as a knight errant is fully immersed in the triune of idea, ideal, and ideology that constitutes chivalry. His self-conception carries with it an anticipated script of action: should he encounter a giant, he envisions himself overcoming it decisively, because such victory accords with the role he inhabits. His expectations flow directly from the internal logic of the chivalric tradition that forms his moral and imaginative world. Action, in this sense, becomes the enactment of a prefigured narrative. At the same time, this immersion reveals the delicate balance between the idea-ideal-ideology triune and the contingencies of lived reality. The chivalric framework supplies coherence, purpose, and moral clarity, yet the external world presents ambiguities, constraints, and contradictions that resist seamless alignment. The tension between these domains exposes the dynamic negotiation required whenever identity, aspiration, and circumstance converge.

Quixote's sense of self is thoroughly informed by these chivalric values, a war-

rior ethos, which he has internalized. He situates himself within a constructed narrative, ready to fulfill the noble destiny he experiences as his. In this way, he lives his identity in a space between resolute belief and some recognition that this constructed world is not entirely aligned with things that are external to it. In this light, this prompts further reflection. How does the performance of an identity, knowing that it may be in tension with certain external forces, shape the way warfighters understand and enact themselves? Does a warfighter's recognition of a constructed self make them more or less authentic in the eyes of those outside their collective community? These questions compel further investigation into the ways in which the unity, boundaries, and/or separations of ideas, ideals, and ideologies, and the changing realities of a technologically and socially fluid world, continue to shape warfighter identity and its attendant ethos.

Cervantes' text presages a conflict of the modern warfighter, viz.—one not on some combatant field of engagement, but rather one that exists between the ideological identity of the self and a changing world of different ideas, ideals, and ideologies that can create a fabric of dissonance. The hero's journey and quest is to sustain such noble ideas, ideals, and ideologies, and speaks to a modern necessity for the warfighter to embrace an ethos to preserve duty to moral service in the face of changing technological influences and challenges, and diverse, often fungible social norms. Quixote's tribulations can be seen as analogous to the ideas, ideals, and ideologies that constitute the modern warfighter's ethos, and its engagement with the contemporary world. The relationship between ideas, ideals, and ideologies and the real world constitutes a profound comment on identity recognition and the tensions that can arise between duty, role identification, and societal contingencies and exigencies.

To be sure, the joint warfighter is often influenced by the spirit of expectations, traditions, and the military values that define the warrior ethos. Cervantes's novel invites questions of the ethics of representation. By portraying Quixote with some sense of dignity, Cervantes affords him a sense of agency and worth, offering a sympathetic portrayal of a complex man caught between two worlds. Ultimately, the novel forces reflection on larger social, political, and cultural forces, and this insight can be directed toward the modern warfighter situated at the boundary of human and machine, and the socio-political values of the past, contingencies of the present, and uncertainties of the future.

4. Cervantes and the Cyborg Soldier

Scholars such as Robert Hassan (Hassan, 2015) and Donna Haraway (Haraway, 2016) approach boundaries that have traditionally defined human identity (viz., the organic and the mechanical, i.e., the human and the machine) and put them into question. In *Don Quixote* (both the novel and its eponymous protagonist), there is a somewhat prescient dismantling of these boundaries. The character of Quixote is trapped between idea and reality. Mirroring Hassan's argument that human representation must be reinvented in light of changing influences and realities.

Perhaps we could view Quixote as a foretelling of what has been called “the cyborg soldier”. According to Chris Robles-Gray, a cyborg is the fusion of human and technology; an iterative spectrum where technologies are increasingly integrated within the functions and structure of a biological entity (Gray, 2000). For Donna Haraway, a cyborg occupies the space where such boundaries are simultaneously problematic. Quixote, much like Haraway’s cyborg, is problematically balanced upon the boundaries of his perceived identity (and what he conceives to be the chivalric essence of humanist virtue) and the imposed technologies that are integrated within his life world.

In a trans-humanist context, such balancing, precarious as it may be, is not regarded as a problem to be corrected but as an integral part of the modern human condition, and both a challenge and an opportunity for human flourishing (Benedikter et al., 2010; Giordano & Benedikter, 2012). A transhumanist lens may enable a view of Quixote as an object lesson not to oppose technology, but to engage with it within the ethos of role and identity, in virtuous adherence to those things he preserves as human. While *Don Quixote* stands as a critique of the ideologies of Cervantes’s time, it can also illustrate how confronting technology speaks to the transhumanist impulse to question the very idea of fixed human boundaries. Quixote’s predicament—not unlike that of the modern joint warfighter—compels a revitalization of ethos, role, and representation amidst the fluidity and instability of the society influenced by its immersion in technology.

In using the character of Don Quixote as an object lesson, and *Don Quixote*—the novel—as a morality play, consideration can be directed to the larger historical and cultural contexts that can influence, shape, and ultimately dictate and direct the role, rationality, and identity of the modern warfighter. Technology and its growing influence on human experience and societal values, norms, and attitudes may challenge traditional understandings, concepts, and constructions of warfighter identity (Annett et al., 2025). Of course, we do not suggest that Cervantes anticipated artificial intelligence, autonomous systems, or contemporary military technologies. Rather, *Don Quixote* offers an enduring literary exploration of perception, role performance, and the formation of identity under changing social conditions. These themes provide an illuminating analogy for contemporary discussions of human-machine teaming, where military professionals likewise negotiate the relationship between technological mediation, professional identity, and moral agency. The comparison is analogical rather than historical: Cervantes helps illuminate perennial questions about human judgment and identity that remain relevant as military technologies evolve.

Indeed, as technologies become ever more integrated into human biology, psychology, and social institutions, occupations, and actions, they shape not only involvement with the world but also human self-construction, identity, and how others are regarded, engaged with, and treated (Benedikter & Giordano, 2011). The rapid expansion and relative ubiquity of technology, and its effects upon global order and power competition, introduce radical challenges to more traditional no-

tions of the warfighter. It is often stated that such forces will not change the nature of warfare, but rather its character (Vergun, 2025). We agree, however, we add that these influences *will* change the nature of what it is to be a warfighter, and from this premise, argue that these changes in situatedness, functions, and role(s), and the influence these factors have upon self-construct and identity demand integrity of character, as obtained and entailed by preservation of a grounding ethos.

5. The Warrior Ethos: Preserving Human Virtue of the Cyborg Soldier

Quixote presents an enduring examination of the tension between idealistic virtue and pragmatic reality. Armed with antiquated weapons and guided by chivalric codes seemingly obsolete in his time, he confronts a world that has moved beyond his moral framework. Cervantes' genius lies in revealing Quixote's profound wisdom about the necessity of maintaining moral idealism in the face of technological and social transformation. We propose that, in this way, the character of Don Quixote and the book's moral narrative offer (admittedly somewhat unexpected but nonetheless) essential guidance for the modern warfighter.

We opine that there is increasing importance, if not a need, to face a modern version of Quixote's dilemma: how to preserve the classical intellectual and moral virtues that define an authentic warrior ethos while embracing technological capabilities and an evolving social milieu? We argue that the virtues that informed the medieval chivalric code Quixote embraces are not antiquated reminiscences, but instead should be viewed as essential foundations for contemporary military ethics. Rather than viewing Quixote as a prediction of the cyborg soldier, we employ his narrative as an interpretive framework for examining how military professionals preserve coherent moral identity while operating through increasingly sophisticated technological systems.

Quixote's worldview may reflect a deeper truth about the relationship between perception and morality and reality; he maintains the conviction that the world should be viewed through the lens of virtue in order to morally "color" the "black and white" of empirical fact. This perspectivity is relevant for military professionals operating with biotechnologically enhanced capabilities that can alter perception, cognition, and moral judgment. Consider, for example, the warfighter equipped with AI-based cognitive enhancement technologies that enable processing vast amounts of data, predicting adversaries' behavior with unprecedented accuracy, and modifying tactical decision-making. Such capabilities afford evident advantage, but they also risk hazards of viewing reality only through technological means (or perhaps even through a technologically-skewed lens), and in so doing, diffusing capacity for the moral imagination that recognizes human dignity, suffering, and the profound dimensions of warfare.

We argue that Quixote's insistence on seeing the world through a lens of chivalric virtue preserves essential capacities for moral perception that purely technological approaches could dilute or diminish. Perhaps, what Quixote lacked was the

Aristotelian virtue of practical wisdom (*phronesis*); the ability to intellectually perceive the moral dimensions of reality that technology alone cannot provide. Aristotelian *phronesis* can (and we contend should) be regarded as a fulcral virtue that enables proper application of all other virtues in particular circumstances.

Quixote's example suggests that maintaining classical virtue requires both a defined framework of (structural) deontology and rule utility, that is, functionally exercised (via act utility with respect to context, community, and circumstance) by virtuous agents (as depicted in **Table 1**) (Applewhite et al., 2023; Sisbarro et al., 2022).

Table 1. Structural-functional architecture of military moral codification.

Structural Framework	Functional Exercise	Virtuous Agent's Role
Deontology	Adherence to codified duties	Acknowledges moral obligations of duty
Rule Utility	Exercise of duty through the parameters of rules	Applies rules contextually to achieve the defined good(s) established by duty
Act Utility (Contextual)	Situational evaluation of actions based on outcomes and the contingencies and exigencies of circumstance	Interprets the construct of duty and rule(s) with flexibility relative/relevant to context
Virtuous Agency	Embodies and enacts incised traits of character (virtues) such as courage, justice, temperance	Engages practical wisdom (<i>phronesis</i>) as intellectual and moral trait to balance duty, rules, and outcomes

Source: Courtesy of the authors.

We believe that this “structural-functional” architecture of military morality should be intrinsic to and embodied by the modern warrior ethos. Engaging these architectonics in real-world practice may foster a kind of “principled resistance” to the purely utilitarian evaluation of the iterative integration of technology (e.g., “for technology’s sake”) and to vulnerability to social pressures (e.g., “for conformity’s sake”). We believe that the virtuous warfighter may need to sometimes appear “quixotic” by insisting on moral considerations that 1) temper immediate tactical advantages conferred by technological possibility, and 2) fortify integrity in the face of societal flux.

But perhaps no aspect of Quixote's character is more relevant to the warfighter ethos than his relationship to his capabilities, aspirations, and his restraint in his use of force. His engagements typically entail proclamations of moral code rather than articulations of belligerence. The object lesson is one of prudent (i.e., *phronetic*) exercise of the virtue of temperance. We hold this to be particularly relevant to the warfighter ethos in an AI-technologically enabled military. Temperance requires moderation both in the use of available capabilities and in those ways that such capabilities should be wisely utilized, given the varying settings and demands of particular contexts. Like Quixote, who often resolves conflicts through moral

rationalization and expression rather than combative action, the virtuous warrior should cultivate restraint that goes beyond simple tactical considerations to encompass broader appreciation of, and responsibility for, the strategic relevance of proportionality of means to ends.

6. The Enduring Relevance of *Don Quixote* for Professional Military Education

For professional military education at undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate levels, we posit that *Don Quixote* offers far more than historical curiosity. It provides a sophisticated framework for examining how warrior virtues persist, and must persist amid technological advancement and social change. An immediate objection to elevating Quixote as an exemplar for military professionals is obvious: he is, after all, mad. His chivalric worldview is anachronistic even within the narrative's timeframe, and his adventures consistently expose the gap between ideals and realities. Yet we maintain that this apparent criticism reveals the work's deeper pedagogical value. Quixote embodies an unwavering commitment to virtue that refuses to be extinguished by confronting technology or social resistance. This is not blind adherence to doctrine, but rather a recognition that certain moral truths and virtues transcend contextual changes.

In professional military contexts, it would be important to consider Quixote's foundational motivations: the protection of the vulnerable, the pursuit of justice, personal courage in service of others, and fidelity to an ethos that elevates human pathos above social proscription. These principles constitute the bedrock of professional military ethics. Cervantes effectively dramatizes how these virtues are tested both by physical adversity and by a society that views such commitments as quaint, impractical, or even delusional. The parallel to our contemporary moment is striking. As military operations become increasingly mediated through screens and algorithms, as kinetic engagement gives way to cyber operations and drone strikes conducted at great distances, the question becomes pressing: how can, and should, the warrior ethos be maintained when the traditional crucible of physical courage and face-to-face moral encounter is technologically circumvented?

The narrative structure of *Don Quixote* operates as a morality play precisely because it refuses easy answers and mandates deeper reflection. Cervantes does not simply celebrate or condemn his protagonist. Instead, he presents a dialectical examination of virtue's relationship to reality. Quixote suffers, fails, and is repeatedly humiliated. His chivalric interventions often create more problems than they solve. Yet the reader cannot dismiss him as merely foolish, because his fundamental moral orientation remains superior to that of his cynical detractors. This tension between ideal and real, and between what is and what ought to be, defines the ethical space that military professionals must inhabit.

For undergraduate military education, *Don Quixote* offers an accessible entry point into complex ethical reasoning. Cadets and junior officers can examine how

Quixote's virtues remain valid even when his tactical judgment fails. This distinction between character and competence, between moral orientation and operational effectiveness, is foundational to the development of the military professional. The text invites discussion of how virtuous intent without prudent judgment can lead to problematic outcomes, and how technical capability without moral grounding can produce ethically untethered action and effects. In these ways, *Don Quixote* encourages integrated thinking about the relationship between martial motivation and capabilities and moral development and character.

At the graduate and postgraduate levels, *Don Quixote* can be read to foster more sophisticated analysis of institutional culture and systemic pressures. Advanced military professionals can examine how military organizations and societies rationalize their relative acceptance or negation of certain values in favor of facile technological solutions and convenient current views and attitudes. In representing a source of practical wisdom, the character of Sancho Panza provides crucial pedagogical value. His prudent balance of folk knowledge and healthy skepticism can be seen as personifying the institutional sagacity of the military, as forged through historical experience and as inculcated by its culture. Cervantes shows how the relationship of Quixote's idealism ennobles (the "boots on the ground" knowledge of) Sancho, and how the knight's unwavering commitment to virtue and principle elevates those around him. This illustrates a concept vital for military education: that character is cultivated through sustained exposure to exemplary models, even (and perhaps especially) when those models appear impractical by extrinsic measures.

The technologically saturated character of our contemporary challenge makes *Don Quixote* particularly salient. The rise of empiricism that was transforming Quixote's Spain, rendering chivalric romances simultaneously popular and obsolete, can be seen as a prescient reminder of the capacity of technology to reshape human experience and moral perception. Today's technocentrism threatens aspects of the warrior ethos that are essential to developing and sustaining moral probity: the gravitas of personal responsibility, the recognition of and pathos for suffering, and the cultivation of prudent judgment through embodied experience. Quixote's resistance to his era's modernizing forces should not be regarded as futile. Cervantes ensures that the reader recognizes what is lost when Quixote returns to "sanity", specifically, the moral aspiration that challenged a complacent world to be better than it was. This provides rich material for discussing how military professionals must work to balance gain and loss as fundamental to the benefits and burdens of their military role, endeavors, and identity.

Practical applications of *Don Quixote* in military curricula should emphasize comparative analysis of the idea-ideal-ideology triune in different contexts and across different sociocultural ecologies. Key questions for reflection, discourse, and dialectical engagement might include: How have warrior virtues adapted to various social climates and military challenges? How did honor cultures of the military adapt to and survive the industrialization of warfare? What can the char-

acter of Don Quixote instruct about maintaining human judgment within increasingly assertive social pressures and/or technologically imbued environments? Focal aspects of such inquiry, discourse, and dialectic are suggested in **Table 2**.

Table 2. Proposed PME objectives for integrating *Don Quixote*.

Objective Category	Description	Intended Outcome	Proposed Assessments	Criteria for Mastery
Dynamic Warfighter Identity	Explore identity as a fluid, performative construct influenced by culture, society, technology, and ideology.	Understand the tension between internal virtues and external realities shaping warfighter identity.	Reflective essays connecting <i>Don Quixote</i> to personal professional experiences; facilitated seminar discussions.	Demonstrates self-awareness of identity formation; articulates tensions between role expectations and personal values with clarity and depth.
Moral Imagination & Ethical Reflection	Cultivate the capacity to uphold moral ideals amid ambiguity, complexity, and rapid technological change.	Encourage embodiment of virtues like honor, loyalty, and courage in technologically mediated warfare.	Ethical reflection papers; guided discussion of literary and contemporary operational cases.	Applies moral reasoning beyond rule compliance; integrates virtue-based analysis into complex scenarios.
Practical Wisdom (Phronesis)	Develop the ability to apply virtue ethics contextually and make nuanced ethical decisions beyond rigid doctrine or technical calculation.	Enable warfighters to prioritize moral principles over expedient tactical advantage when required.	Case-study analysis requiring justification of decisions under uncertainty; oral defense in a seminar.	Demonstrates contextual judgment; balances mission demands with ethical considerations without reliance on formulaic answers.
Resilience Against Dehumanization	Recognize and resist the corrosive effects of moral ambiguity, depersonalization, and technological determinism in warfare.	Foster personal integrity and human dignity as foundational to military service.	Narrative analysis of literary and operational examples; reflective journaling.	Identifies dehumanizing pressures; articulates strategies for maintaining moral integrity and respect for human dignity.
Integration of Classical & Philosophical Thought	Bridge Clausewitz and Sun Tzu's strategic frameworks with Cervantes' existential and ethical inquiry.	Cultivate tacticians who are also moral agents with deep self-awareness and ethical grounding.	Comparative analytical essays; seminar debates linking strategic theory and moral philosophy.	Synthesizes strategic and philosophical perspectives; demonstrates coherent integration rather than parallel understanding.
Critical Awareness of Technology's Impact	Analyze how AI, cyber warfare, and biotechnology reshape combat conditions and responsibility boundaries.	Prepare warfighters to understand and navigate the ethical challenges posed by emerging technologies.	Technology-focused ethical case studies; policy reflection memos.	Demonstrates awareness of responsibility diffusion and ethical risk; articulates limits of technological determinism.
Reflective Warrior Ethos as Lived Identity	Internalize warrior ethos as an enacted identity, balancing personal conviction with institutional demands.	Promote consistent embodiment of virtue in daily practice amidst operational complexity.	Longitudinal reflection assignments; peer and instructor feedback.	Shows continuity between stated values and reflective self-assessment; recognizes gaps between ideals and practice.

Continued

Objective Category	Description	Intended Outcome	Proposed Assessments	Criteria for Mastery
Ethical Leadership in Ambiguous Domains	Equip leaders to maintain moral clarity when facing dilemmas without purely technical solutions.	Strengthen principled leadership, balancing mission success with human dignity and ethics.	Leadership dilemma simulations; written decision rationales.	Demonstrates moral courage; articulates principled reasoning under pressure without overreliance on authority or doctrine.
Intellectual Humility & Openness to Complexity	Encourage recognition of war's paradoxical nature, requiring intellectual flexibility and ethical vigilance.	Develop military judgment enriched by engagement with literary and philosophical inquiry.	Seminar participation evaluation; reflective synthesis papers.	Acknowledges uncertainty; revises assumptions in light of discussion and reflection; avoids simplistic conclusions.

Source: Courtesy of the authors.

The objectives we propose are an essential bridge between argument and pedagogy. To be useful in PME practice, it must do more than identify aims; it should specify how instructors will assess learning and what constitutes demonstrable mastery. In text, we expand information presented in this chart by pairing each objective with recommended formative and summative assessments and with clear, observable criteria for mastery. These assessments emphasize reflective practice, ethical reasoning, and applied judgment rather than rote recall or technical proficiency. Emphasis upon this rubric and its achieved attitudes, skills, and values would therefore reflect PME's valuation of the process of professional "becoming" as much as the status of professional "being".

Such inquiry poses the text as a sophisticated venue to reflect upon ethical reasoning in times of change. Ultimately, *Don Quixote* can serve as a morality play to illustrate how the preservation of martial virtue requires conscious, disciplined effort in the face of what often are powerful systemic pressures. Quixote's example, as a flawed, yet noble individual, can serve to both reground military professionals in the reality and vulnerabilities of their individual personhood and reinforce that some values and truths are worth defending even when others deem them obsolete. Thus, we counsel that Cervantes's masterwork is not a nostalgic piece of literature, but remains a lens through which to view the military professional both as a person and as a principled warrior; and in this way can afford a mirror that the reader may employ to reflect upon their own choices, values, and identity.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions presented in this essay are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States government, Department of War, or the National Defense University.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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